

The Dust Bowl

As the majority of the country was dealing with the crippling economic effects of the Great Depression, yet another catastrophe awaited Americans living in the southwestern portion of the **Great Plains** region – the **Dust Bowl**. The 1930s and 1940s saw this region devastated by the worst man-made ecological disaster in American history, a series of dust storms that ravaged the land due to a combination of drought and soil erosion.

The Great Plains region was settled by thousands of American farmers thanks to the **Homestead Act of 1862**, which encouraged westward migration by provided settlers with 160 acres of public land. In exchange, these “homesteaders” paid a small fee and were required to live on the land continuously for five years. Most of the farmers raised grazing cattle or grew wheat. Over the years, demand for wheat products grew and consequently millions more acres of prairies grass were plowed and planted for wheat production. At the same time, the introduction of mechanized farming during the Industrial Era had revolutionized the industry. Manual labor was replaced by machinery which could prepare more fields and harvest more crops than ever before.



Dust clouds rolling over prairies, Hugoton, Kansas, 1935, Courtesy of the [Kansas Memory Project](#)

This combination of factors presented a problem when drought struck in 1931. Large dust storms began to sweep across the region. The natural prairie grass could have withstood the severe drought, but the wheat that was planted in its stead could not. The drought caused the wheat to shrivel and die, exposing the dry, bare earth to the winds. This was the major cause of the dust storms and **wind erosion** of the 1930s. Dust blew like snow,

creating poor visibility and halting road and railway travel. Work crews shoveled the dust from roadways and train tracks, but to no avail. Electric street lights were dimmed by the dark dust, even during the middle of the day. Those motorists who dared to venture out during the storms found that their cars often stalled due to the static electricity the storms created. Small buildings were almost buried. The dust made everyday life miserable. Residents sealed their windows with tape or putty and hung wet sheets in front of their windows to filter out the dust

that blew in through cracks in the windows. They covered keyholes, wedged rags underneath doors, and covered furniture with sheets. Everything in the household was covered in a fine layer of dust. Mealtime was especially difficult as cups, plates, dishes, and even food was covered in dust. The dust created health problems for many people; respiratory illnesses were very common. For those living in the Great Plains, life as they had known it had come to a virtual stop. In 1935 homesteader Caroline Henderson wrote to the Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace to inform him about the grave conditions in which she and thousands of others were living:

There are days when for hours at a time we cannot see the wind-mill fifty feet from the kitchen door. There are days when for briefer periods one cannot distinguish the windows from the solid wall because of the solid blackness of the raging storm. . . . This wind-driven dust, fine as the finest flour, penetrates wherever air can go. After one such storm, I scraped up a dustpanful of this pulverized soil in the first preliminary cleaning of the bathtub! It is a daily task to unload the leaves of the geraniums and other houseplants, borne down by the weight of the dust settled upon them . . . A friend writes of attending a dinner where "the guests were given wet towels to spread over their faces so they could breathe." At the little country store of our neighborhood after one of the worst of these storms, the candies in the show case all looked alike and equally brown . . . Dust to eat, and dust to breathe and dust to drink. Dust in the beds and in the flour bin, on dishes and walls and windows, in hair and eyes and ears and teeth and throats.



Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936, Arthur Rothstein, Courtesy of the [Library of Congress](#)

Wind carried the dust hundreds of miles away. By 1937, the dust had reached the Gulf Coast and Middle Atlantic states. The number of dust storms increased from 1934 to 1938.

Farmers and local government officials attempted to combat the effects of the storms using soil and water conservation methods like **contour lines**, a technique which uses terraces and contour planting to minimize water runoff to one end of the field or runoff off the field completely. This technique doubled the odds of a good crop by capturing as much moisture as possible. Despite these efforts, the amount of acreage subject to these storms continued to

grow. In her letter to Secretary Wallace, Caroline Henderson succinctly summed up what, or who, was to blame for their current predicament:

We realize that some farmers have themselves contributed to this reaping of the whirlwind. Under the stimulus of war time prices and the humanizing of agriculture through the use of tractors and improved machinery, large areas of buffalo grass and blue-stem pasture lands were broken out for wheat raising. The reduction in the proportionate areas of permanent grazing grounds has helped to intensify the serious effects of the long drought and violent winds.

