

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2002

**Review of *Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth,
and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma* by Robert Lee Maril**

Ginette Aley
Virginia Tech

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Aley, Ginette, "Review of *Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma* by Robert Lee Maril" (2002). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 611.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/611>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma. Robert Lee Maril. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. xviii + 190 pp. Foreword, preface, introduction, notes, references, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

The Great Plains is home to a range of economic experiences, yet little research has focused on the roles that poor people and poverty have played in society. Constantly, though, the ghost of Tom Joad, John Steinbeck's protagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*, has reminded us of the status of the contemporary poor while also embodying the potential for social change. Robert Lee Maril, has produced the first comprehensive analysis of poverty in Oklahoma, the eighth poorest state in the nation, in which he explores myths about the poor and the "real" causes of poverty, especially low-wage labor. Maril develops a methodological triangulation of research

that employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, including random sample surveys, census data, in-depth interviews, and an ethnography of four poor neighborhoods in four different communities.

In doing so, the author puts a face on the label of poverty and shows us its human dimensions and daily life. He is interested in how the poor manage in their neighborhoods and in their communities, and to this end he closely examines twelve representative households in 1995, and then again two-and-a-half years later. Oklahoma's rural and urban poor live with rats and roaches, open storm sewers, rotting porches, litter-strewn vacant lots, addicts of all kinds, and inferior health services. Although poverty varies, Maril notes a number of common themes among these households: marital status has a significant impact; adults are usually working; these adults recognize that education is the key to job status; and householders regularly encounter serious health problems. Undeniably, the poor have been victimized by their poverty, and yet they have shaped their own culture of survival. Welfare rules are accommodated to current needs. "For most," explains Maril, "it is a question of making rational decisions from a list of bad choices." He also hears in their voices the will to "make do" in their circumstances. They strive to keep what little they have despite being driven by emotional and physical exhaustion and fears for their safety. Disappointingly, at the return visit two-and-a-half years later, the households were essentially "worse off."

Scrutinizing the dynamics of Oklahoma poverty shreds myths and leaves hard truths. Race, gender, and age are all directly related to poverty, which challenges traditional assumptions. African Americans and Native Americans, for example, actually represent only a small minority of all Oklahomans yet are over-represented among the poor. Likewise, poverty among children has increased at an alarming rate. Lingering social myths about the poor fuel racism and class antagonisms, and perhaps mislead policymakers about the ultimate source of Oklahoma poverty—an economy predicated upon low-wage jobs. Maril urges Oklahomans to end public policies and programs that recruit low-wage industries to the region.

The author has conducted a stark human-focused study of contemporary poverty in Oklahoma that speaks to the consequences of local and regional economies based on low-wage labor. Its value lies in the personalizing of the impoverished. This reviewer is not persuaded, however, that low wages alone create an impoverished class. In fact several of those studied were engaged in activities, such as crank dependence, that consumed roughly one-half of an already meager income. In some ways, Maril

appears to ennoble the poor or to absolve them from contributing to the persistence of their condition. But Maril has given policymakers—and any interested scholar—concrete and suggestive information about contemporary poverty. **Ginette Aley**, *Department of History, Virginia Tech.*