BACKGROUND

From the early 1900’s to the mid 1920s, the wheat fields of the Middle West and Great Plains were scenes of great movement. Only a few workers were needed to plant the wheat crop, using the machinery available at that time, but large numbers of workers were needed for the harvest. To do this work as many as 250,000 men were annually on the move from field to field, following the ripening crop.

The migration started in May, in the area around Garfield County, Oklahoma, and moved steadily northward, reaching North Dakota by the middle of August, and passing on into Canada. Some of the workers moved all the way from Oklahoma and Texas to the Dakotas and Canada, traveling mostly by train. The rail station in Enid, Oklahoma, became the starting point for this Great Wheat Belt Migration.

While smaller operations might get by on help from family and neighbors, most Oklahoma wheat farms required outside labor to bring in the grain. The need for workers depended on the type of machinery used. Smaller wheat farms used binders, which cut the unripened wheat and bound it into shocks. This required only two to four men—called "shockers"—to follow the machine, collect the bundles, and turn them upside down to ripen. The work was slow, because the binder could only harvest about 10-12 acres a day.

More than half the wheat in north-central Oklahoma was cut by machines called "headers." The header only cut the heads of ripened grain and did not bind them. Because ripe grain could shatter and scatter its seeds, the workers had to get it in as quickly as possible. Header operations required a large number of men working intensively over a period of a few days.
Header crews included men who drove the horse-drawn reapers, men who drove wagons called "barges" that transported the harvested grain, and laborers who arranged the wheat in the wagons for transport and in "ricks" for storage. Headers could cut about 30 acres a day, which meant the workers were on each farm for about one week before moving on to the next one.

The work was hard, and conditions were difficult. The harvesters labored in the intense heat and humidity of summer, and many suffered sunstroke and heat exhaustion. Even travel to the fields could be deadly. Oklahoma newspapers regularly ran stories about young men killed while trying to hop freights for the Wheat Belt. Brakemen often threw workers from trains, while "hi-jacks"—robbers who preyed on the migratories—probably murdered others.

Many of the workers had to stay in "jungle camps" outside the town. They slept in haystacks, in empty boxcars, or in the open. They scrounged for food. They would boil wheat for gruel or to make flour for pancakes, or concoct a "hobo's delight" from young alfalfa and bacon rinds. Wages ranged from $2-4 a day, sometimes dropping as low as 50 cents a day, depending on the supply of workers.

Mechanization of the wheat harvest ended the Great Wheat Belt Migration. The combine harvester cut and threshed the grain in a single operation and made hand shocking unnecessary. With the combine, five men could do the work formerly done by 320.

Because farm machinery is so expensive, many farmers today hire custom operators who bring in their own machinery and crews for the harvest. Custom operations follow much the same migration as that followed by workers in the early part of the last century.

ACTIVITY
1. Introduce the basic concept of labor unions, and lead students in a discussion of why unions might be necessary under certain conditions.
2. Share background information. On a map of the US, have students trace the Great Wheat Belt Migration and name the states included in the Wheat Belt (Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Montana, North Dakota South Dakota).
3. Hand out the student worksheets, and have students read "The Great Wheat Belt Migration." Then have students match the vocabulary words to definitions on Student Worksheet B.
4. Lead a discussion about the story.

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5. Have students write imaginary letters home describing their experiences on the wheat harvest.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES
1. The Great Wheat Belt Migration took place during the first two decades of the 20th Century. Have students place the event in context by researching or discussing what other great events were happening in our country before and after this period. (World War I, Industrial Revolution, etc.)
2. Invite a wheat farmer to class to answer students' questions about the wheat harvest.
3. Our official state motto is "Labor Omnia Vincit," Labor Conquers All. Have student discuss the meaning and significance in Oklahoma history.
4. Bring ripe wheat (in the spring) or any dried grass with a head to show students how easily the heads will shatter when they are ripe.
5. If you can acquire a sheaf of ripe wheat, bring it to class so students can handle it and thresh it (separate the wheat kernel from the straw).
6. Have students research the history of the labor movement in the US.
7. Have students research the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World.
8. Have students research to find out how hobo sandwiches got their name. (Hungry hoboes would knock on back doors, and women in the community would give them food. Sandwiches would have been an easy food to hand out the back door.)

