Forbidden Fruit: The Banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Kern County

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My experience with censorship began early in my career as a librarian at the Oildale Branch library in a poor neighborhood on the other side of the river from Bakersfield. It was a tiny brick library across the street from Standard School on North Chester, the heart of Oildale, where many poor descendents of the original Okie migrants live. An arrangement, which preceded my tenure as the children’s librarian, involved every 3rd, 4th, and 5th grader from a local school district visiting the library once every two weeks. I would prepare a short lesson or read a book and the students would then find a book or two to check out. This occupied a lot of my time and saved the district a boatload of money. But—it also kept our branch’s circulation numbers up, and our budget and staffing were based on those numbers.

One day—around Halloween—a class of 4th graders was visiting. I had read a Halloween story and then the kids began looking for a book. One of the girls found a book on the shelves entitled *Mom, the Wolfman, and Me* by Norma Klein. She asked me if it was a Halloween book—because it had Wolfman in the title, and I replied that it wasn’t. The book was a little old for her, but I knew she was a good reader, so I didn’t say it was too advanced for her.

Before long, I had a call from the district asking me to take the book off the shelves, as her parents had complained about the book’s content. The book’s narrator was a young girl—fatherless—whose never-married mother was dating a bearded man who owned a wolf hound—hence the wolfman of the title. The assistant superintendent insisted that this type of story was inappropriate for school aged children. I refused to take the book off the shelf and conferred with my head librarian and the director of children’s services who backed me up. I was then called to a meeting at the district office, and the district threatened to stop classes from coming to the library. I went to the meeting alone; I don’t remember who was there, but I do remember facing at least four district employees. I stood my ground and fully expected the district to stop the school visits, which would have adversely affected our circulation statistics and our budget. I remember saying that I fully supported the parents’ right to censor their own children’s reading but not their right to censor the reading of all the children in Oildale. That these particular parents didn’t approve of the lifestyle portrayed in the book was fine, but the library served many children of unmarried mothers and families that defied conventional definitions.

I kept waiting for the district to cut the visits—but also knew that the district would have to do spend a great deal of money to resolve the absence of library services in its schools. I, a county employee, was the district’s surrogate librarian and the Oildale branch a substitute for its libraries. The problem for the district was that I wasn’t on its payroll, so I could stand my ground without fear. So the visits continued, but the district sought another solution. The assistant superintendent’s wife, a regular patron at the branch, checked the book out, saying she wanted to know what the fuss was about. But instead of returning it, she claimed she lost it and
paid the fine for doing so. I guess she and her husband thought—problem solved. But, they didn’t know me very well, as I marched to the library headquarters and found a replacement copy. Had one not been available, I would have paid for it with my own money.

As I went through this episode, I don’t recall if I consciously thought of the banning of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Believe me, *Mom, the Wolfman and Me* is no *Grapes of Wrath*. But I did know about the ban because it was a topic of conversation in my family. My dad loved John Steinbeck; he recognized that Steinbeck was a master.

I recall my dad talking about questioning his University of Texas English professors about why Steinbeck wasn’t on the reading lists for classes there. He complained when his children didn’t read Steinbeck in high school and college—and by then Steinbeck had won the Nobel Prize in 1962. And, he must have also talked about the book being banned in the libraries in Kern County. It was just something I always knew. It’s interesting, really, since my dad was a Democrat of the Southern genre until the Kennedy-Nixon election when he changed his registration and became a staunch Republican. Steinbeck’s politics, his identification with both Communist party and Marxist ideas, couldn’t be further from my father’s eventual political views, but Steinbeck captured a life my dad knew very well.

My dad was born in 1923 in Fellows, CA, near Taft in western Kern County, on an oil lease in a house located on what was called Rag Row. His parents, Missouri natives, had come to CA with their 3 older children—well before the Joads did. My grandparents were dirt poor before the Depression and Dust Bowl. They first landed in the Imperial Valley where my grandpa worked in the fields and my grandma cooked for the field workers from a cook wagon. Eventually they moved to Fellows where my grandpa built wooden oil derricks, and my grandma cooked for the single men on the lease. They were poor, in the years before the Fellows job, probably as poor as the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*. So Steinbeck’s depiction of the poor, of their perseverance and nobility in the face of need appealed to my father.

So when I was in library school, I was assigned to write a paper, using archival information, about the founding of a library. I asked my professor if I could, instead, write about the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. She agreed and so began my study of this infamous incident in Kern County. And infamous it was: at the time, the ban was news across the nation. I became obsessed with the subject—and my professor recommended that I submit my paper to a journal for publication. Luckily, it was accepted by *Libraries and Culture*, a publication of the University of Texas, my father’s alma mater. But I wasn’t alone in my interest in the subject: Rick Wartzman’s *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* was published 5 years later in 2008. Wartzman is the co-author of *King of California: J G Boswell and the Making of a Secret Agricultural Empire*, which was published in 2003. While engaged in the research about Boswell, he encountered Boswell’s role in the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath*; obviously, he thought it was
worth a book. While J. G. Boswell’s role in the banning was not overt, the role of the Associated Farmers, an organization made up Boswell and his ilk, ultimately was pivotal.

