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# Letters From the Dust Bowl

WHEN DROUGHT STRUCK OKLAHOMA IN THE 1930S, THE AUTHOR AND HER HUSBAND STAYED BEHIND TO PROTECT THEIR 28-YEAR-OLD FARM. HER LETTERS TO A FRIEND PAINT A PICTURE OF DIRE POVERTY, DESICCATED SOIL, AND LONG DAYS WITH NO SUNSHINE.

**By Caroline A. Henderson**

*Editor's Note: For 28 years, Mrs. Caroline A. Henderson and her husband have been farming in Oklahoma. For the past five years, her household has been one of many that have fought as best they might the devastating effects, first of the unprecedented drought, and then of the resulting dust storms. Her letters, written to a friend in Maryland, open a vivid and pathetic chapter of American agriculture.]*

**EVA, Oklahoma**

**June 30, 1935**

DEAR EVELYN: —

Your continued interest in our effort to 'tie a knot in the end of the rope and hang on' is most stimulating. Our recent transition from rain-soaked eastern Kansas with its green pastures, luxuriant foliage, abundance of flowers, and promise of a generous harvest, to the dust-covered desolation of No Man's Land was a difficult change to crowd into one short day's travel. Eleanor has laid aside the medical books for a time. Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and Vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulations of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is an almost hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. 'Visibility' approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor. I keep oiled cloths on the window sills and between the upper and lower sashes. They help just a little to retard or collect the dust. Some seal the windows with the gummed-paper strips used in wrapping parcels, but no method is fully effective. We buy what appears to be red cedar sawdust with oil added to use in sweeping our floors, and do our best to avoid inhaling the irritating dust.

In telling you of these conditions I realize that I expose myself to charges of disloyalty to this western region. A good Kansas friend suggests that we should imitate the Californian attitude toward earthquakes and keep to ourselves what we know about dust storms. Since the very limited rains of May in this section gave some slight ground for renewed hope, optimism has been the approved policy.

Printed articles or statements by journalists, railroad officials, and secretaries of small-town Chambers of Commerce have heralded too enthusiastically the return of prosperity to the drouth region. And in our part of the country that is the one durable basis for any prosperity whatever. There is nothing else to build upon. But you wished to know the truth, so I am telling you the actual situation, though I freely admit that the facts are themselves often contradictory and confusing.

Early in May, with no more grass or even weeds on our 640 acres than on your kitchen floor, and even the scanty remnants of dried grasses from last year cut off and blown away, we decided, like most of our neighbors, to ship our cattle to grass in the central part of the state. We sent 27 head, retaining here the heifers coming fresh this spring. The shipping charge on our part of the carload was \$46. Pasture costs us \$7.00 for a cow and calf for the season and \$5.00 for a yearling. Whether this venture brings profit or loss depends on whether the cattle make satisfactory gains during the summer and whether prices remain reasonable or fall back to the level that most people would desire. We farmers here in the United States might as well recognize that we are a minority group, and that the prevailing interest of the nation as a whole is no longer agricultural. Hay for the horses and the heifers remaining here cost us \$3 per ton, brought by truck from eastern Oklahoma.

The day after we shipped the cattle, the long drouth was temporarily broken by the first effective moisture in many months —about one and one-quarter inches in two or three gentle rains. All hope of a wheat crop had been abandoned by March or April.

Contrary to many published reports, a good many people had left this country either temporarily or permanently before any rains came. And they were not merely 'drifters,' as is frequently alleged. In May a friend in the southwestern county of Kansas voluntarily sent me a list of the people who had already left their immediate neighborhood or were packed up and ready to go. The list included 109 persons in 26 families, substantial people, most of whom had been in that locality over ten years, and some as long as forty years. In these families there had been two deaths from dust pneumonia. Others in the neighborhood were ill at that time. Fewer actual residents have left our neighborhood, but on a sixty mile trip yesterday to procure tract repairs we saw many pitiful reminder of broken hopes and apparently wasted effort. Little abandoned homes where people had drilled deep wells for the precious water, had set trees and vines built reservoirs, and fenced in gardens —with everything now walled in half buried by banks of drifted soil, told a painful story of loss and disappointment. I grieved especially over one lonely plum thicket buried to the tips of the twigs, and a garden with fence closely built of boards for wit protection, now enclosing only a hillock of dust covered with the blue-flower bull nettles which no winds or sands discourage.

