WOODY GUTHRIE. During the years 1936 to 1940, some 309,000 Oklahomans emigrated to other parts of the country in the second stage of the great Okie migration. About 100,000 settled in California. Ninety percent of them blamed the drought or unemployment for their move. The average male was 33 years old, married to a woman of similar age, and the father of two children.

One of the migrants of the thirties was an Okemah folksinger named Woody Guthrie, who became a social troubadour (poet or musical spokesman) for the workers and unemployed. Suspected of being a communist, Woody never reached the heights of popularity in Oklahoma that he reached in some other parts of the nation, but his folksongs were among the most meaningful in the country’s social history. Composer of “This Land Is Your Land,” “Riding in My Car,” “California Blues,” “Pretty Boy Floyd,” “Tom Joad,” and others, Woody was asked to record his Dust Bowl ballads for the Library of Congress in 1940.
THE MARLAND ADMINISTRATION. Ernest W. Marland succeeded Alfalfa Bill Murray in the governor’s mansion. Born in Pennsylvania, Marland had come to Oklahoma and had established an oil empire at one time worth $85 million. Though he was still able to pay debts, Marland’s resources had been seriously depleted by the time he was inaugurated as an avid New Deal governor.

With 150,000 Oklahomans unemployed and 700,000 drawing some kind of relief, Marland had devised a state relief aid plan that became known during his campaign as the Little New Deal. A hostile legislature, however, refused to pass the major bills recommended by Marland, and they greatly altered the rest, claiming that they were too expensive. At the same time, they launched a spending spree that was so large and so notorious that the 16th legislature became known as the “Spending Sixteenth.”

State relief boards were set up to correspond with federal relief agencies, however, and the state appropriated $7.6 million to match federal relief funds. The money was distributed by county boards, the membership of which had been filled under the patronage system (hiring friends and relatives of public officials) and under whose supervision great abuses occurred. Federal investigators discovered that the number of pensioners receiving aid to the needy exceeded the total number of elderly in all income brackets in at least three counties.

Many relief programs were successful, despite the problems between the governor and the legislature and despite the abuses of those programs. Almost 90,000 people worked on 1,300 Works Projects Administration jobs in the state. They built public buildings, laid sidewalks, and performed other tasks beneficial to the public.

Governor Marland succeeded in developing the Interstate Oil Compact, an agreement among several state governors to organize a council which would provide guidance in regulating the oil industry and keeping it stable. Marland served as the first president of the group.

During Marland’s term, the Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board was established, and groundwork was laid for establishment of the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. Josh Lee, the great orator of Norman, was elected to the United States Senate in 1936. While he was serving as governor, Marland himself ran for senator in both 1936 and 1938 and was defeated.
GOVERNOR LEON PHILLIPS. Nine candidates ran for governor in 1938, including two former governors, Jack Walton and William H. Murray. (The law did not preclude an individual’s serving multiple terms in the governor’s office as long as they were not succeeding terms.) Leon Phillips was elected, and his main priorities were economy and solvency.

Born in 1890 in Worth County, Missouri, Phillips came to Oklahoma Territory with his family as a child. He attended Epworth University (now Oklahoma City University) and later the University of Oklahoma, where he played football and studied law. He had studied for the ministry at Epworth and taught school for a year before entering law school.

Leon “Red” Phillips served three terms in the State House of Representatives, and he was Speaker of the House during Marland’s term of office. He led the fight against Marland’s New Deal policy. When he took office as governor, he was fully aware of the state’s $26 million debt. His first step to remedy the situation was to persuade the legislature to approve the issuance of $35 million in state bonds. This brought indebtedness under control and provided a small surplus for the operations of government. Taxes were increased on gasoline, automobiles, tobacco, and other items. An amendment was adopted prohibiting the state from spending more money than it received in tax revenues. In addition to these measures, appropriations for education and public institutions were cut by one-fifth.