The name Associated Farmers may suggest a group of farmers getting together to discuss crop yields and irrigation techniques, but this organization of California businessmen, organized in 1933, had very different goals than merely discussing crops. A collaboration between the California Farm Bureau and the California Chamber of Commerce, the Associated Farmers was formed to stop union activities and keep farm labor costs low in the California fields. A *Time* magazine article from 1940 calls the Associated Farmers the “most notorious labor-baiting group in California.” The article continues, “These ‘Farmers’ track very little earth into their parlors. They were born at a meeting of the State Chamber of Commerce . . . when the State was being invaded by Dust Bowl migrants” and when devastating labor strikes were slowing the harvest of California crops.

Indeed, the word “farmers” in Associated Farmers is something of a misnomer. Although farmers were members of the organization, they were not farmers who actually worked the soil, but the businessmen who ran large corporate farms that dominated California agriculture, even then. While the growth of these giant farms began prior to the Depression, these corporate farms benefitted from the economic realities of the Depression; as small family farms failed, the land was purchased by large corporate farms. Farmers like J.G. Boswell were able to capitalize on the economic despair of small farmers, often resorting to less than ethical tactics to drive smaller farmers out of business. In fact, granges, which were truly groups of farmers getting together to discuss farming issues, opposed the Associated Farmers’ point of view on almost every issue.

Although Boswell does not epitomize the stereotype of a farmer, he did actually run a farming operation. Many members of the Associated Farmers were not farmers at all, but executives from canneries, banks, utility companies, railroads, and oil companies, who all profited from various aspects of the huge agricultural economy in California. And the margin of profit that they enjoyed was dependent upon cheap farm labor.

Prior to the Depression, these corporate farmers recruited foreign, non-white laborers to work the fields, significantly Asian and Mexican men, who migrated from their native countries without their families. They were easily exploited and endured low wages and terrible working conditions. Having farm laborers that were “available, tractable, and cheap” seemed ideal to these large California farm interests.

When the Depression began in 1929, even large farms were affected negatively. To compensate for decreased profitability, these farm employers cut costs by cutting the wages of farm laborers. Carey McWilliams, one of my heroes, who chronicled the workers’ plight by practices he labeled as “farm fascism,” reported that wages in California agriculture reached “all-time lows” in spite of increased agricultural production and value. And when the already low
wages reached new lows, the previously “tractable” workers went on strike—repeatedly—threatening the harvest of perishable crops and the profits of the California corporate farms. While California farm workers had engaged in two strikes prior to the Depression, nothing prepared farmers for the widespread strikes that occurred after the Depression.

Between 1929 and 1935, strikes by agricultural workers in California were “without precedent in the history of labor in the United States,” according to McWilliams. Some of the striking workers were the foreign-born laborers. But the Dust Bowl migrants were also among the strikers. With little to keep them home, these migrants traveled to California—usually with their families—in hopes of finding work and better lives. Unlike the single, foreign-born farm laborers, these workers were predominantly white and had families to house and support. After the arduous journey from the Dust Bowl region to California, they didn’t expect to confront the low wages, poor living conditions, and an oversupply of farm labor. But that was the reality, a reality that led to more tension in the agricultural work force.

During this period from ’29 to 35, strikes affected the harvest of lettuce, peas, and cantaloupe in the Imperial Valley; peas in Northern California; berries in Southern California, grapes in Central California; tree fruit all over the state, and cotton in the San Joaquin Valley. Farmers responded in several ways to these strikes, but none involved improving workers’ wages or working conditions. The farmers did everything possible to stop the organizing efforts of unions. They also formed vigilante groups that were “deputized” to attack the strikers. And they recruited new workers—workers they believed were desperate enough to settle for low wages and horrific working conditions. And in 1933, they formed the Associated Farmers to combat the workers’ demands, the threat of unionization, and the interference of progressive New Deal policies. The rhetoric the organization used employed the words Communist and Red to incite fear. Indeed, the Communist Party was involved in efforts to organize the workers—however with very little success. While some of the Associated Farmers efforts were successful, their tactics did not stop the strikes or the efforts to organize workers.

One such strike was the basis of Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle, published in 1937; the novel was drawn, in part, from Steinbeck’s interviews of two farm labor organizers who were in hiding in Monterey—near Salinas, Steinbeck’s hometown. Since In Dubious Battle portrayed the workers’ situation with understanding, the pro-labor San Francisco News enlisted Steinbeck to explore the conditions of workers around the state. This assignment led to a series of articles published first in the paper. Steinbeck’s series of articles was later published with the title The Harvest Gypsies. As a result of his research for these articles, The Grapes of Wrath was born.

In The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck portrays the Associated Farmers and its tactics and thinly veils the organization’s name—the Farmers’ Association. The similarities between the real Associated Farmers and Steinbeck’s version of the group are many. The Associated Farmers
lobbied hard and successfully to curtail the development of Farm Security Administration (FSA) camps. In the novel, the Weedpatch Camp where the Joads live briefly is modeled on the real FSA camp that was headed by Tom Collins, to whom the novel is dedicated. The camps, in the novel and in reality, provided security, autonomy, and decent living conditions for the migrants. But these camps, made possible by New Deal policies, provoked the ire of the Associated Farmers, which believed that the camps were havens for union organizers and Communist agitators and that workers would not work for low wages if they could live in such comfort. The Associated Farmers launched a propaganda campaign against the camps and refused to hire workers who stayed in an FSA camp. In the original FSA plan, 200,000 migrants would be housed in the camps; due to efforts by the Associated Farmers and others, only 15 demonstration camps housing around 6000 migrants were built or under construction by 1940—far from the intended goal.

