

BY RON JACKSON, STAFF WRITER

## **The voices of Dust Bowl eyewitnesses are often haunting.**

Their words are rooted in the fear of what they once survived — a Biblical drought, mass poverty, and at times, the death of livestock and humans alike. Their memories are seasoned by decades of perspective, but can be as dark and frightful as the "Black Blizzards" or "Black Rollers" that routinely descended upon them during the 1930s without warning.

And they are voices that should not be forgotten.

An oral historian once asked Bruce Beard of Texoma to describe a dust storm during a 1984 interview. Beard, then 74, shook his head and shoulders as if chilled by the thought, stating, "Looked like a big, black cloud rolling in on you. No wind. Just fell

in on you."

Silence overtook Beard momentarily before he added, "Gives you an awful feeling."

Historians generally point to the fall of 1939 as the end of the Dust Bowl, which in many ways was a manmade disaster spurred by a decade of drought. At the time, people were driven to entertain apocalyptic thoughts. Yet, despite the fears, a few innovative thinkers – and the implementation of desperately needed government conservation programs – revealed the real cause and effects of the Dust Bowl.

Deep plowing of virgin topsoil across the Great Plains killed vast stretches of native grass, leaving the soil exposed to drought and wind. With no grass to trap the soil or moisture, the parched dirt turned to sand that was easily carried away by wind. Dust storms became common place. Poverty became the norm.

Homesteaders lived with this nightmarish reality mostly in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, as well as parts of Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico. In December 1935, experts estimated that 850 million tons of topsoil had been blown off the Plains that year alone. The drought would linger four more years.

Rain finally brought relief in the fall of 1939.

Kansan Floyd Coen described the feeling in simple, yet soulful words.

"It was a very emotional time, when you'd get rain, because it meant so much to you," Coen recalled. "You didn't have false hope then. When the rain came, it meant life itself. It meant a future."

**Oklahomans who lived through the "Dirty Thirties" rarely struggled to describe what they had witnessed. The images were too ingrained in their minds, as if seared there like scars.**

Caroline Henderson once wrote of what she and her husband, Wilhelmine, experienced at their Panhandle homestead in Shelton, OK. Henderson later submitted her writings for publication to an eastern magazine, mostly with fruitful results. In one passage, she summed up the human drama that engulfed them in vivid detail:

"Now we are facing a fourth year of failure. There can be no wheat for us in 1935 in spite of all our careful and expensive work in preparing ground, sowing and re-sowing

our allocated acreage. Native grass pastures are permanently damaged, in many cases hopelessly ruined, smothered under by drifted sand. Fences are buried under banks of thistles and hard packed earth or undermined by the eroding action of the wind and lying flat on the ground. Less traveled roads are impassable, covered deep under by sand or the finer silt-like loam. Orchards, groves and hedge-rows cultivated for many years with patient care are dead or dying ... Impossible it seems not to grieve that the work of hands should prove so perishable."

Everyone remembered the dust storms.

Lydia Bostwick, a child of Russian immigrants, endured the Dust Bowl as a young adult in Hooker. In a 1983 interview with then-Oklahoma Historical Society historian Joe Todd, Bostwick recalled the sometimes daily drudgery of the dust storms.

"They'd come in in morning a lot of times from the south," remembered Bostwick, then 81. "And the next day they'd come in from the north ...

"You couldn't hardly sleep in the home from all the dust."

"How did you keep dust out of the house?" Todd asked.

Bostwick promptly replied, "We didn't."

In another taped interview – one of hundreds stored at the Oklahoma Historical Society – Boise City's Fern Behrendt described how people slept. Behrendt, then 83, explained how a clean bed sheet was pinned each night from the headboard to the footing of the bed posts.

"In the morning," she concluded, "the sheets would be brown with dust."

Dust swirled around in abundance. Money didn't.

"As far as money, you couldn't even afford a few-cent postage stamp a lot of times," Behrendt said. "People went in floods to California ... We were too poor. We couldn't get away. So we stuck it out there."

**If the Dust Bowl had a defining moment, it occurred April 14, 1935. That day has long been remembered as "Black Sunday" – a day that began with warm temperatures and fresh, blue skies.**

Beaver County's Brice Jackson remembered how neighbors "rushed outside to get jobs done they had put off all spring. Many people drove to neighbors' or simply took a walk down a country road."

An eerie scene soon began to unfold. Jackson recalled how flocks of birds began to fill yards, "nervously fluttering and chattering ... as though feeling an unseen enemy."

Roy Gunn of Logan was hitchhiking to his Elmwood farm that day when he was overtaken by the storm.

"As it approached, its face was a dark, rolling bank," Gunn recalled in a 1984 interview. "As it approached, the sunlight was completely shut out. I literally touched my nose with my hand and could not see my hand."

Gunn blindly followed a pasture fence until he reached a farm house on a nearby hill.

Rogene Tribble, then 14, watched the storm approach from his back porch in Pease, OK.

"I didn't know what I was going to do because this was the worst I had ever seen in my life," Tribble said. "And I had seen a lot of dirt storms ... I looked out the dining room window and it was just black – I mean rolling black coming right at the house and I couldn't even see the porch posts ..."

Visibility was not measured in feet, but rather inches.

Ilene Andle of Vici was with her siblings in some timber about a half mile from their home when they spotted the gigantic, black clouds fast approaching. The older children scooped up the younger ones and began to run. But the youngest brother broke free, screaming that the world was about to end.

"As he got to the house, he screamed and mother came out," Andle recalled. "He was just ... he just fell at her feet, trying to tell her what was happening ... It was so frightening and hard to breathe in that wind and terrible dust was so bad at our place where the dust had settled. I hope it never happens again."

An epidemic of respiratory pneumonia broke out across the plains. Hospital administrators in Meade, Kansas, reportedly found that 52 percent of their April 1935 admissions suffered from acute respiratory infections.

Thirty-three patients died.

A few weeks later, Oklahomans received some temporary relief when the skies opened up with rain. Beneath a coppery, dusty skyline, Doris Larison remembered the first drops of rain.

"I began noticing big black drops on my dress," Larison recalled. "To my surprise there was an occasional drop of rain and the big black spots were mud. I was so elated that we were finally going to get some rain, even if my dress did get dirty."

Dust from the epic storm reportedly reached New York and Washington, and eventually even settled on ships far out in the Atlantic Ocean. By April 27, 1935, Congress declared soil erosion "a national menace" in an act that established the Soil Conservation Service in the Department of Agriculture. New farming techniques such as crop rotation, terracing, and contour plowing were thus advocated.

Two years later, President Franklin Roosevelt launched the Shelterbelt Project, which called for the large-scale planting of trees across the Great Plains to further combat soil erosion. Rows of these trees can still be seen throughout western Oklahoma and the Panhandle.

They are monuments to those who bravely struggled to survive.

"Those of us who survived became really resilient people; self-reliant people who are willing to help their neighbors," Pauline Hodges told *The Oklahoman* during a 2007 interview. "I still see that today."

*Note: Taped interviews from the Oklahoma Historical Society's Oral History Program, "The Oklahoma Chronicles" and The Oklahoman archives were all used in the creation of this story.*

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