It might give you some notion of our great 'open spaces' if I tell you that on the sixty-mile trip, going by a state road over which our mail comes from the railroad, and coming back by Federal highway, we encountered on one car, and no other vehicles of an sort. And this was on Saturday, the farmers' marketing day!

The coming of the long-desired rain gave impetus to the Federal projects for erosion control. Plans were quickly made, submitted to groups of farmers in district gatherings, and put in operation without delay.

The proposition was that, in order to encourage the immediate listing abandoned wheat ground and

other acreage so as to cut down wind erosion the Federal Government would contribute ten cents per acre toward the expense of fuel and oil for tractors feed for horses, if the farmers would agree to list not less than one fourth the acreage on contour lines. Surveys were made promptly for all farmers signing contracts for either contour listing or terracing. The latest report states that within the few weeks since the programme was begun in our county 99,986 acres have beenughed or listed on these contour lines—that is, according to the lay of the land instead of on straight lines with right-angled turns as has been the usual custom.

The plan has been proposed and carried through here as a matter of public policy for the welfare of all without reproach or humiliation to anyone. It should be remembered that 1935 is the fourth successive year of drouth and crop failure through a great part of the high plains region, and the hopelessly low prices for the crop of 1931 gave no chance to build up reserves for future needs. If the severe critics of all who in any way join in government plans for the saving of homes and the restoration of farms to a productive basis could only understand how vital a human problem is here considered, possibly their censures might be less bitter and scornful.

At any rate the contour listing has been done over extensive areas. If rains come to carry forward the feed crops now just struggling up in the furrows, the value of the work can be appraised. The primary intention of the plan for contour listing is to distribute rainfall evenly over the fields and prevent its running off to one end of the field or down the road to some creek or drainage basin. It is hoped that the plan will indirectly tend to lessen wind erosion by promoting the growth of feed crops, restoration of humus to denuded surfaces, and some protection through standing stubbles and the natural coverage of weeds and unavoidable wastes. One great contributing cause of the terrible dust storms of the last two years has been the pitiful bareness of the fields resulting from the long drouth.

I am not wise enough to forecast the result. We have had two most welcome rains in June—three quarters of an inch and one-half inch. Normally these should have been of the utmost benefit, though they by no means guarantee an abundant feed crop from our now sprouting seeds as many editorial writers have decreed, and they do nothing toward restoring subsoil moisture. Actually the helpful effects of the rains have been for us and for other people largely destroyed by the drifting soil from abandoned, unworked lands around us. It fills the air and our eyes and noses and throats, and, worst of all, our furrows, where tender shoots are coming to the surface only to be buried by the smothering silt from the fields of rugged individualists who persist in their right to do nothing.

A fairly promising piece of barley has been destroyed for us by the mere' less drift from the same field whose sands have practically buried the little mulberry hedge which has long sheltered our buildings from the north west winds. Large spaces in our pastures are entirely bare in spite of the rains. Most of the green color, where there is any grazing, is due to the pestilent Russian thistles rather than to grass. Our little locust grove which we cherished for so many years has become a small pile of fence posts. With trees and vines and flowers all around you, you can't imagine how I miss that little green shaded spot in the midst of the desert glare.

Naturally you will wonder why we stay where conditions are so extremely disheartening. Why not pick up and leave as so many others have done? It is a fair question, but a hard one to answer.

Recently I talked with a young university graduate of very superior attainments. He took the ground

that in such a ease sentiment could and should be disregarded. He may be right. Yet I cannot act or feel or think as if the experiences of our twenty-seven years of life together had never been. And they are all bound up with the little corner to which we have given our continued and united efforts. To leave voluntarily to break all these closely knit ties for the sake of a possibly greater comfort elsewhere —seems like defaulting on our task. We may have to leave. We can't hold out indefinitely without some return from the land, some source of income, however small. But I think I can never go willingly or without pain that as yet seems unendurable.