Another Associated Farmers’ tactic was vigilantism. Steinbeck in The Harvest Gypsies calls it “terrorism.” The organization was successful in influencing agricultural communities to pass “emergency” ordinances that allowed the Associated Farmers to organize vigilantes in the event of a strike. In addition, the group had successfully lobbied to have nearly every rural county pass laws against picketing. McWilliams explained that the Associated Farmers “cleverly stimulated the [real] farmers and townspeople to act as their storm troopers” to protect the economic interests of the organization’s members. And brutal vigilante violence was evident, during strike after strike. Steinbeck depicted workers’ vulnerability to vigilantes in The Grapes of Wrath, In Dubious Battle, and in Of Mice and Men. In The Grapes of Wrath, the migrants live in fear of the vigilantes, and Tom Joad ultimately retaliates against a vigilante, killing him.

Steinbeck also believed the Associated Farmers and other large agricultural interests in California employed unfair labor practices to keep workers vulnerable and wages low. By insuring an oversupply of laborers, the farmers could find workers who would maintain their crops for next to nothing. Growers maintained that California suffered from an “acute” shortage of field hands when, in fact, statistics show there was an oversupply. In The Grapes of Wrath, handbills blanketed the Dust Bowl region, assuring the destitute Okies of work in the fields of California, which was depicted as an agrarian promised land. While the Associated Farmers and some historians disputed the accuracy of Steinbeck’s fictional account of the handbills, there is ample evidence that handbills advertising agricultural work in California did entice some Dust Bowl migrants to make the arduous trek—often to only face more hardship, few jobs, poor working conditions, and low wages.

Due to Steinbeck’s zeal in portraying the greed and immorality of the corporate farmers and their exploitation of workers, Steinbeck became the target of the group’s ire. The group maintained FBI-like files on Steinbeck. In the Associated Farmers’ propaganda against Steinbeck, he was often labeled as a Communist. Steinbeck’s friends report that he actually feared for his life during this time and was warned to cover his tracks. Interestingly, the FBI was
also investigating Steinbeck due to his advocacy for workers. His advocacy extended to forming a committee to encourage farm workers to organize. The committee held a meeting of cotton strikers in Bakersfield, the largest city in Kern County. This may have been another motivating factor for Kern County’s antagonism toward Steinbeck.

The publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* was followed by Carey McWilliams’ non-fiction account of the treatment of the migrant workers, *Factories in the Field*. The film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* also drew wide attention to the workers’ plight. Although representatives of the Associated Farmers insisted that the novel, film, and McWilliams’ book did not accurately portray the workers’ situation in California, these works brought national attention to California’s farm labor situation, particularly the growers’ use of violence and other unethical tactics to control workers. Shortly after the publication of the novel Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the President, visited both an FSA camp and a makeshift migrant camp in Central California and declared, “I never believed that *The Grapes of Wrath* was an exaggeration.” But clearly other forces disagreed with Mrs. Roosevelt.

On Monday, August 21, 1939, the secretary of the Board of Supervisors handed Gretchen Knief, head librarian at Kern County Free Library, a copy of resolution to ban John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had passed that morning without the librarian’s knowledge. The resolution took an unprecedented step in the history of Kern County, for never had a book been officially banned from its libraries or its schools. The passion of the board can be witnessed in the wording of the resolution:

**RESOLUTION**

WHEREAS, John Steinbeck’s work of fiction, “The Grapes of Wrath”, has offended our citizenry by falsely implying that many of our fine people are a low, ignorant [sic], profane and blasphemous type living in a vicious and filthy manner, and

WHEREAS, Steinbeck presents our public officials, law enforcement office and civil administrators, business men, farmers, and ordinary citizens as inhumane vigilantes, breathing class hatred and divested of sympathy or human decency or understanding toward a great, and to us unwelcome, economic problem brought by an astounding influx of refugees, indigent farmers, who were dusted or tractored or forceclosed [sic] out of Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Arkansas, Missouri, Texas and others of our sister states, and

WHEREAS, Steinbeck chose to ignore the education, recreation, hospitalization, welfare and relief services, unexcelled by any other political subdivision in the United States made available to Kern County to every person resident in Kern County, and
WHEREAS, “Grapes of Wrath” is filled with profanity, lewd, foul, and obscene language unfit for use in American homes, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, that we, the BOARD OF SUPERVISORS, in defense of our free enterprises and of people who have been unduly wronged request that the production of the motion picture film, “Grapes of Wrath”, adapted from the Steinbeck novel, not be completed by the Twentieth Century-Fox film corporation and request that use and possession and circulation of the novel, “Grapes of Wrath”, be banned from our library and schools.

This resolution caused a storm of controversy and a legacy that haunts Kern County to this day. While the banning attacked the intellectual freedom and the right to read that underpin library ethics, the issues that led to the ban and the consequences of it touch on social, economic, and political realities.

