Common Threads



PHOTO: COURTESY OF JEANNIE EASTMAN

Picking fruit in the 1930s: L. to R.: Jeannie's cousin, Buckley; mother, Eva; brother, Kenneth; and father, Doyal.

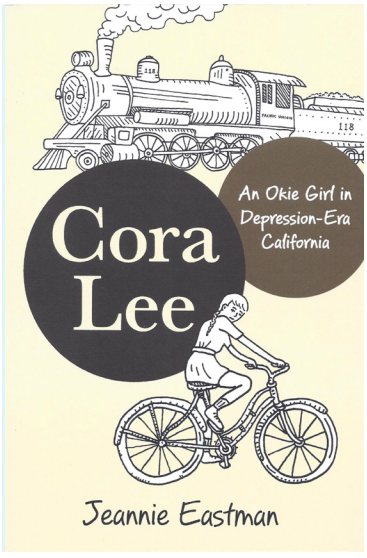
The Newsletter of Harrisville, New Hampshire August / September 2025

CORA LEE: A CONVERSATION WITH JEANNIE EASTMAN

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder (RUS): Your new book, *Cora Lee, An Okie Girl in Depression-Era California*, takes place over a year starting in 1937 in a small agricultural town in California. It traces the story of ten-year-old Cora Lee and her family—American migrant agricultural workers—and the hardships they face. You mention in your Acknowledgments that this story, although fictional, is also the story of your own family. What aspects of their story are also Cora Lee's?

Jeannie Eastman (JE): The story somewhat follows that of my own family. In 1933 my parents and my three oldest siblings, who at that time were 8, 6, and 4, left Arkansas and migrated to California. They weren't alone, however. Unlike Cora Lee's family, ours was an extended family migration: three generations, 12 adults, and a number of children, roughly four to 12 years of age.

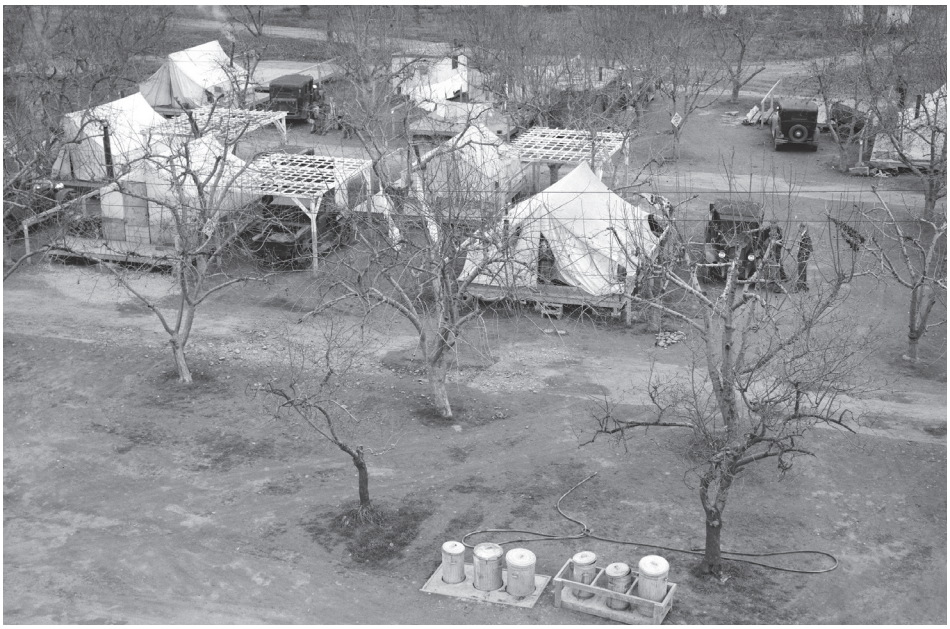
My family spent years following the harvests, which took them through many agricultural areas in the state. Up and down the Central Valley and to the coastal valleys, they harvested cotton, citrus, grapes, peaches, prunes, potatoes, peas, lettuce and other leafy greens, vegetables, sugar beets, olives, hops, and nuts.



Born in 1942, I remember picking prunes with my family when I was three. Cora Lee's chapter seven relies on my memory of those days. Even then, prune branches were hit with long poles, causing the fruit to fall to the ground where they were picked up by hand. Mechanization has changed that. Today prunes never touch the ground. The trees are mechanically shaken, causing the fruit to be caught as they fall and transported to a drying facility.

RUS: You give us an empathetic view of a family struggling to make a place for themselves in a changing world. Your dedication in the book is to the memory of your mother, Eva. How much of her is in Lucy, Cora Lee's mother?

JE: Fortunately for my extended family,



Dorothea Lange, February 1939: The Gridley FSA camp. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-019010-E

we eventually settled in the same town and stayed bonded. I grew up with cousins galore.

This was especially important for my mother, who divorced my father when I was four years old and my younger sister was an infant. Because of that, the character of Cora Lee's dad, Tom Danner, is dear to me. I grew up without a father, and Tom is the loving father I wish I had had.

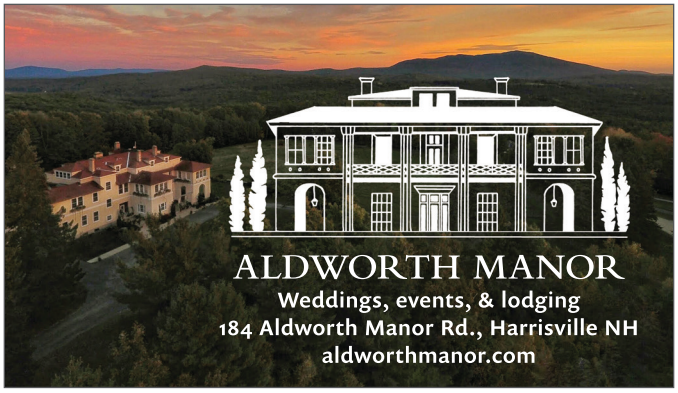
My mother had a hard life, which included six children spread over 22 years. She raised my youngest sister and me, and I owe her much. Dedicating the book in her memory was an easy but heartfelt decision. She had Lucy's sense of right and wrong, family strength, and pride in our place in society. Mother, however, did not have the self-confidence that I tried to portray in Lucy's character.