There are also practical considerations that serve to hold us here, for the present. Our soil is excellent. We need only a little rain —less than in most places—to make it productive. No one who remembers the wheat crops of 1926, 1929, 1931, can possibly regard this as permanently submarginal land. The newer methods of farming suggest possibilities of better control of moisture in the future. Our entire equipment is adapted to the type of farming suitable for this country and would have to be replaced at great expense with the tools needed in some other locality. We have spent so much in trying to keep our land from blowing away that it looks foolish to walk off and leave it, when somewhat more favorable conditions seem now to 'cast their shadows before.' I scarcely need to tell you that there is no use in thinking of either renting or selling farm property here at present. It is just a place to stand on —if we can keep the taxes paid —and work and hope for a better day. We could realize nothing whatever from all our years of struggle with which to make a fresh start.

We long for the garden and little chickens, the trees and birds and wild flowers of the years gone by. Perhaps if we do our part these good things may return some day, for others if not for ourselves.

Will joins me in earnest hopes for your recovery. The dust has been particularly aggravating to his bronchial trouble, but he keeps working on. A great reddish-brown dust cloud is rising now from the southeast, so we must get out and do our night work before it arrives. Our thoughts go with you.

**August 11, 1935**

MY DEAR Evelyn: —

On this blistering Sunday afternoon, I am, like Alexander Selkirk,

Monarch of all I survey;

My right there is none to dispute.

There is no one within a mile and a half, and all day I've seen just one person pass by in an old stripped-down Ford.

Will and Eleanor went early this morning with a family of neighbors to visit the dinosaur pit in the next county to the westward —about seventy miles from here where the State University is engaged in excavating the bones of some of these ancient monsters, reminders of a time when there was plenty of water even in the Panhandle.

It seemed impossible for us all to leave home at once, so I stayed here to care for a new Shorthorn brother, to keep the chickens' pails filled with fresh water, to turn the cattle and horses in to water at noon, and to keep them from straying to the extremely poisonous drouth-stricken cane. We spent the

better part of a night during the week trying to save two of the best young cows from the effects of the prussic acid which develops in the stunted sorghum. We thought they would die and I am not sure yet whether they recovered because of the liberal doses of melted lard and molasses or whether the poison was not quite strong enough to be fatal. It produces a paralysis of the respiratory system, and when death occurs, as it frequently does, it is due to suffocation from lack of oxygen.

Ever since your letter came, I have been thinking how different are the causes of our personal difficulties. It is hard for us prodigals in this far country, in our scarcity of all things, not to feel envious of the Del Mar Va pigs luxuriating in potatoes, peaches (and cream?), and the delicious Youngerberries. But, as I started to say, our own problems are of a quite different sort. We cannot complain of laziness on the part of our citizens. Oklahoma is one of the first states to get away from direct relief. Official reports of the administrators here emphasize the eagerness with which people accept any sort of work to help themselves and to make unnecessary the acceptance of public aid. In our county the FERA force is being cut down. Three case workers and two from the office force have been dismissed during the past week.

This progress toward more nearly normal conditions of employment occurs in the face of the most critical farm situation that we have ever encountered. For over a month we have had no rain, and the two light local showers early in July had only a slight and temporary effect. All hope of an adequate forage crop has now followed into oblivion the earlier hopes of wheat and maize production. We have no native or cultivated hay crops. The cattle stay alive thus far on weeds, but the pastures are destitute of grass. Many think it can never be restored. The heat is intense and the drying winds are practically continuous, with a real 'duster' occurring every few days to keep us humble. After the government erosion control project was carried through there was, for a time, a partial cessation of the dust blowing. But as the freshly upturned earth is pulverizing under the influence of continued heat and wind and entire lack of moisture, it too is ready to blow. A recently established Oklahoma law permits the County Commissioners to require the working of kind that is being allowed to blow to the detriment of other farms, and I note that one such order has recently been issued in our county.