The desperate conditions in farming areas of some Southern and Plains states resulted from a composite of causes. The Depression was in full force, making cash and jobs scarce and, as a result, causing prices for farm products to decrease. The board’s resolution mentions people being “forclosed [sic] out” of their farms. This was certainly the case for some farmers, who in the “boom” times before the Depression had mortgaged their farms and became unable to make payments; others were tenant farmers who could no longer pay their landlords. Being “tractored . . . out” refers to the increasing mechanization of farming which displaced hand pickers from the harvest, particularly of cotton. Finally, to add the crowning blow to these already-crushing economic circumstances, the drought brought these dry-crop farmers to their knees; farmers simply had no crops to harvest; farm laborers had no crops to pick. So—they moved. Carey McWilliams, California’s controversial Director of Immigration and Housing, reports that between “1935-1936, 87,302 migratory workers entered California of whom nine tenths were white persons and over a third of whom were from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas.” These migrants—who came to be collectively known as Okies—followed Route 66 to escape the privation of their lives. They changed the face and culture of California, particularly the San Joaquin Valley, of which Kern County is a part.

A report of the Kern County Health Department in July of 1939 noted that unlike the Mexican migrants who return to Mexico or disappear at the end of harvest, the Okies and their families “han[g] on.” And while the Roosevelt administration had enacted protections for other displaced workers, farm workers were not protected by Social Security, unemployment, minimum wage, or the National Labor Relations Act. Not only were they bereft of protection we now regard as normal, the areas where these workers moved with their families were not prepared for the “astounding influx of refugees.” The experience of the Okies in Kern County certainly reflects this reality.

Steinbeck’s Joads arrived in Kern County and stayed at the Weedpatch camp near Arvin at the foot of the Tehachapi Mountains. The camp, modeled on the actual Farm Security
Administration (FSA) camp headed by Tom Collins, provided one of the few positive experiences for the Joads in California. But when they left the camp, they encountered what the *San Francisco Chronicle* characterized as filthy, “festering sores of miserable humanity.” While it may be difficult to justify the deplorable conditions that existed in Kern County for these migrants, knowing the numbers of people who arrived in Kern County over a short period of time provides a context for understanding the complexity of the situation and the board’s reaction.

Charting the population growth of the counties in the San Joaquin Valley, in the 5-year period of 1935 to 1940—after a good number of Okies had already arrived—the population of Kern County grew 63.6 percent. The real number of new residents was 52,554. Fresno County to the north experienced the next most significant growth, but the rate of increase in that county was only 23.7 percent. Given this extraordinary growth, it’s no wonder that residents of Kern County felt invaded and that adequate housing and other facilities did not exist.

Yet Steinbeck’s novels did not attempt to ameliorate the harshness of the conditions with the economic and social realities of local government. Nor did the novel imply that these services were available. For instance, in the novel, the Joads’ daughter Rose of Sharon gave birth to her child in a boxcar and, in the controversial last scene of the novel, offered her breast milk to a starving man. There is little doubt that Okies did not receive adequate health care and were turned away from Kern General Hospital in Bakersfield. However, there is also ample evidence that Kern County attempted to meet the health needs of these migrants, perhaps not out of altruism but out of fear of epidemics. A historian notes, “Kern County maintains a remarkable health service under the direction of Dr. Joe Smith, who believes that an ill person is a menace to others and that it is the county’s duty to make him well.” The health department was called “the most enlightened county health department in California’s agricultural regions, supplying medical care to anyone in need . . . ; therefore, [Kern] was most affected [economically] in the area of public health.”

The cost of schools and other county infrastructure also escalated sharply. In the rural Kern County schools, students from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas often outnumbered the “native” students, but the migrant children might move as many as seven times during one school year. Given this reality, they were regarded as disruptions—and outcasts. A principal at Washington Grammar School in Bakersfield described them as “helpless victims of a physical and economic environment over which they have no control.” Leo B. Hart, the superintendent of schools, who has been celebrated for his advocacy of the Okie children, created special programs to meet their needs. As a result, the rate of taxation for schools increased 200 percent, so that taxpayers were probably none too pleased. And the costs to the county increased in various other ways; even the cost of libraries went up during the period. E. Gay Hoffman, of the Kern County Chamber of Commerce, took a common view: “Some people think taxes are awfully high in Kern [C]ounty. If they are it is because of the services rendered to the destitute migrants.” Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?
Clearly, the infrastructure of Kern County was hit hard by the influx of Okies, and the county had attempted to meet some of their needs. But Steinbeck’s novel did not congratulate those efforts. Instead, Hoffman asserts that the novel focused on “Kern County as a land of squalor, starvation, and despair.” Perhaps justifiably, the Board of Supervisors felt its efforts to provide services to the newcomers were ignored.

But roots of the animosity toward the Okies and the novel were not merely economic in nature. In *Harvest Gypsies*, Steinbeck summarizes the “curious attitude” that Californians had of its newest citizens:

The migrants are needed, and they are hated. Arriving in a district they find the dislike always meted out by the resident to the foreigner, the outlander . . . . The migrants are hated for the following reasons, that they are ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease, that they increase the necessity for police and the tax bill for schooling in a community, and that if they are allowed to organize they can, simply by refusing to work, wipe out a season’s crop.