Most political limitations against women holding office were removed during Phillips’s term. This made women eligible for all offices in the state, including that of governor. The proposal was defeated in 1940 but was resubmitted and passed in 1942.

THE 45th INFANTRY DIVISION. The United States entered World War II during Phillips’s administration, following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Anticipating American involvement in the war, President Roosevelt mobilized the Oklahoma National Guard in 1940. In 1923, when
the Guard was expanded to a division, it was designated the 45th Infantry Division. The original insignia for the 45th resembled a gold swastika on a red background — an Indian “good luck” sign. However, when the swastika became infamous as the Nazi symbol with the rise of Adolph Hitler, the original symbol was abandoned. A new one was sought by means of a statewide contest. In 1940, the Indian “thunderbird” symbol was adopted in yellow on a red diamond field, and the members of the 45th Infantry became known as the Thunderbirds.

The Thunderbirds hit the beaches at Salerno and Anzio. By V.E. Day they had taken Munich and were occupying Hitler’s own apartment. In 1944, the 45th’s Lieutenant Clarence E. Coggins of Poteau single-handedly captured 946 Germans near Grenoble, France. The Germans called the men of the 45th “Falcons.”

At one time, American military codes were easily broken by German communications experts, and American soldiers often found themselves stopped by enemy soldiers with advance information. The “codes” of the 45th Infantry Division were never broken, however, because they used communications people who were members of Oklahoma’s Indian tribes. The codes were not codes at all. They were native Indian languages. These men were called “code talkers.”

In 1999, the army honored the last survivor of an elite World War II group of code talkers. A native Oklahoman, Charles Chibitty of the Comanche code talkers received the Knowlton Award during a ceremony in the Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes. The award recognizes people for outstanding intelligence work. Chibitty was one of seventeen Comanche Indians to serve in the Army Signal Corps. While serving in the army, he earned the World War II Victory Medal, the European Theater of Operations Medal, the Bronze Star, the Europe-African-Middle East Campaign Medal, and the Good Conduct Medal.

The Thunderbirds were always “gainers,” too. They were the only division that never lost an inch of ground. General George S. Patton, Jr., praised the 45th Infantry with these words:

**Sergeant Major Art Peters tries out Hitler’s bed after the capture of Munich.**
Born at sea, baptized in blood, your fame will never die. Your division is one of the best, if not the very best, division in the history of American arms.

**WILLIE AND JOE.** It wasn’t the great fighters of the 45th who made the division famous, however. It was two GI’s named Willie and Joe. The product of Thunderbird Bill Mauldin, “Willie and Joe” cartoons brought smiles to Americans around the world. To those at home, the cartoon characters represented all the infantrymen in the war, and the infantrymen themselves identified readily with the sympathetic characters and with the sentiment the cartoons relayed. Bill Mauldin won the Pulitzer Prize for his work.

Mauldin was assisted with his creations by photographer George Tapscott. Tapscott sometimes made photographs of Mauldin in specific poses. Mauldin used the photographs as models for his drawings. Tapscott was a copy boy for the *Oklahoman & Times* when he bought his first camera, a “box brownie,” in 1938. He had become so **proficient** in photography that he became the division photographer during the war.

Mauldin left the 45th in 1943, but Tapscott stayed with the division for the duration of the war and was on hand to take pictures when the Thunderbirds liberated Dachau. He photographed crematoriums and boxcars full of bodies, where Nazi executioners had killed thousands of people, most of them Jewish. After news of the camps became public, he photographed one sign written in German that read, “I am ashamed that I am a German.”

After the war, Tapscott returned to the *Oklahoman & Times* as photographer, and he also stayed with the 45th Infantry until its demise in 1968, when he went on to the 145th Public Information Detachment. Because of military reorganization and the **demand** for a more mobile, maneuverable infantry, the 45th Infantry Division was retired on February 1, 1968, after 45 years of service. Tapscott retired from the Oklahoma National Guard in 1974.
OKLAHOMA’S WAR EFFORT. Oklahoma politics was not the only thing that opened for women in 1942. That same year, they were accepted into the armed services to work in technical and clerical positions. Members of the Women’s Naval Reserve, the Waves, trained on a simulated ship at the Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) campus in Stillwater.