You asked about the soil erosion control programme and what could be done with an allowance of ten cents per acre. That amount just about covers actual expense of fuel and oil for listing with a large tractor. Possibly it leaves a slight margin if listing is done with a lighter outfit. In no case was any allowance made for a man's labor or the use of his farming equipment. The plan was proposed to encourage widespread and practically simultaneous working of the blowing fields, with a reasonable proportion on contour lines, Undoubtedly it has been of great benefit, and had rains followed, as everyone hoped, we should feel that we were approaching the turn in the long road. As a matter of fact, the complete absence of rain has given us no chance to test the effectiveness of the contour listing. A few people signed up for terracing as a more permanent method of conserving and distributing the longed for moisture —if it ever comes! Will has been working early and late with one of the county terracing machines, laying up ridges on contour lines for every foot of fall. He hopes to be ready to-morrow to turn the machine over to a neighbor who will also make the experiment. Later on he would like to run the terrace lines across the pasture lands, but the future for us is most uncertain.

Everything now depends on whether a definite change of moisture conditions occurs in time for people to sow wheat for 1936. The 'suitcase farmers' that is, insurance agents, preachers, real-estate men, and

so forth, from cities near or far —have bet thousands of dollars upon rain, or, in other words, have hired the preparation of large areas of land all around us which no longer represent the idea of homes at all, but just parts of a potential factory for the low-cost production of wheat if it rains. A short time ago a big tractor, working for one of these absentee farmers across the road from our home, accidentally hooked on to the cornerstone of the original survey and dragged it off up the road. All these many years that stone has marked the corner of our homestead. I have walked past it hundreds of times as I have taken the cows to their pasture or brought them home again. Always it has suggested the beauty of the untouched prairie as it was when the surveyors set the stone, the luxuriant thick turf of native grasses, —grama grass, buffalo, and curly mesquite, the pincushion cactuses, straw-color and rose, the other wild flowers which in their season fulfilled the thought of Shakespeare: —

    | The summer's flower is to the summer sweet, Though to itself it only live and die.

The cornerstone has also suggested the preparation for human occupation —the little homes that were so hopefully established here, of which so very few remain. After twenty-nine years, eight places in our township, out of the possible 136 (excluding the two school sections), are still occupied by those who made the original homestead entry. And now the stone is gone and the manner of its removal seemed almost symbolic of the changes that appear inevitable.

We can't see why your wheat prices should be so hopelessly low. You may judge now a little of how we felt in 1931, with wheat at less than 'two bits' per bushel! The price here has recently been about a dollar a bushel, several cents above the Kansas City price. I suppose the idea is to discourage shipment, as there is not enough wheat in this area now to provide for fall sowing —if it rains —and seed wheat must be shipped in.

One morning at the store, being in a reckless mood, I invested a dime in five small tomatoes and wished you might be getting something like that price for your surplus. Potatoes cost us around thirty cents a peck. I hope the protest of the Maryland growers has been successful in giving them some return for their work. Peaches are priced at four pounds for a quarter, but are not for us. So count your mercies, lady. It may surprise you to see how numerous they are.

The last sack of flour cost \$1.69, and twelve-ounce loaves of good bread are still to be had for a nickel, considerably less than the price we paid during the dear old days of reputed prosperity —before processing taxes were a subject for political debate and court consideration. We feel rather proud that the proprietor of the Elkhart flour mill which we have patronized for many years has withdrawn from the group of Kansas millers suing the government for recovery of the processing tax. He explained his position by stating that, as the benefits derived from these taxes had been an actual lifesaver for farming and general business interests in this section, he would not seek to embarrass the government in its attempt to collect the tax. His independent action in refusing to join in the raid seems worth mentioning in these days when individualism is supposed to be dead.

It's time to do the evening work, put the guinea pig to bed, and begin to watch for the return of our explorers. I do hope weather conditions are favoring the growth of your crops.