Clearly, Kern County was ill prepared during these Depression years to meet the challenge of this burgeoning and destitute population, but in his statement, Steinbeck identifies other elements of the distrust of the Okies.

The economic livelihood of Kern County was (and is) heavily dependent on agriculture, and, as a result, the county and countless other Valley counties were (and are) vehemently anti-union. The largest newspaper in the area, *The Bakersfield Californian* and its publisher Alfred Harrell were supporters of “California’s corporate agriculture” and, as the major paper in the southern San Joaquin Valley, its pages relayed this message consistently. The paper “poured a torrent of antimigrant [sic], antirelief [sic], anti-FSA [Farm Security Administration] invective into the Southern half of the state.” In fact, Harrell was a founding member of the California Citizens Association. This statewide group, formed from a nucleus of Kern County businessmen, opposed relief for the migrant workers. Not surprisingly, the *Californian* editorialized against *The Grapes of Wrath* soon after its release. But an even more powerful organization played a role in the Okies’ plight and in the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath*—the Associated Farmers.

In 1936, Steinbeck wrote of the power the Associated Farmers wielded: “When such a close-knit financial group as the Associated Farmers becomes excited about our ancient liberties and foreign agitators, someone is about to lose something.” And he was quite right, for when the Associated Farmers joined forces with the Kern County Board of Supervisors, they were attempting to prevent the citizens of Kern County from hearing the voice of John Steinbeck.

Steinbeck had already established his reputation as being sympathetic to the working classes in *Tortilla Flat* and, more pointedly, in the novel *In Dubious Battle*. He had clearly upset the power structure in California with these novels. On his research trips for *Harvest Gypsies*, he
found the inspiration for *The Grapes of Wrath*. And he met Tom Collins, the director of the Weedpatch FSA camp in Arvin, to whom he dedicated the novel. Steinbeck identified his preoccupation with the class struggle that he depicts in *The Grapes of Wrath*: “If[,] as has been stated by a large grower, our agriculture requires the creation and maintenance of a peon class, then . . . California agriculture is economically unsound under a democracy.” The novel is his attempt to expose this elitist attitude and the agricultural system that exploited human beings for profit.

Whatever Steinbeck's motive, the novel was enormously successful immediately upon its release. Published in April of 1939, it was in its seventh printing by August of that year and would later win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was thought to be a pivotal consideration in Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize for Literature awarded in 1962.

However, the novel’s popularity was by no means universal. The *Bakersfield Californian* had editorialized against *The Grapes of Wrath* as early as June after its release in April, and the inspiration for the ban came from a news item in the *Bakersfield Californian*. The United Press item, dated August 18, 1939, reported on the Kansas City board of education’s decision to ban the best-selling novel “from the shelves of public libraries” due to its obscenity and portrayal of life. Upon reading the item, members of the Kern County chapter of Associated Farmers sent a telegram congratulating the Kansas City board for its action. Corporate farmer W.B. Camp is quoted: “But in our efforts to obtain solution of the problem, we are constantly being harassed by propaganda such as Steinbeck’s book which blames the farmers of Kern and the San Joaquin valley for the entire problem.” Labeling the novel “propaganda of the vilest sort,” Camp also stated that he hoped that the Kansas City action was the “forerunner of a widespread denouncement against the book before schools open and our boys and girls find such filthy material on the shelves our public libraries.” Two days later on August 21, the Kern County Board of Supervisors quickly passed the resolution to ban the novel. Clearly, the Associated Farmers influenced the board as well.

The resolution to ban *The Grapes of Wrath* and discourage the movie from being made was brought to the board by Stanley Abel, supervisor of the 5th district, an area composed of the western part of Kern County, including the city of Taft. The rest of the board—perhaps with the exception of the board chairman, Roy Woollomes—seemed to be blindsided by the resolution. The vote—taken with no consultation of librarian Gertrude Knief and no advanced publicity or discussion—was 4 to 1 in favor of the ban, with Ralph Lavin, who represented East Bakersfield, being the only dissenter.

In the controversy that followed the ban, it became clear that Stanley Abel had acted on behalf of the Associated Farmers and other powerful political forces in Kern County. Abel at age 47 had served on the board for 23 years. My father, who was 14 at the time of the ban, remembers the controversy. He recalls Stanley Abel as “a redneck like the rest of us” and comments that most people who lived the west side were “Okies of a different era.” Earlier in Stanley Abel’s
political career, his connection to the Ku Klux Klan had been exposed, but in spite of a Grand Jury probe, he took pride in being a member and said, “I make no apology for the Klan. It needs none.” But Stanley Abel wasn’t merely another racist “redneck”; by virtue of his long tenure on the board, he was part of the conservative Republican political power structure of Kern County.

In an interview with a reporter from The Kern Herald, a now-defunct pro-labor newspaper that took a dim view of the ban, Abel was asked if the Associated Farmers played a role in the ban. First, Abel denied knowing anything about the group, then admitted, “Oh, I might know one or two of ‘em.” In a subsequent meeting to reconsider the ban, his own brother Ralph Abel, a Democrat and a labor activist, denounced his brother’s action and charged him “with writing the Associated Farmers’ resolution denouncing Steinbeck’s book.” First, Stanley Abel denied authorship, then later admitted he had directed E.G. Hoffman of the Kern County Chamber of Commerce to write the resolution. His brother Ralph Abel asserted, “Certain so-called farmers in this state are nothing but corporate stooges. I refer to the Associated Farmers. The Associated Farmers are a threat to democracy—and the association has a decided influence on the actions of this board of supervisors. The real issue here is whether the Associated Farmers are going to dictate to the people.” The drama of this public display of sibling rivalry aside, Ralph Abel exposed his brother’s alliance with the Associated Farmers.

