

VIGILANTE MAN (Woody Guthrie) (1930s)



The moving, questing people were migrants now.... And the hostility changed them, welded them, united them -- hostility that made the little towns group and arm as though to repel an invader, squads with pick handles, clerks and storekeepers with shotguns, guarding the world against their own people.

In the West there was panic when the migrants multiplied on the highways. Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants. And the men of the towns and of the soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves; and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders bad, as a man must do before he fights. They said, These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They're degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights.

And the latter was true, for how can a man without property know the ache of ownership? And the defending people said, They bring disease, they're filthy. We can't have them in the schools. They're strangers. How'd you like to have your sister go out with one of 'em?

The local people whipped themselves into a mold of cruelty. Then they formed units, squads, and armed them -- armed them with clubs, with gas, with guns. We own the country. We can't get these Okies get out of hand.

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York, NY (Viking Critical Library), 1972, pp. 385-386 (originally published in 1939)

Lyrics as recorded by Woody Guthrie, RCA Studios, Camden, NJ, 26 Apr 1940, released on "[Dust Bowl Ballads](#)," transcribed by Manfred Helfert.
© 1961, Ludlow Music, Inc., New York, NY

Have you seen that vigilante man?
Have you seen that vigilante man?
Have you seen that vigilante man?
I been hearin' his name all over the land.

Well, what is a vigilante man?
Tell me, what is a vigilante man?
Has he got a gun and a club in his hand?
Is that is a vigilante man?

Rainy night down in the engine house,
Sleepin' just as still as a mouse,
Man come along an' he chased us out in the rain.
Was that a vigilante man?

Stormy days we passed the time away,
Sleepin' in some good warm place.
Man come along an' we give him a little race.
Was that a vigilante man?

Preacher Casey was just a workin' man,
And he said, "Unite all you working men."
Killed him in the river some strange man.
Was that a vigilante man?

Oh, why does a vigilante man,
Why does a vigilante man
Carry that sawed-off shot-gun in his hand?
Would he shoot his brother and sister down?

I rambled 'round from town to town,
I rambled 'round from town to town,
And they herded us around like a wild herd of cattle.
Was that the vigilante men?

Have you seen that vigilante man?
Have you seen that vigilante man?
I've heard his name all over this land.