**January 8, 1936**

DEAR EVELYN: —

As I have said before, our own problems seem of slight moment as pared with yours. Yet more than ever of late 'the day's journey' has indeed seemed to 'fill the whole long day.' As yet there are no decisive changes, no clear light on our way. Late in the summer, before Eleanor returned to her work in the medical school, she drove the tractor for her father, and with the help of the old header they worried down the scattering, scanty crop of sorghum cane and Sudan grass which had made all the growth it could through the hot, dry summer. That there was anything at all to harvest we attribute to the new planting methods encouraged by the Soil Erosion Control service, of listing on contour lines and laying up terraces to check the run-off in whatever rains might come. A shower the night they finished cutting and another about ten days later, conserved in the same way, gave us most fortunately a second cutting over the same fields, and a few loads of maize fodder from spots here and there on another part of the farm. These crops of roughage have little or no market value, but are indispensable if one plans to winter any cattle. The old, nutritious native grasses which used to provide winter pasturage are forever gone. Killing frosts happily came later than usual. In October, I drove the tractor myself and we two cut and hauled and put into the barn loft (including the earlier cutting) some twenty tons of fodder from two hundred acres, expensive feed when regarded as the entire outcome of a year's work and investment, yet essential to our attempt at carrying on.

As you know, however, wisely or otherwise, this region has permitted wheat growing to become its main concern. The wheat situation around us is so varied and precarious as to be most difficult of appraisal. Our own acreage is fairly typical of the general condition. We have a little wheat that came up in September, made a fair start, and for a time furnished pasturage for the small calves. A part of it was early smothered out by the drift from near-by fields. Part of it would yet respond to abundant moisture if that were to come. Much of the early sown wheat did not come up. Some of the seed sprouted and died before reaching the surface. Other portions remained dry until sprouted by a light rain in December. Most of that still lies dormant waiting for warmth to promote its growth. Large areas were drilled after the December rain, with varying results as to germination.

After the four-to-six-inch snow of early January, the editor of our county paper was asked by the United Press for a candid report of actual conditions. His estimate allowed the county as a whole a 5 per cent chance; not, if I understood him, a fair chance for a 25 per cent crop, but about one chance in four for anything at all. His statement showed that fall and winter precipitation so far had been a trifle over half the normal amount for that time of year. And you must try to remember that a failure this year would mean five in succession for a large part of the high plains region. So our great problem here is production, after all. You can readily see that the conditions I have so hastily outlined promise no protection against the ravages of dust storms if the spring winds rage as in previous years.

On the whole it is not surprising that here and there some bitterness should have been felt and expressed, perhaps immoderately, over the recent AAA decision in the Supreme Court. People here, business men as well as the farmers themselves, realize that the benefit payments under the AAA and the wage payments from Federal work projects are all that have saved a large territory here from abandonment. A December statement by the Soil Conservation service reports an area in five states, including part or all of sixty-eight counties and 87,900 square miles of territory, as in need of active measures for protection and control of the duststorm menace. Mr. Bennett, director of the service, regards this as the greatest 'physical problem facing the country to-day.' I was astonished to find by a

little primary arithmetic that the area involved is equal to that of all the New England States, with New Jersey and Maryland and about half of Delaware added for good measure.

The desolation of the countryside would admittedly have meant the ruin of the small towns, entirely dependent as they are upon country patronage. It will also mean —if it must ever be abandoned through utter exhaustion of resources and sheer inability to hang on any longer —a creeping eastward into more settled and productive territory of the danger and losses originating in the arid wastelands. It is a problem now that no merely individual action can handle successfully.

But to return briefly to the Supreme Court decision. It has naturally been the cause of much regrettable confusion. It would probably have caused even more disturbance had there not been a background of hope that something may yet be done to compensate for the disappointments necessarily involved.

Farmers are not asking for special favors. They ask only an even chance as compared with other workers. But people don't understand.

Perhaps the many books on pioneer life with the usual successful and happy outcome have helped to give a wrong impression and perpetuate the idea that country people live on wild game and fish and fruits and in general on the free bounty of heaven. Many people have no idea of the cash expense of operating a farm to-day, or the work and planning required to the wheels going round, to say nothing of a decent living or suitable education for the children. This year we are keeping a separate account of expenses for car, truck, and tractor, all of which are old and frequently in need of repair. I fear we shall be horrified and discouraged by the close of the year. Not that I should willingly return to the long, slow trips of fifteen miles to town in a jolting wagon. Not that I want to take it out of the flesh and blood of horses in the hot heavy work of seed time and harvest —if they come again. But we can't combine the modern methods of work with the income of our early pioneering, when \$200 used to cover all of a year's expense.