Once news of the ban was published, the real controversy began. Librarian Gretchen Knief may have been among the first to know, the library being housed in the basement of the county courthouse where the board met. That evening she wrote the four supervisors who supported the ban. She acknowledged her understanding of the power play at hand when she wrote, “I realize only too well that this resolution may have been ‘sprung’ on the Board, that all kinds of pressure may have been brought to bear on you, that any number of things may have happened to make it seem advisable to pass such a resolution.” She continued that Kern County needn’t “follow Kansas City or any other group.” Her letters were never made public, but other expressions of protest were heard as well as expressions of support.

Not surprisingly the first support for the decision came from the Associated Farmers. On the 22nd, only a day after the ban was enacted, Kern County land owner and farmer W.B. Camp and his colleagues made headlines again by “mapping plans for statewide action to follow in Kern county’s footsteps in banning” the novel. In this plan, Camp takes the tack that the Associated Farmers are outraged at Steinbeck’s language and his depiction of the Okies:

We are angry, not because we were attacked but because we were attacked by a book obscene in the extreme sense of the word and because our workers with whom we have lived and worked for years are pictured as the lowest type of human life when we know that is not true.

The Kern Associated Farmers were encouraging the statewide group to launch a “statewide drive for suppression” of the novel. The photo of W.B. Camp, a farm laborer Clell Pruett,
identified as a migrant, and another farmer burning *The Grapes of Wrath* accompanied the article. (The photo was later re-published in an October 1939 issue of *Look*.) The ban would be discussed at a meeting in San Francisco on the 25th. The *Californian* also reported that the Panama Grange, local group of “real” farmers, commended the board’s action, a rumor that was later squelched by the Grange’s master. The confusion over the Grange’s action is revealing. A resolution condemning the board’s action was brought before the membership. It read,

Be it resolved that we feel our present librarian, Miss Gretchen Knief, possesses ability and a knowledge of literature together with a high sense of responsibility and devotion to the patrons of said library. Her choice of books is far better than a small number of so-called farmers who endeavor to dictate what should be read.

While the resolution didn’t pass, neither did its failure to pass mean the Grange supported the board’s action. And what is patently clear in the resolution is the Grange’s understanding of who the Associated Farmers were (“so-called farmers”) and their role in the ban.

Those who protested the ban can be categorized broadly into two groups—unions and pro-labor organizations and groups, like the ACLU, who were concerned with the legality of the ban. One of the first responses was from the ACLU. R.W. Henderson, a local attorney, was the spokesperson for the ACLU, speaking before the board as well as broadcasting his impassioned remarks over a local radio station, KERN. Discussing the banning of the novel, he alludes to what is on everyone’s mind—the impending war in Europe—and to the “revolutionary” actions of the board:

In addition to this broadcast address, Henderson orchestrated the speakers at the board meeting protesting the ban on August 25, 1939. Labor groups also responded immediately.

While most of the protesters came from these two camps, many citizens seemingly unconnected with either contingent also spoke out against the board’s action. Letters to the editor appeared immediately in the *Californian*. For example, “It is not fair to those of us who depend upon a free library for comprehensive and up-to-date service”; another letter writer wrote, “Only the moronic mind can be offended by the tragedy of realism. It is significant to recall that ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ was banned in the [S]outh in its day.” Among letter writers to the *Californian*, “the verdict went 100 per cent against the book banners.” Finally, even Twentieth Century Fox responded to the board’s resolution, saying it would proceed with the filming of the novel although its spokesman denied any “partisan” intentions.

Since the furor over the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* ensued immediately, two supervisors began to re-think their positions supporting the ban. Charles Wimmer reconsidered, saying, “I have decided that the board of supervisors has no right to censor the reading matter of the citizens of Kern County.” Wimmer claimed that initially he had thought the book was critical of the Okies; moreover, he learned that “only the county librarian had the
right to censor books.” In the wake of the protests against the ban, C.W. Harty also made headlines. Harty explained that he was still undecided but “inclined to believe he would vote to rescind the order.” Lavin, initially the lone opposition to the ban, and Abel and Woollomes all announced their votes would remain the same, prompting the *Californian* to predict “rescinding of the ban by a 3 to 2 vote thus appears probable.” That prediction was wrong.

At the first board meeting after the ban, protesters picketed outside the courthouse. The librarian Gretchen Knief, who did attend this meeting, wrote that it was “quite a parade . . . by the members of the Workers Alliance Group.” Once the meeting began, many spoke against the ban. Stanley Abel’s brother Ralph provided moments of great drama when he accused his brother of being the stooge of the Associated Farmers. He also asserted, “[M]aybe the book is vulgar, but sometimes life is vulgar too.” Clark Pollard, an African American, accused the Associated Farmers with hypocrisy, noting that a year before in its propaganda, “the migrants were dirty, immoral scum, who lived under crowded, immoral conditions and lay naked in the fields” while now it claimed to be defending the migrants’ reputations. After Abel denounced the book as a “lie,” he asked Bertha Rankin, a farmer and a member of the ACLU, if the book was true. She answered that “it was, citing incidents of the strike in 1933 when workers were shot and maimed.” She also mentioned the obscenity charge and said, “It is their regular language. When a bunch of you menfolk get together you use the same sort of language.”

