



Waltzing With the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage labor in Oklahoma

Robert Lee Maril

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In Oklahoma, eighth-poorest state in the nation, poverty is a pressing social problem. Even so, Robert Lee Maril's *Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad* is the first comprehensive analysis of poverty in the state.

Skillfully combining ethnography with statistical analysis, Maril portrays the lives of poverty-stricken Oklahomans, many of them children, minorities, and the elderly. Exploring myths about the poor and discussing the facts behind these myths, Maril discusses the real causes of poverty in the state, especially low-wage labor. He concludes by presenting a public-policy agenda that would benefit the poor directly and, in so doing, improve the lives of all Oklahomans.

From the Foreword by Robert McCormick:

Why did my grandparents and many Oklahomans of their generation escape from poverty while many others did not? The reasons are not clear. Nor do we have easy explanations for those present-day Oklahomans fighting the same struggle. Robert Lee Maril's compelling account shows the plight of hundreds of thousands who remain poor even though conditions in the state have vastly improved. Blaming the victim is not an option for intelligent and caring Oklahomans. The question before us today is, what will we do as citizens to reduce the level of poverty in our state? From my vantage point as someone who has fought for increased opportunities for Oklahomans. I have seen a common thread that runs through story after story of individuals who make the move from poverty to prosperity: that thread is access to and support for education. Inherent inequalities in economic and family backgrounds often dissipate before doors that education routinely opens. One wonders in reading Dr. Maril's accounts of Oklahomans in poverty how different their stories might have been had someone cared enough to see to it that their underlying condition of poverty did not interfere with their opportunity to get an education.

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