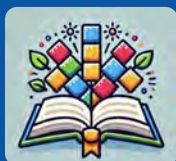


DIARY OF A DUST STORM



TextProject
Background Builders

When the Prairie Grass Disappeared

For thousands of years, thick prairie grass covered the middle of America – especially the areas that are now Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas. This grass had roots that went down about ten feet deep, holding the soil together like nature's glue.

In the early 1900s, farmers moved to the Great Plains and plowed up millions of acres of prairie grass to plant wheat. At first, this seemed smart. Farmers made good money, and everything looked fine. But they had just removed what kept the soil safe without knowing it.

In the 1930s, a big drought hit. The wheat died, and now nothing held the dirt down. When the wind blew, it picked up the loose soil and created giant dust storms – dark walls taller than buildings moving across the land.

Successful farms turned into deserts very quickly. Entire towns were buried under sand dunes. People had to wear masks just to breathe inside their homes.

This disaster became one of the worst in American history, all because people didn't understand what the grass was really doing.



A towering wall of dust sweeps across the prairie Great Plains during the dust storms of the 1930s.

How the Dust Bowl Got Its Name

For nearly a decade, dust storms swept through the Great Plains, striking mostly in spring and early summer when soil was driest. The timing was awful—storms hit right after farmers planted their crops, destroying everything.

These storms were frightening. When they hit, day turned to night. People couldn't see their hands in front of their faces.

The dust got into everything—eyes, noses, mouths, and lungs. Many people got sick. Some died from breathing in so much dust.

People called the storms different names. Some said “black blizzards” because the dust clouds looked like dark snowstorms. Others called them “rollers” because walls of dust rolled across the land.

Then came April 14, 1935—the worst storm anyone had seen. A newspaper reporter, Robert Geiger, who was in Oklahoma saw the storm. Geiger wrote an article and called the area “the Dust Bowl.” The name stuck. People could picture the flat plains as a giant bowl filled with dust. Almost 90 years later, we still call it the Dust Bowl.



A farmer digs for water in land destroyed by drought and dust storms during the 1930s, while his young son tries to help.

Route 66: The Road to California

When Dust Bowl families needed to escape, they headed west to California on Route 66.

In the 1930s, the U.S. didn't have interstate highways like today. Route 66 was one of the few paved roads that ran through the Dust Bowl. It started in Chicago and stretched across the desert to Los Angeles. Florida might have seemed like another choice, but there was no easy highway from the Dust Bowl to Florida. All the roads were rough and unpaved.

Newspapers promised jobs picking fruit in California. Radio shows made it sound easy. So families packed everything they owned into old cars and headed west on Route 66. The highway became known as "The Mother Road" because it carried so many struggling families toward a better life.

Route 66 is still there today, but it's not the main road anymore. Starting in the 1950s, America built faster interstate highways like I-40. Today, it's a historic road that tourists visit.



Thousands fled their Dust Bowl farms on Route 66, betting everything on a new life in California.

Why Dust Storms Are Smaller Today

The Great Plains still get dust storms, but nothing like the 1930s. What changed? After the Dust Bowl, scientists studied what went wrong. They taught farmers new methods to protect the soil. Instead of planting the same crop every year, farmers learned to switch between different crops.

Scientists showed them to leave dead plants in fields after harvest to hold the soil down. They showed farmers how to plant windbreaks. Windbreaks are rows of trees around or between fields.

Scientists also advised farmers not to plow up every inch of land. Leaving some areas covered with grass helps to keep the soil from blowing away.

These methods work well during normal years. But dust storms still happen during droughts when the soil gets too dry. When strong winds blow across dry, bare fields, dust storms can form.

Some recent storms have been big enough to close highways. But they usually last hours instead of days and cover smaller areas than the 1930s storms. The Dust the Bowl taught us important lessons about protecting soil.



Farmers now plant rows of trees called windbreaks, which block wind and stop the soil from blowing away.



Cover image generated by ChatGTP



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons,

171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA. "TextProject" and STORYLABS logos are trademarks of TextProject, Inc.