RUS: There is a thread running through the book about hoboes and the way they lived, which adds another compelling layer to the story. What inspired you to include this theme?

JE: The home setting in the story is the neighborhood where I spent my life from age three until I left for college. The empty lot next door where we played softball, the railroad tracks, the sound of the trains, the canal, and the hobo camp were all part of my world. My mother fed hoboes, although not to the extent that Lucy did, and there was no cat's face on our fencepost. I expanded on that theme to fit the parameters of the story and because hoboes represented a definite subculture in in the 1930s.

RUS: In the book you beautifully capture the cadence, expressions, and language of Cora Lee and her family through their dialogue without making them caricatures. Can you talk about how you approached this?

JE: Although some readers might find the language inconsistent or inaccurate, it is the language that I grew up with. Expressions—backerds and forth; y'all; gol-darn; I 'member; up yonder; *worsh* instead of *wash*; *cain't* instead of *can't*; *thang* instead of *thing*. I simply reached into my



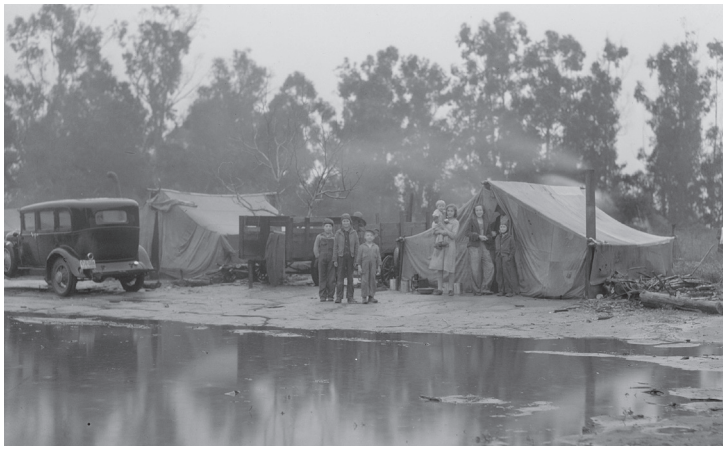






memory for expressions that resonated from my past.

RUS: The Farm Security Administration (originally the Resettlement Administration) hired photographers to document migrant farm workers as part of a plan to make the nation aware of the difficulties these laborers faced, while also gathering political support for the programs Roosevelt was trying to put in place. What was your family's response to what the FSA was trying to do?



Dorothea Lange, February 1936: Migrant pea pickers camping. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-001787-C

JE: As publicity spread about the migrants' deplorable living situations in the 1930s, President Roosevelt and the federal government produced a life-changing solution. The Farm Security Administration built as many as a dozen labor camps for agricultural workers throughout California's farming regions.

The camps provided tents erected on wooden platforms to keep them off the dirt, each with a woodstove for heat and cooking. They rented for 10 cents per day. Other buildings housed toilets and showers, laundry facilities, communal kitchens, sewing rooms, nurseries, first aid stations, and a camp office. Campers were expected to work a couple of hours each week to keep the grounds and buildings clean. Those who couldn't afford the rent could work additional hours. Resident campers served on committees that enabled the camps to be run democratically. The Gridley camp, where my family stayed from time to time, is featured in *Cora Lee*. The famous photographer, Dorothea Lange, took several photographs of the camp.

RUS: You use details in the book that conjure up rich sensory imagery: the lasting irritation of peach fuzz on the skin, the gagging smell of chicken poop, the variety of cut grasses in the vacant lot where they play softball, the gold fields of California poppies, the scent and movement of water tumbling over the weir from the canal, the Burma-Shave jingles! How much of this is from your own memory and how much did you need to research?

JE: These elements are from my memory, including the Burma-Shave jingles. We loved reading them along the roadside, and I later found a book devoted totally to their history.

RUS: When Cora Lee is called an "Okie," she is ashamed and angry because of its implication of poverty and lack of education. Her family situation is tenuous, but they are also hopeful. How much of you is in her?

JE: Like her, I was comfortable in our neighborhood and felt her unease whenever I moved from that safety net. But I admire Cora Lee's spunk because I was not so spirited myself. That said, much of me is in Cora Lee for the simple reason that she and I share a similar history.

RU: You have a storyteller's gift for bringing characters, time, and setting to life. The result is a compelling pager-turner. What was the most challenging aspect of writing this book?

JE: The most challenging aspect of writing this book was the loss of older family members who had lived through it.

RUS: What do you most want people to think about when reading your book?

JE: The history of the time—the 1930s—is somewhat forgotten, and today we have many literary options. However, Cora Lee's story may resonate because the same sorts of challenges are with us in 2025. Okies long ago made their place in American culture and commerce, but also the many challenges they faced in the 1930s are being met today by immigrant groups across the country.

I also hope that others will write their stories. We all have our own, and they are so easily forgotten.

Jeannie's book, ***Cora Lee, An Okie Girl in Depression-Era California***, is available at the Harrisville Library, the Book Nook at the Harrisville General Store, or from Amazon.com.

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder



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