The *Oildale Press* wrote an entertaining account of the meeting, characterizing Lavin as the “hero” who possessed the “courage or political brilliance to oppose censorship of this volume.” Correspondingly, Abel was called the “villain.” Clearly, although the public spoke extensively in opposition to the ban, the stars of this show were the supervisors themselves. Before Wimmer called the vote, each performed his chosen role. Abel, who chaired the meeting in the absence of Chairman Woollomes, played a mercurial role. Before the meeting, in an interview, he had asked, “Well, are you going to come and see us burn those two books,” referring to the library’s copies of Steinbeck’s novel. Referring to his behavior at the second meeting, Knief said that Abel “enjoy[ed] nothing better than a good fight.” And fight he got. Goaded by his brother’s accusations, he finally confessed to his role in authoring the resolution. In an earlier interview, he readily admitted that he hadn’t read *The Grapes of Wrath*, but asserted that if the library had other books as “filthy” as the novel, then he and the other supervisors would “read all the books in the library if necessary” in order to ban them. In this meeting, he went beyond the hypothetical and falsely claimed that the supervisors had “banned thousands of books from the library for the same reason.” But by the end of the meeting, he had thought of a new and improved rationale for the ban: “When I proposed the book be banned from the library I had just this sort of thing in mind. I wanted to get people stirred up. I want everyone to read the book. I want them to know the damnable conditions that exist in this state.” But, as the *Californian* reporter notes, “His desire to have people read the book did not, however, extend to a desire to have them draw it from the county library.”
If Abel’s performance made this meeting appear to be something out of the absurdist tradition, Supervisor Harty’s performance can best be epitomized as paranoid. While Harty had stated that he thought he would vote to rescind the ban, he capitulated that position. He alluded to himself as being “the fall guy again.” As the meeting proceeded, it became clear that Harty saw the re-vote as “a political plot to put him on the spot.” Fearing for his political future if he bucked the power elite and sided with the “workers” of whom he was suspicious, Harty did not change his vote, so when Wimmer called for the vote, Harty and Abel voted for the ban, Wimmer and Lavin against. The ban stood.

But the absurdity didn’t end. At the September 5, 1939, meeting, Bertha Rankin appeared before the board yet again, asking that a vote be taken to rescind the ban. Chairman Woollomes “replied that there was no ban, that the board had simply asked the librarian to remove the book,” apparently referring to the use of the word “request” in the resolution to ban the novel.

Gretchen Knief had been appointed county librarian in July of 1939, only a month before the ban, having previously served as Siskiyou County Librarian. Knief reported on the meetings to California State Librarian, Mabel Gillis, noting “during the entire day the library was left out of the discussion quite completely except toward the end of the day when one woman suggested that we might have something to say and Mr. Abel retorted in a half-jovial manner that after all the librarian was working for the Board.” She never mentions that Wimmer had actually questioned the legality of the Board’s position by alluding to California library law at the meeting—although several newspaper accounts noted Wimmer’s concern.

The legality of the board’s banning books had been brought to the attention of the board by several means. One correspondent to the board, a former library trustee cited California County Free Library Law as reading, “The county librarian shall, subject to the general rules adopted by the board of supervisors . . . determine what books and other library equipment shall be purchased.” He concluded that the board had “exceeded its technical authority.” However, neither Knief nor Gillis seemed convinced that approaching the board with the illegality of its actions was advisable. Gillis wrote, “. . . it was quite impossible for the State Library or any other outside agency to have been of assistance to you.” Indeed, she was quite clear about the threat to Knief’s position: “. . . you can scarcely afford to defy the Board by ignoring its order. You could do no service to the Kern County Library by getting yourself dismissed. You can do a great deal of service by staying there and meeting its problems as courageously as you do.”

In Knief’s first letter to Sacramento, she notified Gillis that she had withdrawn the banned novel immediately although the main library and the branches had over 600 patrons on waiting lists for the work. Gillis commended her for her action: “By the way, even though legally you have the right to select and purchase books and put them into use, I think you are quite correct in withdrawing the book for the present.” Never in any of the correspondence that is available in the Kern County Library archives does either Gillis or Knief suggest that the board’s
order ought to be ignored or challenged legally. In spite of her compliance, Knief was interviewed extensively, noting that prior to the ban the library hadn’t received any complaints about the book and that the demand for it among local readers was high. Of course, the Californian did not oppose the ban, nor did the North of the River News; in a column entitled “Kern Kounty Komment”—and do note the KKK—the columnist commended the board’s action, commenting on “out of town communists” who were a “menace to society.” The column concluded that the novel ought to be “out of our Public Libraries, and out of our homes.”