I think I told you of shipping our cattle to pasture. It proved to be a disastrous mistake. To keep in tune, I suppose we should blame Secretary Wallace or the broad-shouldered Mr. Tugwell, who likewise had nothing to do with it. Really the source of trouble was our own erroneous impression that grass is grass, and that our cattle would gain if they could have ample pasturage. Evidently other factors of acclimatization must be considered. Our experience was duplicated in that of many of our neighbors, most of whom, on finding their cattle in far worse condition in the fall than in the spring, decided to sell for whatever their stock would bring. Perhaps they were wise to do so. We shipped ours back, availing ourselves of the drouth rates for such shipments. In the spring we had paid 85 per cent of the regular rate. In the fall, to encourage reshipment and the restocking of the country if possible, the government rate was 15 per cent of the regular charge. I was quite alone here for a week while Will went after our little bunch. He had to unload them late at night ten miles from home.

That was November first, and most of our efforts and resources ever since have been devoted to trying to bring our cattle back to a normal condition. They are gaining slowly, but our homegrown feed is disappearing rapidly, and the grain feed of threshed maize which we must purchase, while about right in price for the seller at \$1.10 per hundred, is piling up expenses. We have sold one mixed bunch of older cows and summer calves. That will help a little toward caring for the others, but there couldn't be much direct gain, as you will agree, in selling eleven head for \$5. Still this is better than we could have

done a year or two ago, when cattle were practically without value. In general, there has been an improvement in farm prices, both absolutely and relatively, which has given us courage to keep on working, and has kept alive our hope for some definite change in weather conditions that may once more make our acres fruitful and restore to us some sense of accomplishment.

At present this great southwestern plains region, most of which has been perseveringly tilled during the fall and winter so as to cut down the loss by wind erosion even if the wheat proves a disappointment, seems to be lying asleep like the princess in the fairy tale. Perhaps you can share with us the painful longing that soon the enchantment may be broken, that the deliverer may come with the soft footfalls of gentle rain and waken our homeland once more into gracious, generous life.

Perhaps it is a sin to parody anything as beautiful as Ulysses. Yet as we gray, lonely old people sit here by the fire to-night, planning for the year's work, my thoughts seem bound to fall into that pattern.

It may be that the dust will choke us down;  
It may be we shall wake some happy morn  
And look again on fields of waving grain.

So good night, dear friend, and a happier to-morrow.

**March 8, 1936**

DEAR EVELYN: —

Since I wrote to you, we have had several bad days of wind and dust. On the worst one recently, old sheets stretched over door and window openings, and sprayed with kerosene, quickly became black and helped a little to keep down the irritating dust in our living rooms. Nothing that you see or hear or read will be likely to exaggerate the physical discomfort or material losses due to these storms. Less emphasis is usually given to the mental effect, the confusion of mind resulting from the overthrow of all plans for improvement or normal farm work, and the difficulty of making other plans, even in a tentative way. To give just one specific example: the paint has been literally scoured from our buildings by the storms of this and previous years; we should by all means try to 'save the surface'; but who knows when we might safely undertake such a project? The pleasantest morning may be a prelude to an afternoon when the 'dust devils' all unite in one hideous onslaught. The combination of fresh paint with a real dust storm is not pleasing to contemplate.

