

# THE DUST BOWL



Farmer and sons running in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma

**D**awn had broken fresh and clear that Sunday morning, urging the people of the Southern Plains outdoors. Freshly starched white curtains rustled softly in the spring breeze. Many families packed picnic lunches and drove their Model A Fords over country roads to church and, after church, shared their noon meal with neighbors. At mid-afternoon, the temperature suddenly began to drop rapidly — about fifty degrees in a few hours. It was Sunday, April 4, 1935.

The Black Blizzard soared up over the horizon, an inky black cloud blotting out everything behind

it. The silence of the ominous onslaught was broken only by the muffled thunder of the heat lightning that appeared to flashdance in the midst of the black backdrop. Rolling without stopping across the Southern Plains, the Black Blizzard rose like a murky, muddy wall, as high as 7,000 or 8,000 feet. The atmospheric electricity generated by the collision of cold and intense heat lifted the topsoil of millions of acres of plowed farmland, lifting it higher and higher and picking up more as it moved across the Plains.

Flocks of birds chirped nervously and rapidly

grew in number as thousands of them suddenly took flight.

In Kansas, Louise and John Garrettson were headed home in their car. They saw the black wall coming and thought they had time to get home. They had almost made it when they were engulfed by the swirling dust. Leaving their car, they groped for the fence wire and, hand-over-hand, followed it to their door.

In Texas, Ivan English pulled his tractor into the yard just as the dust clouds appeared on the horizon. He placed a tin can over the tractor's exhaust to keep the dust out of the engine and went into the house to wait out the storm. Days later, after the Black Blizzard had passed, only the tip of the exhaust with its sand-polished, glistening can was visible. The tractor was completely covered with sand.

In the Oklahoma Panhandle, Ada and Ed Phillips and their six-year-old daughter were on the way home from an outing in their Model A Ford. They still had fifteen miles to go. Ed realized that the storm would be upon them before they could make it home. Seeing an old adobe house ahead, he knew that they would have to take shelter immediately and felt a sense of relief that he had found the house. By the time they were out of the car, the cloud had engulfed them, making it so dark that they nearly missed the door. Inside they found no other people, stranded like themselves, in a two-room hut, all fearing that they might be smothered. For four hours they sat there, until the storm let up enough for them to follow the roadside ditch back to town. By then, the gloom was moving south across the high plains of Texas.

That "Black Sunday," as it came to be called, was not the first of the dust storms nor was it to be the last. It was one of many fierce storms carrying tons of dust and dirt that were called Black Blizzards.

Some of the worst storms were not accompanied by a drop in temperature. They were rolling clouds of withering heat that rushed out of a prairie furnace, searing crops of grain, and sucking up

rivers and lakes, turning much of the dust to mud.

In the midst of such storms, within a few hours, the bleating of sheep thinned into silence around dry water holes. Cattle staggered and fell while church bells tolled begging for prayers.

At night, the intense blackness was broken infrequently by the hazy, feeble glow of a lantern or lamp in a farm home. Day or night, it was the darkest moment in the history of the Southern Plains. The onslaught of the dust storms, which grew more frequent as vegetation grew more sparse, impoverished the land and made the people despair.

Worried farmers, already four to five years into a severe drought, searched the skies for small signs of relief. Nothing but heat lightning flickered on the horizon, foretelling a plague of insects and pests.

Eventually, the fiercest of storms passed, although some of them filled the air with dust for days at a time. The powdery dust covered and choked the vegetation, drifted into dunes and drifts that covered fence rows, and settled against the outer walls of homes, sometimes to the eaves of the house. The fierce, dust-laden winds sand-blasted automobiles and tractors. The drifts delayed, and at times derailed, trains and snarled traffic on the roads and highways.

These storms resulted in further horrors. Grasshoppers imitated the black clouds of dust and swarmed over the ground. They devoured everything in sight, even fence posts and the family wash hanging on clotheslines to dry. The most devastating side-effect was upon human health. Dust pneumonia, or "brown lung," claimed the lives of thousands — especially the very old, the infants, and the weak. Many thousands survived but were physically weakened and suffered for months afterward.

The jet stream caught up tons of earth from the Plains, the finest topsoil, and carried it eastward across the Atlantic seaboard and the nation's capital, and then dumped it into the Atlantic Ocean.

Farmers watched the scorched earth crack open,

heard the gray grass crunch beneath their feet, and worried about how long they would be able to pay their bills. Worse, the farmers knew that nature had lulled them into a sense of false security. They had “busted the sod” carelessly and had gathered bountifully from the virgin soil. A large share of responsibility was no doubt due to a decade of drought, from 1930 to 1940, but the farmers also knew that their own lack of implementation of conservation practices also contributed to the situation. They knew, too, that it would be they who would bring the soil back.

Droughts are inevitable on the Plains. They bring with them blowing dust and violent thunderstorms with strong winds or tornadoes and hail, but little or no moisture. Therefore, when the drought spawned “dusters” in 1931, no one was really surprised or alarmed. But no one was prepared for the Black Blizzards or the oppressive heat and blowing dust — storms of such destructive force that they left the region reeling in confusion and fear. Day after day, year after year, the sand rattled against windows; fine powder caked one’s lips and eyes; springtime turned to despair—poverty eating into self-confidence and starving both the body and the spirit.