But many papers up and down the Valley were critical of the ban, including the Dinuba Sentinel and the Selma Irrigator, which commented on the irony that the Associated Farmers met in a luxury hotel in San Francisco, “far from the San Joaquin cotton fields.” In October of 1939, Look ran a pictorial article on the migrant situation followed by an article authored by California’s Governor Olson. Ironically for Stanley Abel, much of the attention, both local and national, focused on the first dissenting supervisor, Ralph Lavin. Time sent a reporter to interview Lavin, and in reply to a letter from Lavin, Steinbeck himself wrote him, commenting on his courage, saying, “it is good to know that such men as you function in our local governments.” In spite of Knief’s acceptance of the resolution, she offered Kern’s 60 un-used copies of the novel to other California libraries. Twenty libraries accepted her offer, so Kern’s copies were sent statewide. However, when Stanley Abel discovered that the books had been lent to other libraries to circulate, “he became enraged” and ordered Knief to recall the books. She did so, and the books sat in Gretchen Knief’s office until January 27, 1941.

Although other California librarians encountered problems with Steinbeck’s novel, no other California librarian was forced to remove the novel from the shelves of her library. However, San Francisco librarian Robert Rea received instructions to buy only one copy of the novel and to keep it off the open shelves; also, librarians in other California towns who did not have an adequate number of copies, yet they “refus[ed] offers of local citizens to donate the book.” Carey McWilliams called the banning of the novel “a grave reflection on the entire public library system in California.”

McWilliams’ assessment may have been too narrowly focused on California. As noted earlier, The Grapes of Wrath had been banned in Kansas City, and the book was burned in St. Louis and banned in towns in Oklahoma and Buffalo, New York. The reactions to the censorship of the book ultimately reflected conflicting tendencies in American librarianship. While Knief’s private correspondence to the supervisors clearly elucidated her position against censorship, she ultimately capitulated to her employers’ demands, a position that State Librarian Mabel Gillis supported. Neither did Gillis, who was not employed by the board, take any public position against the ban. Knief and Gillis were abiding by what Geller calls an “unwritten code” of deference and neutrality: librarians simply didn’t challenge their boards or powerful people in their communities.
Finally, in the aftermath of the Kern County ban, both the ALA and the California Library Association (CLA) established committees on intellectual freedom in 1940; the ALA eventually condemned the ban as a “violation of freedom.” However, at the time, caught between the traditional ideologies of librarianship and the still-theoretical expressions of intellectual freedom, the ALA, CLA, and California State Library all remained silent. But as Jesse Shera once noted, “There are times when silence is not neutrality but assent.”

On January 27, 1941, Knief received a brief message from R.J. Veon, the County Clerk, notifying her that the board had “adopted a minute order requesting that you replace [the novel] on the shelves of the Kern County Library.” The stationary on which this letter is typed has the names of the supervisors in the letterhead. Stanley Abel’s name had been neatly crossed out and replaced with the name of the supervisor who had prevented him from serving his seventh consecutive term—A.W. Noon. This order was one of the first actions of the newly seated board. While the ban ended, the political absurdity that characterized the ban continued. When the order to rescind the ban was proposed, Supervisor Woollomes insisted, “There seems to be a little misunderstanding. No resolution was passed banning the book, the board merely requested that Miss Knief do as she saw fit about its circulation”. In spite of Woollomes’ claim that the resolution was merely a gentle request, the board rescinded the ban, and patrons began requesting the novel almost instantly; the first request was received fifteen minutes after the news was broadcast on the radio. Clearly the tide had turned. In fact, even the Associated Farmers had eventually softened its tactics in the wave of negative publicity that had accompanied the ban. In April of 1940, the Associated Farmers claimed to have orchestrated the ban to help Steinbeck deliver his message. The John Ford film of the novel, released in 1940, enjoyed critical and popular acclaim—receiving seven Academy Award nominations and winning two, for best director and best supporting actress.

But the specter of this censorship is still haunts Kern County—and libraries everywhere. At the time of the ban, Knief clearly understood that the ban was influenced by outside forces and affected by “the political battle between Board members themselves as well as the considerable struggle of the Board with the Workers Alliance.” Moreover, she apparently understood her vulnerability as an employee and felt compelled as such to obey the board’s orders. Clearly, neither did the State Library want to become embroiled in this political battle and commended Knief for keeping a low profile. Furthermore, the “official” silence of the ALA illustrated the paralysis of an organization in the midst of an ideological struggle. Knief characterized the experience as being “sort of a football between two opposing factions.” In a 1979 interview, Knief reflected, “the true reason for the ban was economic. The power structure of the county took offense at Steinbeck’s picture of the migratory workers’ living conditions.”

Social, economic, religious and political realities all play a role in censoring books. Sometimes, as was the case with The Grapes of Wrath, the powerful forces that seek to silence a voice are successful. Other times, they fail. In her letter to the board of supervisors, Kern County librarian Gretchen Knief wrote, “Ideas don’t die because books are forbidden reading.” We can
hope that is true, but we also must remember that silence has a power of its own. We must challenge those who seek to silence ideas.

A note: Since this is a transcript of a lecture delivered at St. John's College in Santa Fe, NM, I have not included formal citation of my sources, except casually in the text of the lecture. Should a reader want or need a citation for any of the research I have mentioned in this lecture, please contact the Levan Center for my contact information. Many of the primary sources are available in the archives in the Local History Room of the Beale Branch Library in Bakersfield, CA.