Women also flocked to the nation’s defense plants to do the jobs the absent men had always done in the past. “Rosie the Riveter” became the theme song of female defense plant workers everywhere, including those at the Douglas Aircraft bomber plants in Tulsa and Oklahoma City and at the smokeless powder plant in Pryor.

Military installations cropped up in several locations in the state. The Army Air Corps located its Air Materiel Command Depot at Tinker Field, outside Oklahoma City, where B-29 bombers were serviced and repaired. Camp Gruber was established in the Cookson Hills near Muskogee as an army training center, and an entire army division was activated there. Fort Sill and other established military installations were expanded, and several training units for the air forces were established in various locations.

Even though Oklahoma was in the middle of the continent, the Navy was well entrenched here, especially the Navy’s flying units. Navy fliers trained at a base near Clinton and at the North Base in Norman, which utilized the University of Oklahoma’s Max Westheimer Field. The South Base in Norman, which was attached to the university’s main campus, was used for training skilled workers, such as machinists, for Navy service.

Altogether, twenty-eight army camps and thirteen naval bases were established in the state, due largely to the central location and abundance of good flying weather. After the war, Norman’s naval installation became the world’s only inland Navy base. In 1958, the base was retired, and the air field returned to the university. Today a small hill juts out of the flatlands along Interstate Highway 35 outside of Norman to puzzle travelers who are strangers to the area. Local residents who can remember the war know that the hill is a man-made structure used by the trainees at the Navy’s Technical Training Center for gunnery practice.

Fliers were also trained at a base outside Miami in northeastern Oklahoma. Many of the trainees were from Great Britain. Fifteen of the Brit-
ish aviation students were killed during their training and buried in a nearby cemetery. After the war, when the training camp was closed, there was no one to care for the graves. Mrs. Claude A. Hill, a local resident with no sons of her own, took it upon herself to groom the graves and keep the Union Jack flying over them. She planted grass and flowers and kept them trimmed, and each year she replaced the small British flag which flew over each grave.

Several years after the end of the war, a British commander visited Miami and saw the cemetery. As a result of his visit, Mrs. Hill was awarded Great Britain’s King’s Medal of Service in the Cause of Freedom, inscribed, “Approved by His Majesty in recognition of the valuable service rendered by you to the Allied Cause.”

All the foreign servicemen based at Oklahoma installations were not friendly to the Allied cause. More than 400 sites nationwide, eight of them within the state of Oklahoma housed prisoners of war, most of them Germans. The first prisoners to arrive at the Fort Reno establishment outside El Reno were among the 250,000-plus captured in North Africa in May, 1943. Germany’s indomitable Afrika Korps, under the command of the famous “Desert Fox,” Lt. General Erwin Rommel, had fallen after five months of heavy fighting against British and American forces. Most captives were sent to the United States for incarceration. Eventually, more than 340,000 German troops, 51,000 Italian troops, and 2,240 Japanese troops were held in prison camps on American soil.

In 1929, the Geneva Convention, which made international rulings governing wars, had said that prisoners of war could be used as a labor force for the capturing government. During World War II, both sides made use of the ruling, and Oklahoma industry, especially the agricultur-
al industry, was offered the services of the prisoners. Unfortunately, the prisoners arrived too late in 1943 to be of significant help with the crops for that year. However, they provided a much-needed source of labor during the 1944 season.

