

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Dust Bowl

By Jessica McBirney
2018

The Dust Bowl was a time of harsh dust storms in the central United States during the 1930s. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney discusses the causes of the Dust Bowl and how Americans were impacted by this period of dust storms. As you read, take notes on what contributed to the Dust Bowl.

- [1] On the afternoon of April 14, 1935, young Irene Thompson looked up in horror. A huge black cloud that covered the sky was racing towards her. It wasn't a thunderstorm, and it wasn't smoke — it was dust. Before Irene could do anything, the flying dirt became so thick that she could not find any of the buildings on her own farm. She later remembered, "They called it the Black Sunday. And some people actually thought the world was coming to an end." Another man recalled, "It looked like a wall of dirt coming at us — 500 to 1,000 feet high."



"Dust Storm Texas 1935" by NOAA George E. Marsh Album is in the public domain.

Black Sunday was one of the worst dust storms in American history, during a time known as the Dust Bowl. However, it was definitely not the only storm. For almost 10 straight years, between 1930 and 1940, high winds and terrible dust storms destroyed most of the farms and towns in the Great Plains, a region of flat lands that runs through the central United States.

What was the Dust Bowl?

One-third of the Great Plains suffered from severe dust storms during the Dust Bowl. The storms covered 100 million acres across Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. In the worst storms, the dust in the air became so thick that people could not see more than a few feet in front of them. They had to wear masks and cover their faces with handkerchiefs just to breathe outside.

Natural and Man-made Causes

Several factors caused the Dust Bowl. In the 1920s, the central U.S. had more rain than usual, and agriculture¹ boomed. New immigrants moved to the Great Plains states seeking to start their own successful farms. However, they did not practice environmentally-friendly farming techniques. They made two big mistakes. First, in order to plant as much wheat as possible, they plowed over all of the natural prairie grasses that kept the topsoil² in place. Second, they planted crops too often, instead of giving the soil a break every now and then. As long as the rain kept falling, neither of these mistakes caused problems.

1. the science or practice of farming
2. the top layer of soil

- [5] But in 1930, the rain stopped coming. The soil became dry, loose, and unable to support crops. This drought would have been bad enough for farmers, but then strong winds picked up across the Great Plains. Those winds picked up all of the dry soil and sent it flying. People called these strong dust storms “black blizzards,” which could sometimes last for one or two days straight.

Dusty Refugees

Farming families realized they could not stay in the Great Plains. Their houses and belongings were always dirty; the dust blew into their lungs and made them sick; and their farms were unproductive. They could not afford to stay. Thousands of families packed up their lives and moved west to find work. Immigrants from the Plains were called Okies because most came from Oklahoma. Many headed all the way to California because they heard California had good agricultural jobs. However, the whole United States was suffering from an economic crisis, and California’s farms did not have room for many new workers. Okies did manage to get away from the thick dust storms, but they could not escape unemployment and poverty.³

Families who stayed faced a never-ending layer of dirt in their houses. Irene Thompson’s family stayed in Kansas throughout the Dust Bowl. She remembers constantly cleaning dirt out of her kitchen and bedrooms, and she recalls how many people got “dust pneumonia”⁴ from all of the flying dirt. People tried to continue on with life as usual, going to school and inviting friends over for dinner. But they never knew when or where they would be trapped by a dust storm.

Ending the Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl did end eventually. The U.S. government realized that it had to encourage farmers to practice more responsible farming techniques. The Soil Conservation Service studied the land and came up with some ways to preserve⁵ the earth in the future. The agency also worked with farmers to develop farming methods that were better for the soil. A group of government employees planted trees throughout the region to restore root networks and keep the dirt stuck to the ground.

By 1938, the amount of dust blowing around had been reduced by 65%. In 1939, large amounts of rain came and ended the drought. Most farmers returned to the area to reclaim their farms. This time, they had better ideas of how to care for the environment around them; if another drought came, they knew their new farming techniques would help prevent another natural disaster like the Dust Bowl.

“The Dust Bowl” by Jessica McBirney. Copyright © 2018 by CommonLit, Inc. This text is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

3. the state of being extremely poor
4. an infection that causes inflammation in the lungs
5. **Preserve (verb):** to keep something in its existing state

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Farmers aggressively harvested the land in the Great Plains, despite warnings from environmentalists that it could result in dust storms.
 - B. There was nothing that farmers could have done to prevent the Dust Bowl, as they merely chose the wrong time and place to farm.
 - C. Farmer's treatment of the land weakened it against the elements and resulted in dust storms that negatively impacted life in the Great Plains.
 - D. The Dust Bowl negatively impacted life for everyone in America, as dust spread beyond the Great Plains and farmers couldn't produce crops.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Several factors caused the Dust Bowl. In the 1920s, the central U.S. had more rain than usual, and agriculture boomed." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "First, in order to plant as much wheat as possible, they plowed over all of the natural prairie grasses that kept the topsoil in place." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "Those winds picked up all of the dry soil and sent it flying. People called these strong dust storms 'black blizzards,' which could sometimes last for one or two days straight." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "However, the whole United States suffered from an economic crisis, and California's agriculture sector did not have room for many new workers." (Paragraph 6)
 - E. "A group of government employees planted trees throughout the region to restore root networks and keep the dirt stuck to the ground." (Paragraph 8)
 - F. "By 1938, the amount of dust blowing around had been reduced by 65%. In 1939, large amounts of rain came and ended the drought." (Paragraph 9)

3. Which of the following describes how the author introduces dust storms in the text?
 - A. as mysterious events that people struggled to understand for years
 - B. as deadly storms that claimed many people's lives in the Great Plains
 - C. as similar to other storms that people in the Great Plains encountered
 - D. as serious storms that frightened people by their appearance and power

4. How does paragraph 6 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. It shows the extent of the effects that dust storms had on families.
 - B. It emphasizes how dust storms often extended beyond the Great Plains.
 - C. It shows how families protected themselves from the dust storms.
 - D. It reveals why some farmers decided to stay in the Great Plains.

5. What is the relationship between the government's actions and improvement in the Great Plains?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Have you ever experienced extreme weather or a natural disaster? What happened? How did it make you feel? What did you do to protect yourself?

2. In the context of the text, how did humans create an imbalance in nature during the Dust Bowl? How did nature react to this? What are other examples in which humans have created an imbalance in nature? What have been the consequences?