Context Sheet #3:  
The novel’s author, John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. Although his family was wealthy, he was interested in the lives of the farm labourers and spent time working with them. He used his experiences as material for his writing.

He wrote a number of novels about poor people who worked on the land and dreamed of a better life, including The Grapes of Wrath, which is the heart-rending story of a family’s struggle to escape the dust bowl of the West to reach California. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, six years before his death in 1968.

Steinbeck had many short-term and casual manual jobs while establishing himself as a writer – including as a ranch hand near King City, which later became the setting for Of Mice and Men. Though he may have romanticised the nature of some of this work, he clearly understood what it was to be hired and fired, and the harshness of heavy labouring work.

Spreckles owned or leased ranches from below King City in the south to Santa Clara in the north. Each ranch had a bunkhouse or two, a cook house, and a superintendent’s house. The main business of the ranches was to raise sugar beets, but they also raised hay and alfalfa, had milk cows, and ran some cattle, although the land was more likely to be leased out part of the year to others for grazing. Each ranch had a small semi-permanent crew for maintenance and feed operations. They were helped with these chores by the bindlestiffs and hobos who worked their way north every year up the line of Spreckels ranches. They’d get a meal at the southernmost ranch, find out what the work situation was in the valley, and then travel north to where there was work, living on one or more of the company ranches as long as they were needed.
Lennie and George from Of Mice and Men are such bindlestiffs (although they drift in from the northern part of the state), who find work at the Spreckels ranch number 2, just south of Soledad on the west side of the Salinas river, joining the maintenance crew at haying time. (2)

I was a bindlestiff myself for quite a spell. I worked in the same country that the story is laid in. The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and struck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn’t stop him until it was too late. (3)

(Steinbeck) took a job on one of the Spreckles ranches near Chualar, bunking with the men and serving as foreman to a gang of Mexican and Filipino migrant workers. They loaded heavy burlap sacks full of beets into trucks for transportation into Salinas: a gruelling job which left Steinbeck so exhausted at night that he could write nothing. His hands, he told his sister, were ‘blistered’ and his back was ‘too sore to sleep’. After a dinner of ‘gristle and potatoes’ he sat with the men and listened to their stories, asking questions, probing for information. (3)