What caused the storms that gave the name of “Dust Bowl” to a decade of despair and stamped an imprint on a broad section of the United States? The dust storms left hundreds of thousands of people without homes or jobs, branded them as “Okies,” whatever their origin, and forced them to accept government relief or to emigrate to another section of the nation in hopes of better opportunities.

A number of negative factors came together at the same time to produce a national disaster. Without strong, swirling winds, the soil would have stayed put, despite the lack of vegetation as cover. Without the long, extended drought, plainsmen would have had lush, strong, healthy crops to cover the soil and hold it in place. Had the land not been



Entire cities, like Hooker, Oklahoma, could be cast into darkness as large swells of dust would mount into tidal waves, covering every inch for miles.

stripped of its natural vegetation and its trees and brush — even the sage or greasewood bushes — there would have been a defense against the strong, dry winds, and the sandy, powdery topsoil would have held. But the combination of the drought, poor conservation practices, and strong winds sucked up more dirt into the airstreams until millions of tons of dirt rode the winds and covered the land of the Southern Plains.

The dirt was everywhere. It was brown, black, yellowish, ashy gray, or sometimes red, depending upon where it came from. It was, at times, sharp and peppery, burning the nostrils and lungs, or it was heavy, greasy, and nauseating because of its unpleasant odor. People hesitated to turn over in their beds at night because their movements would stir the dust on the covers. The once-starched white curtains hung at every window. Now, they were a limp, gray, dirt-laden insulation against more of

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the relentless blowing dust. The bed pillows were dark with the dust that came into the prairie homes through every crack and crevice. People slept with the dirt, and when day came, they breathed the dirt-laden air and chewed the grit with their food.

The exodus began!

Almost a million people left their homes and farms in the first half of the decade of the 1930s. More than two-and-one-half million left after 1935. Not all were “dusted out.” But all were uprooted — a generation of human tumbleweeds, cut loose from the soil. Almost half who had crossed state lines, more than 300,000 from 1935 to 1940, went to California. Others who left went to East Texas, Washington, or Oregon.

When they arrived in California, they were destitute. Moreover, they found that they were not wanted. These proud people were scorned. They finally sought refuge together in tent cities called “Little Oklahomas,” where people lived

together in their cars or in tents. Sometimes families with eight or ten members traveled and lived in one small automobile. Many tales were told of the valiant efforts of the mothers to make such an existence as homelike as possible. But the Okie image persisted — the rundown, rattletrap automobiles with their mattresses on top, with a small coop of chickens so that the family could have eggs to eat, as they traveled old Route 66 to California. Only the large growers of fruits and vegetables, which had to be gathered by hand, were glad to see them. They were a source of cheap labor to replace the Hispanic farm labor, since the 1929 restrictions on immigration from Mexico had reduced that supply of workers.

Many poems and stories were written about the Dust Bowl and the unfortunate emigrants. The most socially committed work produced during and about the decade was John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. It taught a reading public what to



Dust drifts on a farm in Cimarron County.

think about the Okies. Although deeply resented by Oklahomans, who took the work as a personal insult and a blow to the state's pride and its people, it nevertheless stung the consciences of those who had been practically unaffected by the disaster. The story of the heroic, embattled, persevering, and persistent Joad family was the story of thousands of ordinary families. From the Dakotas to deep in the heartlands of Texas and New Mexico, they were defeated by two major disastrous blows — the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, each making the other worse.

For those who stayed, their great hope lay in the optimism and leadership of a new U.S. President — Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The massive government program to rebuild and rehabilitate the “breadbasket of the nation” could not be implemented overnight. During his first year in office, the President worked to restore confidence in the nation's financial institutions. Then, while Kansas and Oklahoma dust fell on the White House lawn, the President began his programs to salvage the Plains. First, he called for and got \$525 million for drought relief. He made emergency feed loans to cattlemen. He purchased their starving cows, slaughtered them, and had them canned for food relief for the poor. He provided public jobs as supplemental income for farmers, particularly in the building of ponds and reservoirs for conservation purposes. He created work camps, called the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), for young men. He made seed loans available to farmers and made monies available for setting out trees as shelter belts against the strong straight winds that blow constantly on the prairie. He paid the farmers 20 cents per acre to “list” their land meaning to deep-chisel it in such a way that the land would hold against the wind. He paid them 40 cents per acre if they listed abandoned land or land that belonged to someone who no longer had tractors or the equipment to list the land. Slowly, the program began to work. When the rains finally came, the

land was ready, lessening the erosion that could have occurred from run-off.

Such appeared to be the fate of the Southern Plains at the end of the “Dirty Thirties,” no doubt the worst decade of Depression and drought in America's economical history. The farmers of the Plains shouldered their share of the responsibility for the disaster. But that wasn't all they did about it. They began conservation practices to prevent wind and water erosion. They replaced the nutrients that had blown away with the precious topsoil. They planted windbreaks, built reservoirs to retain water during years of drought, contoured and terraced the hillsides and rolling fields of plowed ground, and put in irrigation systems where practical.

In late spring each year, massive combines and grain trucks move south, down to the southern edge of the Plains of Texas. Then they turn north and harvest millions of acres of wheat, growing so abundantly that it feeds the world. From South Texas to the Canadian border, golden grains wave in a wind free from the dust and dirt of a nation's farmland.

Could it happen again? Certainly, the nation's grain belt will experience severe drought again.

With little to no usable soil, many farmers were helpless to prevent their equipment from being absorbed by the very earth that had taken everything else. Original photo undated. © THE OKLAHOMA CITY TIMES

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