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Living in the Dust Bowl

Peter Roop

The morning of Sunday, April 14, 1935, dawned clear and dry across the southern Great Plains. Families went to church, planning to enjoy picnics and visits to friends during the pleasant afternoon hours ahead.

Then, in mid-afternoon the air turned suddenly cooler. Birds began fluttering nervously. All at once, a rolling black cloud of dust darkened the northern horizon. Everyone hurried home, trying desperately to beat the overwhelming "black blizzard" before it struck. Within minutes, the sky overhead was dark, streetlights flickered in the gloom, and drivers switched on headlights as the swirling dust storm blotted out the sun.

"Black blizzards" were nothing new to the residents of the southwestern Plains. They had experienced these destructive dust storms for several years. Yet the wall of flying soil that struck on April 14 was particularly awesome in its size and intensity.

One reporter wrote that an "uncorked jug placed on (the) sidewalk two hours (was) found to be half filled with dust. . . . Lady Godiva could ride through the streets without even the horse seeing her." A long-suffering home owner said, "All we could do about it was just sit in our dusty chairs, gaze at each other through the fog that filled the room and watch that fog settle slowly and silently, covering everything including ourselves in a thick, brownish gray blanket."

The stories were the same throughout the area of the Great Plains known as the dust bowl—stories of attics collapsing under the weight of tons of dust, tractors buried beneath six-foot drifts of dirt, and travelers stranded in their cars.

From 1932 through 1940, powerful storms of dust ravaged the farming and grazing lands of the dust bowl. At times the winds were so powerful that they cut to levels as deep as a steel plow could reach. With the soil stripped away, people found long-buried Indian campgrounds, arrowheads, pioneer wagon wheels, and even Spanish stirrups. In many locales, a day rarely passed without dust clouds rolling over. A boy in Texas said, "These storms were like rolling black smoke. We had to keep the lights on all day. We went to school with headlights on and with dust masks on."

Before the "dirty thirties," as people called that time, the dust bowl region had experienced years of bumper crops. The years 1926, 1929, and 1931 produced particularly fine crops of wheat. The farmers, encouraged by the bountiful crops, began to use more efficient machinery, to carve out even greater fields. In so doing, the farmers uprooted the grasses that had held together the rich prairie soil for ages.

Then the weather changed. Less rain fell throughout the Plains. The ground dried up, crumbling into small pieces. Crops withered and died. At the same time, the ever-present prairie winds increased in strength and duration. The winds first shifted the topsoil, then lifted it and transported it for miles. Drought and wind storms were not new to the Great Plains, but the lack of prairie grass to hold down and protect the soil was. To make matters worse, a grasshopper plague struck the Plains, wiping out the remaining vegetation and completely exposing the soil.

During the height of the storms, a farmer in Texas commented that, "If the wind blew one way, here came the dark dust from Oklahoma. Another way and it was the gray dust from Kansas. Still another way, the brown dust from Colorado and New Mexico. Little farms were buried. And towns were blackened."

Marge Betzer, a native of North Dakota, recalls that during those years, "The morning sky was a pale yellow. By noon, everything had turned grayish. We covered our windows, but nothing could keep the dust out. Lots of farmers got in debt."

Despite the hardships, many farm families chose to stay in the dust bowl, hoping for rain and trying to combat the shifting earth with improved conservation measures. An Oklahoma farmer said, "All that dust made some of the farmers leave. We stuck it out here. We scratched, literally scratched to live. Despite all the dust and the wind, we were putting in crops, but making no crops and barely living out of barnyard products only. We made five crop failures in five years."

Life during the Dust Bowl years was a challenge for those who remained on the Plains. They battled constantly to keep the dust out of their homes. Windows were taped and wet sheets hung to catch the dust. At the dinner table, cups, glasses, and plates were kept overturned until the meal was served. Dentists and surgeons struggled to keep their instruments sterile. Roads and railroads were often blocked, causing delays until hardpressed crews cleared them. People lost their way in the "black blizzards" and perished. The cutting dust caused "dust pneumonia" which sometimes killed the very young and the very old.

Yet most people kept a sense of humor. Farmers told the tale that, when the drought was especially bad, a man hit on the head by a single raindrop had to be revived by throwing two buckets of sand in his face. A store advertised, "Great bargains in real estate. Bring your own container." Hunters were said to have shot prairie dogs overhead as they tunneled through the dusty air. One farmer mused, "I hope it'll rain before the kids grow up. They ain't never seen none."

Those who stayed tried to live as normal a life as possible in spite of the failing crops, ever-present dust, and dying landscape. Schools remained open except in the worst of the storms. Basketball tournaments continued. Farmers planted seed, praying the rains would return. Farm wives took whatever they could spare to Saturday markets. People had faith that times would change and their beloved land would regain its former prosperity. As Caroline Henderson, an Oklahoma farm wife, wrote in 1936, "We instinctively feel that the longer we travel on a straight road, the nearer we must be coming to a turn."

And finally the turn came. By 1938, the worst of the drought was over. The new soil conservation measures had taken hold and crops were returning. The ravaging winds had slackened and dust storms came less frequently. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was over.

Drought struck the Great Plains again in the 1950s, but thanks to improved conservation measures, the soil suffered much less damage. With each drought, soil conservationists learn more about protecting the land. Anyone who lived through the 1930s Dust Bowl will agree that that is a good thing. No one wishes to live through the conditions of that earlier tragedy again.

A Note from the Editor

"Dust Bowl" is a term sometimes used to describe both a time and a place. The dust bowl region of the United States is the southern portion of the Great Plains, including parts of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. But Dust Bowl—with capital "D" and "B"—refers to the time during the 1930s when drought, prairie winds, and poor land use practices combined to make life in this region miserable, and farming nearly impossible.

The natural balance of life and climate in the dust bowl is a delicate one. It is largely created by the region's short grasses, grass-eating animals, and unpredictable wet and dry periods. During the mid-1800s, huge cattle and sheep herds did great damage to the region. The herds devoured the short grasses whose roots held the soil together, and the sheep's sharp hooves tore the roots from the ground. Later, farmers using newly-invented steel plows dug up thousands more acres of prairie grasses. During the early 1900s, gas-powered tractors and combines enabled farmers to cultivate millions of acres and to enjoy bountiful harvests. But all these practices had destroyed the dust bowl's natural balance, exposing soil to wind and rain, and making the region ripe for disaster.

That disaster struck beginning in 1932. Drought and wind storms battered the dust bowl for the next several years. Thousands of lives, homes, and businesses were ruined. Millions of acres of land became useless. Billions of tons of topsoil blew away.

The situation was reversed largely due to government actions. A special branch of the Department of Agriculture—the Soil Conservation Service (SCS)—was created and went to work. The SCS used carefully-planned conservation methods and wiser farming techniques to restore prairie grasses and to enable farmers to live off the land without ruining it. By the time rains returned, the situation had already improved dramatically. Even today, however, the Dust Bowl is remembered as one of the most severe tragedies to affect both nature and people in this country's history.

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