

“The Dirty Thirties”: The Dust Bowl



Dust storm approaching Stratford, Texas. April 18, 1935
NOAA George E. Marsh Album

http://www.weru.ksu.edu/new_weru/multimedia/dustbowl/dustbowlpics.html



Son of Cimarron County, Oklahoma farmer
April 1936 (Library of Congress)

On Armistice Day (November 11) 1933, the wind began to blow through Beadle County, South Dakota, not just briskly, but at nearly 60 miles per hour. “By noon,” reported R.D. Lusk, “it was darker than night.” When the wind finally settled down, Lusk’s farm, like the rest of Beadle County, was transformed. As Lusk peered out at the landscape, he saw no fields, “only sand drifting into mounds.... Fences, machinery, and trees were gone, buried. The roofs of sheds stuck out through drifts deeper than a man is tall.” The “Dust Bowl,” which many in South Dakota had only heard stories of its destructive storms hitting areas further south, had crept northward, and unleashed its fury on their doorstep.

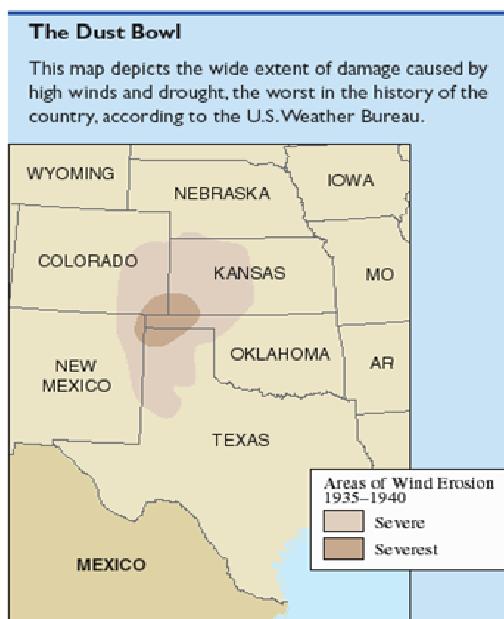
The Dust Bowl refers to a series of dust storms causing damage to American prairie lands from 1930 to 1940. It was one of the worst ecological disasters in modern history, and its effects, which stretched throughout the heart of the United States, were felt as far north as the Dakotas and as far south as Texas. Nearly sixty years of intensive farming and grazing, without crop rotation or other techniques to prevent soil erosion, had stripped the prairie region of its natural vegetation, rendering it defenseless against the dry winds that blew away 1/3rd of the Great Plains. A steady decline in rainfall and increased heat turned once fertile farm regions into virtual deserts. The landscape of the nation’s heartland was scorched as whipping winds destroyed agriculture and livestock.

Between 1932 and 1939, an average of nearly 50 “black blizzards” a year, such as the one that hit Beadle County, turned 1500 square miles between the Oklahoma panhandle and western Kansas into a gigantic “Dust Bowl.” A typical dust storm lasted anywhere from hours to days. R.D. Lusk observed that walking into one was like walking into “a wall of dirt.” In 1934, the dust clouds had spread eastward across the nation, darkening the skies over Boston and Savannah, Georgia. As the clouds passed over the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., one legislator commented, “There goes Oklahoma.”

Sunday, April 14, 1935 dawned clear across the plains. After weeks of dust storms that destroyed five million acres of wheat, people were grateful to see the sun high above. They went outside to head to church, complete chores, or to picnic and sun themselves under the blue skies. By mid-afternoon, the temperatures dropped and birds began chattering nervously. Suddenly a huge black cloud appeared on the horizon, approaching fast. "Black Sunday," often regarded as the worst storm of the Dust Bowl era, roared through Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado packing winds in excess of 70 miles per hour, suffocating thousands of cattle and dumping tons of topsoil and red clay on homes and streets.

Those on the road had to try to beat the storm home. Some, like Ed and Ada Phillips of Boise City, and their six-year-old daughter, had to stop on their way to seek shelter in an abandoned adobe hut. There they joined ten other people already huddled in the two-room ruin, sitting for four hours in the dark, fearing that they would be smothered. Cattle dealer Raymond Ellsaesser tells how he almost lost his wife when her car was shorted out by electricity and she decided to walk the three-quarters of a mile home. As her daughter ran ahead to get help, Ellsaesser's wife wandered off the road in the blinding dust. The moving headlights of her husband's truck, visible as he frantically drove back and forth along the road, eventually led her back to safety. Others were not so lucky. Some residents of the Great Plains, in especially Kansas and Oklahoma, succumbed to illnesses and death from dust pneumonia and the effects of malnutrition.

Black Sunday was the last major dust storm of the year, and the damage it caused was not calculated for months. Coming on the heels of a stormy season, the April 14 storm hit as many others had, only harder. "The impact is like a shovelful of fine sand flung against the face," Avis D. Carlson wrote in a New Republic article. "People caught in their own yards grope for the doorstep. Cars come to a standstill, for no light in the world can penetrate that swirling murk. . . . The nightmare is deepest during the storms. But on the occasional bright day and the usual gray day we cannot shake from it. We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions. It is becoming Real. The poetic uplift of spring fades into a phantom of the storied past. The nightmare is becoming life."



*Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm.
Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936 (Library of Congress)*

Some 3.5 million Americans living on the plains were forced to abandon their farms. Most did not travel far as they perhaps migrated to the next county. A minority, known as the “Exodusters” traveled long-distance to California in search of work. The plight of these people became widely known from author John Steinbeck’s classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which depicted the hardship of the Joad family. These Exodusters traveled west along the historic Route 66 through the Arizona and New Mexico deserts with their belongings piled high atop rickety jalopies.



Oakies stalled in California, Feb. 1937
facstaff.unca.edu/.../1930's_webquest2.html

More than 350,000 Oklahomans migrated to California. These migrants were referred to as “Okies,” which later came to mean any Dust Bowler who traveled to the West Coast. In 1937, California passed the so-called “Anti-Okie Law” stating that anyone bringing indigent persons to California from outside the state would be charged with a misdemeanor. The statute was eventually overturned in 1941 by *Edwards v. California*, a case stemming from the actions of Edwards, a Californian who had brought his brother-in-law from Texas and who was later convicted and sent to prison for six months.



Folk Singer Woody Guthrie
Library of Congress



Novelist John Steinbeck
Library of Congress

The human crisis was documented by photographers, musicians, and authors of the time. Photographer Dorothea Lange made a name for herself while working as a photographer with the Farm Security Administration, capturing the impact of the storms on film. Independent artists, such as folk singer Woody Guthrie and novelist John Steinbeck, became famous for their depictions of life during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

The federal government responded during the New Deal era by establishing the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in 1935. They instructed farmers to plant soil conserving grasses and legumes in place of wheat and taught them how to plow along contour lines and build terraces—techniques that slowed the runoff of rainwater and improved its absorption into the soil. Although the federal government offered little assistance to the rural farmer, plains agriculture slowly began to recover. In the fall of 1939 the rain came, finally bringing an end to a devastatingly decade-long drought.