The greatest problem in utilizing the prisoners was government “red tape.” Many farmers and other employers complained that the priority system, which had been established by the government and which was rigidly followed by the military personnel who were in charge of the projects, hindered their access to the captive labor source and therefore hindered production. Alvin Powell, foreman of the Horseshoe Ranch near Roff, related that, on one occasion, when notifying a camp commander that he needed a supply of workers for spring lambing, he was told that all workers were engaged in a military priority project and that he should “postpone lambing.”

Despite such problems, the program succeeded in filling part of the labor shortage which had been created by the war. Some post-war reports estimate that prisoners of war provided 870,000 hours of labor every thirty days across the nation, putting the value of the labor program over $100 million.

GOVERNOR ROBERT S. KERR. Oklahoma elected a new governor during the war. Robert S. Kerr, elected in 1942, was the first governor actually born in the state. An attorney and oilman, one of the founders of the Kerr-McGee Oil Company, Kerr was born in a log cabin near Ada in the Chickasaw Nation. An effective civic and lay religious leader, Kerr was an accomplished public speaker, proud of his frontier heritage, and maintained a “hearty manner” and a good sense of humor.

Most of Kerr’s term was during the war years, and he effectively handled those war-related duties. In addition, he succeeded in gaining a referendum vote for free textbooks for the public schools. The Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board was established during Kerr’s term, removing from the governor’s office the responsibility for deciding on sentences, pardons, and paroles. Bonds issued during Phillips’s term were retired.
before the end of Kerr’s administration, and when he left office, there was a surplus in the state treasury.

Kerr sought to draw industry into the state, and he did a great deal to improve Oklahoma’s image in the nation. He was well-respected nationwide, and in great demand as a public speaker. He lost no opportunity to tell his audiences about the abundant resources and opportunities in his great state. He wrote a book, *Land, Wood and Water*, to further extol Oklahoma’s assets, and he saw the state’s Dust Bowl image begin to wane.

In 1948, two years after leaving the governor’s office, Robert Samuel Kerr was elected to the United States Senate. A massive man of six feet, four inches and sometimes topping 270 pounds, Kerr was known for his pointed sarcasm on the Senate floor and for his ability to get things done. Kerr was almost solely responsible for the Kerr-McClellan Arkansas River Navigation Project. This project opened the Arkansas River to handle trade and transport between inland Oklahoma and the Gulf of Mexico.

Kerr made one unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 1952. Defeated, he abandoned the idea and vowed to be “the best...senator you ever saw.” A wheeler-dealer, Kerr became one of the nation’s most powerful senators, and one of the most effective as far as Oklahoma was concerned. He once said, “If Oklahoma needs it, I’ll get in bed with the devil to get it.” Oklahoma Democratic Congressman Tom Steed once said of him, “Bob came along at a time when the Dust Bowl was ending, and we needed to go places. We did.”

Kerr hated “big government,” but he learned to use the government “machinery” to his advantage. He dealt in power, and he gave his support to people who supported Oklahoma and Oklahomans. Rex Hawks, a former Kerr employee, said of Kerr in a 1978 interview that he was “for the farmers, the old folks, and the working people.”

Although many former governors had run for the U.S. Senate, Robert S. Kerr was the first to succeed in Oklahoma. He died on New Year’s Eve, 1963, in his room at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, in the midst of entertaining a group of doctors and nurses with a personal anecdote. Death was quick and merciful for the Oklahoma senator, who was at the height of his power. Just a few days earlier, the *Saturday Evening Post* had printed a story calling him “King of the U.S. Senate.” No one has ever disputed that Kerr deserved the title.

The late senator was inducted into the Petroleum Hall of Fame in 1984.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the accomplishments of Robert S. Kerr as governor and as the United States Senator from Oklahoma.
2. Why was Woody Guthrie’s work significant?
3. Discuss the controversy between Leon Phillips and Ernest Marland.
4. What roles did women play in World War II?
5. Identify:
   • Woody Guthrie
   • E.W. Marland
   • Code talkers
   • “Willie and Joe”
   • Charles Chibitty
   • Robert S. Kerr