

The Dust Bowl

The Black Blizzards of the 1930s and 1940s



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In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act. This encouraged farmers in the east to move and farm on land west of the Mississippi River. For a small fee, farmers would get 160 acres of prairie land so long as they lived on it and farmed it for five years. These farmers, known as pioneers, moved out to the prairie in the thousands.

The prairie is located across an enormous swath of land called the Great Plains. The Great Plains have a unique environment. They were once entirely covered in deep-rooted grass. In some areas, the grass grew between five and 10 feet high. The plains are very windy. They are prone to long droughts. These droughts, when very little to no rain falls, can last one to two years.

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The pioneers who settled the region cleared away millions of acres of grass. Unfortunately, pioneers didn't know that clearing away the grasses would create one of the worst man-made environmental disasters in human history.

The Great Plains were a great place to grow grain. The topsoil is the richest and most nutritious part of the soil. This is the soil in which farmers plant their crops. The thicker the topsoil, the better it is for planting. It is also looser than the soil found underneath. Most topsoil is between 1–8 inches deep. The topsoil in the Great Plains was 6 feet deep and the richest on earth.

Four generations of farmers—starting with the original pioneers—plowed the Great Plains and used up the topsoil. By 1934, the rain stopped. The topsoil dried out and the strong winds picked it up. The air was so dry, it was full of static electricity. The dried-out topsoil rose into the air and was carried off by the gusty winds of the Great Plains.

It happened on April 14, 1935. A deep, dark cloud hung over the horizon in Kansas. No one knew what it was. They had no idea what was coming for them. Some people thought it was the end of the world. This day became known as Black Sunday.



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It was the first black blizzard, one of the worst dust storms ever seen in America. It blacked out the sun and covered thousands of miles of land in thick dust from Colorado all the way to New York

City. But the lands of the Great Plains were hit the hardest. The thick dust choked and smothered farmers, even indoors.

Winds of 40–60 miles per hour blew the fine dust all across the prairie. The dust was so thick and the winds so strong, that it could take the paint right off of the cars, like sandpaper. It stung your skin, burned your eyes, and clogged your throat. It was so thick that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. It destroyed houses and buildings, too. Worst of all, it was impossible to grow anything.

Farmers of the Great Plains began to abandon their farms. Families packed everything they owned into a car and headed west looking for work. Some farmers stayed, trying to wait out the dust storms.

The Dust Bowl started to end when farmers began to use a new farming technique and when the United States government bought four million acres of prairie and turned it into national grasslands. National grasslands couldn't be used for farming. The grasses in these areas grew back and the environment began to improve.



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But Americans haven't learned their lesson from the Dust Bowl. Scientists discovered water far underneath the ground of the Great Plains in the 1950s. It is called the Ogallala Aquifer. Farmers could now dig deep into the ground to get water. They began to plant more corn to feed pigs and cows for the meat industry. This corn requires much more water than wheat.

The Ogallala Aquifer was originally about 100 feet deep. Today, farmers have used so much water that it is only 50 feet deep. In 20 years, it will be dry. Once they lose the water, they will lose the land—they won't be able to farm it anymore. Could this cause another Dust Bowl catastrophe? Scientists think that it could. The question is, how do we stop it?

