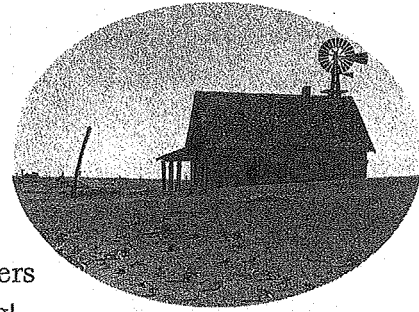


The Dust Bowl

Lured by the federal government's offer of free land, thousands of settlers established farms on the Great Plains in the late 1800s. By 1920 millions of acres of prairie grassland had been plowed under and planted in wheat. More powerful tractors and increasing crop yields made opportunities for successful farming seem unlimited. In the 1930s, however, many Great Plains farmers lost everything they had worked for. It had stopped raining!



There had been long periods without rain in the Great Plains before, but this drought started in 1931 and lasted for eight years! Crops withered and died. The soil, weakened by years of overplowing and poor farming practices, turned into dust. In 1932 dust storms began hitting the area. With few crop roots and grasses to hold the ground in place, strong prairie winds whipped the dusty soil out of the fields and into the air. A particularly powerful storm struck in May 1934. It carried tons of powdery dirt all the way to East Coast cities. Even ships hundreds of miles out in the Atlantic Ocean were covered with dust.

Year after year dust storms filled the air with stinging dirt. These "black blizzards" swept in without warning and changed day into night. Once a storm ended, dirt had to be shoveled away from barn doors, off of farm equipment, and out of houses. There was dirt and dust everywhere—on furniture, on clothes, on dishes, and even in the food. Because breathing the air could be dangerous, families slept with wet cloths over their noses and mouths. In spite of such measures, cases of asthma, bronchitis, and "dust pneumonia" soared.

Hardest hit by the drought and the dust storms was the southern Great Plains, an area that included large sections of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico. Ponds dried up, cows died of starvation and thirst, and much of the **arid** farmland could no longer produce crops. There was so much damage that this area became known as the Dust Bowl.

Defeated by poverty from repeated crop failures, large numbers of Dust Bowl farm families packed up their belongings and headed west for California. There were lots of jobs there, they'd been told, picking fruits and vegetables. They arrived filled with **optimism** but soon discovered there were thousands of poor people looking for work and few available jobs. Many found that their lives in California were just as hard as the lives they had left behind.

In 1939 rain began to fall again in the Great Plains. By then, many farmers had started to use planting and plowing methods that would protect and enrich the soil. They had learned from government-sponsored programs to rotate crops, reseed some areas with grasses, and plant trees to break the wind. Using responsible farming practices, they now knew, would prevent such a disaster from happening again.