EXTRA READING

EVALUATION
Vocabulary words are as follows: 1. labor; 2. labor union; 3. migration; 4. harvest; 5. shock; 6. sheaves; 7. thresh; 8. custom operation; 9. reaper; 10. rick; 11. header.
Hobo on Harvest

The Great Wheat Belt Migration

Oklahoma is a great place to grow wheat. Our state first began growing large wheat crops during World War I. The fields of Europe had been destroyed by war, so American farmers needed to grow extra food to feed the people there. At this time all the machinery wheat farmers use now had not yet been invented. So when it was time to bring in the wheat harvest, the wheat farmers needed lots of help.

Most of the wheat was cut by machines called "headers." The header simply cut off the heads of the ripened grain. Horse-drawn reapers picked up the wheat. Then it was placed in wagons and taken someplace for storage. Ripe grain could burst open and scatter its seeds, so the workers had to work as quickly as possible.

Header crews included some workers to drive the reapers, some to drive the wagons that took the grain to storage, some to arrange the wheat in the wagons and some to arrange the wheat in ricks for storage. Headers could cut about 30 acres a day. This meant the workers were on each farm for about one week. Then they moved on to another farm and started over.

To do this work as many as 250,000 men were on the move every year. They moved from field to field, following the ripening crop. The migration started in Oklahoma in May and moved northward through the summer, ending in Canada in the fall. The workers travelled mostly by train. The rail station in Enid, Oklahoma, was the place where the workers first began to gather each year in May.

The workers were known by several names—"bindlestiffs," "casuals," "floaters," "tramps," "bums," and, most commonly, "hobo." The word "hobo" probably was short for "hoe boy." Among the workers themselves the names had different meanings. A hobo was someone who was willing to work. A tramp had given up finding work but still liked moving around with the workers. A bum was someone who had given up finding work and just stayed where he had ended up.

The work was hard. The hoboes labored in the intense heat and humidity of summer. Many suffered sunstroke and heat exhaustion. Even travel to the fields could be deadly.
Many young men were killed trying to hop freights for the Wheat Belt. Others were thrown from the trains or murdered by robbers.

Many of the hoboes had to sleep in "jungle camps" outside the towns. They slept in haystacks, in empty boxcars, or in the open. Sometimes they had to scrounge whatever they could find for food. Their pay ranged from $2 to $4 a day. Sometimes there were too many workers. Then the pay was even lower.

The Industrial Workers of the World was a labor union that tried to organize the hoboes to help them get better wages and working conditions. Members of the union were called "Wobblies." Some people didn't like the Wobblies because they thought they caused trouble. In the years when there were too many workers, those who couldn't find work sometimes did cause trouble. These few gave the others a bad name.

The Great Wheat Belt Migration ended with the invention of the combine harvester. The combine harvester cut and threshed the grain in a single operation and made hand shocking unnecessary. With the combine, five men could do the work formerly done by 320.

Today many wheat producers hire custom operators to bring in the harvest. Custom operators have their own equipment and crews. They follow the wheat crop from Oklahoma to Canada, just as the hobo workers did nearly 100 years ago.
Hoboos on Harvest

Match the definition with the word by writing the number of the correct definition next to the word. Use the story to find clues.

Vocabulary

___custom operation

1. Work for wages.

___harvest

2. An organization of wage earners formed to help members get fair wages and working conditions.

___header

3. Movement from one place to another.

___labor

4. The act or process of gathering a crop.

___labor union

5. Sheaves of grain stacked upright in a field for drying.

___migration

6. Bundles of cut stalks of grain or similar plants bound with straw or twine.

___rick

7. To beat the stems and husks of grain to separate the grains or seeds from the straw.

___reaper

8. Business that owns specialized farming equipment and hires a crew to do specific jobs for farmers.

___sheaves

9. A machine for picking up grain crops.

___shock

10. A stack of hay, straw, wheat or similar material, especially when covered for protection from the weather.

___thresh

11. A machine that cuts the heads of grain and passes them into a wagon.
VOCABULARY

labor—Physical or mental exertion; a specific task.

migration—To move from one region and settle in another.

harvest—The act or process of gathering in a ripened crop at the end of a growing season.

shock—A number of sheaves of grain stacked upright for drying.

thresh—To beat the stems and husks of grain or cereal plants with a machine to separate the grains and seeds.

custom—Made according to the specifications of an individual purchaser.

reaper—A machine for harvesting grain and pulse crops.

rick—A stack of hay, straw, or other similar material covered or thatched for protection from the weather.

header—One that removes the head from an object; a machine that reaps the heads of grain and passes it through to a wagon.