The prospects for a wheat crop in 1936 still remain extremely doubtful. There has been no moisture of any kind since the light snow of early January. On a seventy-mile drive yesterday to arrange for hatchery chicks and to sell our week's cream and eggs, we saw more wheat that would still respond to immediate rainfall than I, with my stay-at-home habits, had expected to see. A few fields were refreshingly green and beautiful to look upon. There seems no doubt that improved methods of tillage and protection are already yielding some results in reducing wind erosion. But rain must come soon to encourage growth even on the best fields if there is to be any wheat harvest. Interspersed with the more hopeful areas are other tracts apparently abandoned to their fate. A field dotted thickly with shoulder-high hummocks of sand and soil bound together by the inevitable Russian thistles presents little encouragement to the most ardent conservationist. My own verdict in regard to plans for the reclaiming of such land would be, 'Too late.' Yet such fields are a menace to all the cultivated land or

pasture ground around them and present a most difficult problem.

The two extremes I have just suggested —that is, the slight hope even yet for some production on carefully tilled fields, and the practically hopeless conditions on abandoned land are indicative of the two conflicting tendencies now evident through an extensive section of the high plains. On the one hand we note a disposition to recognize a mistake, to turn aside from the undertaking with the least possible loss and direct one's time and energy to some new purpose. On the other hand we observe that many seem determined to use even the hard experiences of the past, their own mistakes and other people's, as warning signals, pointing the way to changes of method and more persistent and effective effort right where they stand.

The first attitude may be illustrated by an incident of the past week, the attempt of former neighbors to sell the pipe from the well on their now deserted homestead. This may not seem significant to you. But to old-timers in this deep-water country, so nearly destitute of flowing streams, the virtual destruction of a well of our excellent, life-nourishing water comes close to being the unpardonable sin against future generations.

The same disintegrating tendency is shown in a larger and more alarming way by the extent to which land once owned and occupied by farm families is now passing into ownership of banks, mortgage companies, assurance societies, and investment partnerships or corporations. The legal notices published in our county paper for the past week include two notices of foreclosure proceedings and nine notices of sheriff's sales to satisfy judgments previously rendered. These eleven legal actions involve the ownership of 35E20 acres of land, the equivalent of twenty-two quarter sections, the original homestead allotment in this territory. In only two cases apparently had the loan been made from one person to another. Four life insurance companies, one investment company, and one joint-stock land bank are included among the plaintiffs.

These forced sales take place just outside of the window of the assessor's office, and we were told that they have now become merely a matter of routine. No one tries to redeem the property in question; no one even makes a bid on it; in fact, no one appears but the sheriff and the lawyer representing the plaintiff.

I am not questioning the legal right of these companies to take over the title of the farms for their own security or that of the people whose money they have invested. In a sense their action in pressing their claims may hold some encouragement for the rest of us, since it suggests that they look in time for a return of value to the acres which at present no one seeks to rescue. In addition to the large amount of land now owned by these corporate interests, very many farms belong to nonresident individuals. The 'quarters' north and south of our own place are so held, while the one on the west has recently been taken over by an investment company. Unquestionably this remote control stands in the way of constructive efforts toward recovery.

Yet there are numerous evidences of the persevering restoration of which I have written. The big road maintainers keep the highways in excellent condition. New license tags are appearing on cars and trucks. Churches, schools, and basket-ball tournaments continue much as usual. One village church reported forty people in attendance on one of the darkest and most dangerous of the recent dusty Sundays. The state agricultural college for this section has an increased enrollment this year. More

people are managing in some way —we hardly see how —to keep in touch with the world of news and markets, politics and entertainment, through radio service. A local implement agency recently sent out invitations to a tractor entertainment with free moving pictures of factory operation and the like. The five hundred free lunches prepared for the occasion proved insufficient for the assembled crowd. Within a few succeeding days the company took orders for three tractors ranging in price from around \$1200 to \$1500. Some people must still have faith in the future!

More impressive to me was the Saturday rush of activity at the small produce house where we did our marketing. Cars kept driving up and people coming in with pails or crates or cases of eggs. Cream was delivered in containers of all sorts and sizes, including one heavy aluminum cooker! Eggs were bringing fifteen cents per dozen and cream thirty cents a pound of tested butterfat. No large sums of money were involved. In many cases the payments were pitifully small, but every such sale represents hard work and economy and the struggle to keep going.

