

The Dust Bowl: A Devastating Drama and Drought

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The Dust Bowl

Across the southern Plains, the storms kept coming. Day after day, the clouds of dirt rolled in. Everything in their path turned black. A vast area, from Texas to the Dakotas, earned a dreadful new nickname—the Dust Bowl.

Why did the Dust Bowl occur where and when it did? Scientists point to several possible causes.

For thousands of years, tall grasses covered the Plains. Their complex root systems held the soil in place.

Then, in the early 1900s, farmers introduced a new technology on the Plains. New kinds of plows pulled by tractors cut deep into the soil and ripped out the root systems that had been in place for centuries. The wheat and other crops farmers planted did not hold the soil in place the same way the natural grasses did. By the 1930s, much of the soil had become dry and loose.

At about the same time, the usually dry Plains became drier. Beginning in 1931, a severe drought struck the Plains. When strong winds whipped through the region, they blew the dry, loose soil away.

The winds blew off and on for 10 years. Between 1932 and 1939, an average of 50 storms a year howled across the Great Plains. The “black blizzards” lasted anywhere from an hour to three days. In 1935, one storm carried



Drought Stricken Area by Alexander Hogue



Sand-covered plow

twice as much soil from the Plains as had been dug to make the Panama Canal. “This is the ultimate darkness,” declared one Kansan. “So must come the end of the world.”

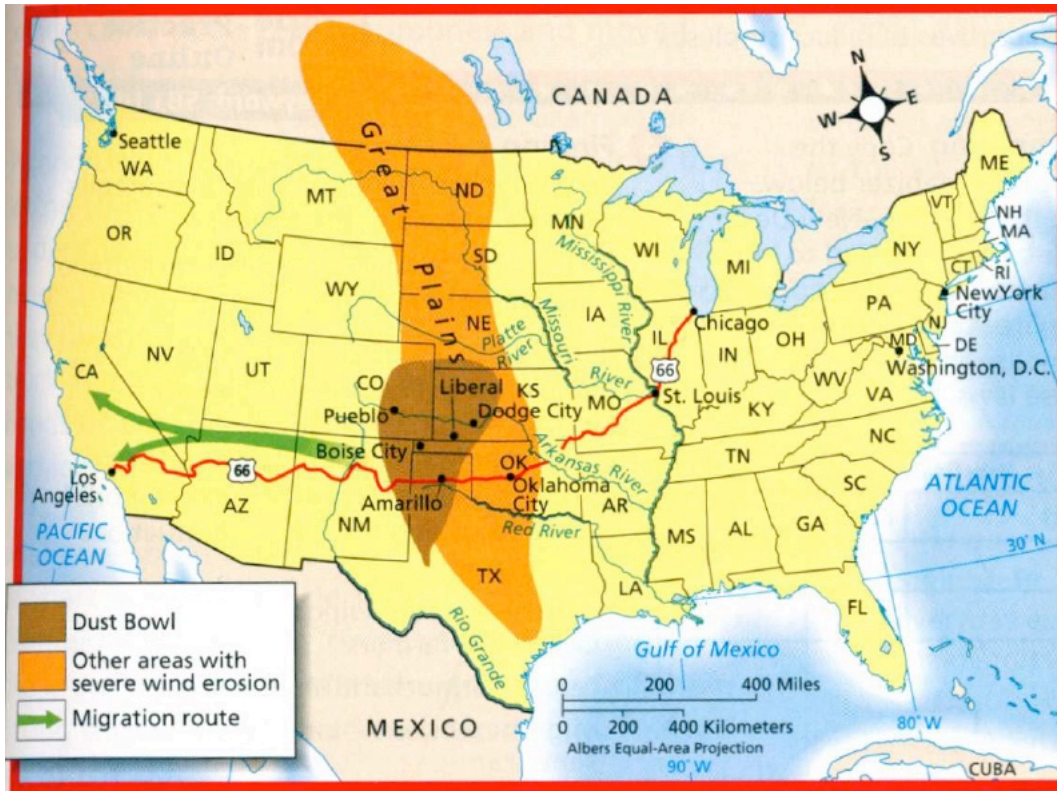
The federal government sent aid to people in the Dust Bowl. The Soil Conservation Service taught farmers ways to conserve and protect the soil. It encouraged them to plant grasses

and to prevent overgrazing of livestock. In addition, the government planted more than 18,500 miles (29,800 km) of trees to break the force of the winds. By 1936, restoring the Dust Bowl was underway.

■ What human activities helped to bring on the Dust Bowl?

ACTIVITY

Imagine that you work for the Soil Conservation Service. Make a poster urging Dust Bowl farmers to conserve and protect the soil.



Dust storms could bury houses, cars, animals, farm, crops, etc.



AMERICAN VOICES

“LAST WEEKEND WAS THE WORST DUST STORM WE EVER HAD. WE’VE BEEN HAVING QUITE A BIT OF BLOWING DIRT EVERY YEAR SINCE THE DROUTH [DROUGHT] STARTED, NOT ONLY HERE, BUT ALL OVER THE GREAT PLAINS. MANY DAYS THIS SPRING THE AIR IS JUST FULL OF DIRT COMING, LITERALLY, FOR HUNDREDS OF MILES. IT SIFTS INTO EVERYTHING. AFTER WE WASH THE DISHES AND PUT THEM AWAY, SO MUCH DUST SIFTS INTO THE CUPBOARDS THAT WE MUST WASH THEM AGAIN BEFORE THE NEXT MEAL. CLOTHES IN THE CLOSETS ARE COVERED WITH DUST.”

—ANN MARIE LOW, *a North Dakota farmer’s daughter in her early twenties, from her diary entry, April 25, 1934*

Without the native grasses, it was unfeasible to grow any crops. Without these crucial crops, families were unable to feed themselves or maintain an income. People left in droves (more than 3 million!) to move in hopes of a better life. Called “Okies” because most/many were from Oklahoma, they loaded up their old trucks with pots, pans, suitcases, washtubs, and mattresses and moved in search of work, whether a job that was steady and stable or employment that was seasonal (such as a migrant worker, especially in California). Unbeknownst to them, California, like the rest of the U.S., was in the midst of the Great Depression, and finding work was near impossible. Many settled for negligible wages on farms in California.



Source: National Archives and Records Administration

Farmers who lost their farms joined the caravans of “Okies” on Route 66 to California, 1935