At the hatchery they spoke of slow business through the extremely cold weather. The young man in charge also referred to the changes or postponements in people's plans because of their failure to receive the expected payments under the now extinct allotment plan. With spring in the dusty air, however, and renewed hope the government contracts will late fulfilled, orders were coming in encouragingly.

We plan ourselves for four hundred baby Leghorns about the middle of April. That will be an increase for us, but is about the safest small investment we can make to yield an all-the-year-round return. We shall have to put quite a bit of work expense into the brooder house to keep out the dust, and the rain —if it ever comes. But we are happier to keep on trying.

This impressionistic account of conditions here and of our hope for the future would scarcely be complete without some mention of government assistance. We have had only slight contact with the Rehabilitation Service. We know that the man in charge here is taking his work seriously, trying to give definite aid and encouragement to those who have reached the end of their small resources and have lost hope and courage. He stopped here the other morning to see whether we really meant it when we promised the use of our tractor and other equipment to a young man in the neighborhood who is trying to make a new start for himself and wife and small daughter through a rehabilitation loan. In spite of seriously adverse conditions, this agent, who meets many people, spoke of a rather surprising general spirit of optimism. I suppose there is something of the gambler in all of us. We instinctively feel that the longer we travel on a straight road, the nearer we must be coming to a turn. People here can't quite believe yet in a hopeless climatic change which would deprive them permanently of the gracious gift of rain.

To me the most interesting and forward-looking government undertaking in the dust bowl centres about the group of erosion control experiments scattered over a wide area. The Pony Creek project, fifteen miles east of our home, includes all of one congressional township and parts of three others, seventy square miles altogether, or something over 42,000 acres. This is a pretty seriously damaged area, principally devoted to wheat growing, and even now blowing badly. If the methods employed succeed in checking the drift and in restoring productivity, much will have been accomplished, both of intrinsic value and of use as a stimulating object lesson. We hope some day to drive over and see how

they are progressing.

We talked about this work with the young man who helped us last summer to run our terrace lines. At present they are employing 140 men from WPA rolls who would otherwise be idle and in need of relief. The work is frankly experimental. It includes such activities as surveying contour lines, laying up terraces, cleaning out fence rows piled high with drifted soil, filling gullies to prevent washing in that longed-for time of heavy rainfall, cutting down dead trees and brush, digging holes for the resetting of trees in favorable locations, testing the adaptability of different types of grass to the difficult task of reseeding wind-blown spaces, and so on. Altogether it is just such work as a provident farmer would like to get done if he had the time and means. It is done without expense to the farmers who agree to cooperate in the plan. Our young friend smiled when I asked about 'regimentation.' The farmers do promise to maintain for five years, I believe, the terraces built for them and to follow a system of crop rotation. But plans for planting and cultivation are worked out for each place in individual conferences, to suit the farm and the farmer. Don't worry about the stifling of individuality. 'It can't be did,' as one of our preachers used to say. Of course no one can predict yet the result of these experiments, but they seem to me abundantly worth while.

Our personal plans like those of all the rest are entirely dependent on whether or not rain comes to save a little of our wheat, to give grass or even weeds for pasturage, to permit the growing of roughage for the winter, and provide some cover on the surface and promote the intertwining of rootlets in the soil to reduce wind damage. Our terraces are in good condition to distribute whatever moisture may come. We hope we have learned a little about protecting the soil which is the basis of our physical life. In the house the poinsettia and Christmas cactus are blooming a second time and the geraniums blossom in spite of the dust. Eleanor has just sent us budded hyacinth and daffodil bulbs in little moss-filled nests. They will help us to look forward for a time at least.

### **March 13, 1936**

We must try to get this mailed tomorrow. It has been a terrible week, with one day of almost complete obscurity, and others when only a part of the sun's rays struggled through the gloom with a strange bluish luminance. On such days each little wave of the troubled water in the stock tank glitters with a blue phosphorescent light. When I dip out a pail of water to carry to the hen-house, it looks almost as if it were covered with a film of oil. On days like this, when William Vaughn Moody's expression 'dust to eat' suggests a literal danger, we can't help questioning whether the traits we would rather think of as courage and perseverance are not actually recklessness and inertia. Who shall say?

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