The Artwork: *Dust Bowl*

Caroline Henderson was not the only person in the region to realize the cause of the dust storms. Artists have traditionally use their art to express their opinions on the events in the world around them. This is precisely what Alexandre Hogue did when in 1934 he painted *Dust Bowl* and other paintings in his “Erosion” series in reaction to the Dust Bowl. The artwork, *Dust Bowl*, depicts Hogue’s view of the terrible drought ravaging parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico beginning in about 1932. A native Texan, Hogue kept a life-long emotional connection to the vast, flat landscape of the Texas panhandle. The land that he knew so well soon began to dry up and blow away. Crops failed year after year. Hogue’s image shows how severe dust storms buried fields, fences, and buildings. The pale sun shines through dense clouds of red dust. Like the federal agencies trying to combat soil erosion, artist Alexandre Hogue blamed farmers for plowing up the wild grasses that had previously held the fragile prairie soil in place. Hogue was vehement in his belief that the Dust Bowl was created by farmers who mistreated the land, arguing:

*I am not a farmer but have spent many seasons on the seats of **listers, harrows, cultivators and binders** . . . when I say I have seen the country defiled by **suitcase farmers** and other selfish ghouls who have taken all but put nothing back, I am most certainly telling the truth.*

Hogue received a positive reception for *Dust Bowl* when it was exhibited around the country in 1935, appearing at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, the Kansas City Art Institute, Rockefeller Center in New York, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Hogue’s *Dust Bowl* and other paintings from his “Erosion” series were even featured in the popular national magazine *Life* in June 1937. Yet, Hogue faced a backlash of criticism from native Texans after the article titled “The U.S. Dust Bowl: Its Artist is a Texan portraying ‘man’s mistakes,’” was published. A local organization in the Texas Panhandle, the West Texas Chamber of Commerce, attacked Hogue’s paintings in print for

exaggerating the seriousness of the situation and thus damaging the local economy. Hogue responded with a letter to the editor of *The Dallas Morning News*: “My paintings are as much a statement of what may happen as what has happened – a warning of impending danger in terms of present conditions. Certainly this is not disloyalty.”

In the artist’s 1938 application to the Guggenheim Foundation for a fellowship to continue his *Erosion* series, he expanded upon his opinion in the *Life* magazine article, writing:

When I paint the [drought] and its devastation of a once luscious country, I do so with authority, having spent much of my early life, both before and after the dust menace, working and painting on a Panhandle ranch near Dalhart [Texas]. This ranch, owned by my brother-in-law, Wiley Bishop, has been, like many others, literally ‘plowed in’ on all sides by the ‘suit-case’ farmers whose uncontrolled loose dirt, pushed before the wind, has gnawed away every spring of grass that dares show above ground. How well I remember the repeated warning of the ranchmen uttered twenty years ago, ‘If you plow this country up it will blow away.’ . . . Some may feel that in these paintings . . . I may have chosen an unpleasant subject, but after all the [drought] is most unpleasant. To record its beautiful moments without its tragedy would be false indeed. At one and the same time the [drought] is beautiful in its effects and terrifying in its results. The former shows peace on the surface but the latter reveals tragedy underneath. Tragedy as I have used it is simply visual psychology, which is beautiful in a terrifying way.

Escaping the Dust Bowl

For the vast majority of those living in the Great Plains farming the land was their life, their source of sustenance, their source of income. Without it, they had nothing. Their options were extremely limited. Many people who were unable to make a living on the ravaged land left for places like California where they had heard tales of fertile land and plentiful job opportunities in the agricultural industry. This is implied in Hogue’s painting by the footprints and tire tracks leading away from the farm. Yet, many stayed on their land. Some aspects of the New Deal, like the **Agricultural Adjustment Act**, would work to address drought relief. The farmers



who stayed hoped that with each passing season, the rains would arrive and the next year's crop yield would be better.

The rains eventually did arrive. From 1938 to 1941 the region received a sufficient amount of rain, providing enough moisture to effectively stimulate growth and recovery. The record-breaking rains of 1941 effectively ended the Dust Bowl. The rains coincided with the beginning of World War II, and once again agricultural prices began to rise and life began to return to a state of normalcy in the Great Plains.

Glossary

Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA): a 1938 New Deal federal law which paid farmers subsidies to not plant part of their land and to kill excess livestock. The reduction in agricultural production reduced crop surplus to effectively raise the value of crops.

binders: farming machines used to cut grain, such as wheat, and tie it into bundles.

contour lines: a farming technique which uses terraces and contour planting to minimize water runoff to one end of the field or runoff off the field completely. This technique doubled the odds of a good crop by capturing as much moisture as possible.

cultivators: farming machines used to loosen soil and destroy weeds around crops.

Dust Bowl: the term given to both the series of dust storms of the 1930s and the region in which those storms took place in the south central United States.

Great Plains: a vast grassland region of the United States that extends from roughly the U.S.-Canadian border, southward to Texas.

harrows: farming implements that are comb-like, dragged over plowed land to break up dirt clods, remove weeds, and cover seed.

Homestead Act of 1862: signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln, the Act encouraged westward migrant to settlers by provided them with 160 acres of public land. In exchange, the settlers were required to live on the land for five years before taking ownership of it. The Act was revolutionary for its time, as it actively encouraged women, immigrants, and former slaves to participate.

listers: corn planting machines used to create high ridges in the land for soil conservation during the Dust Bowl.

suitcase farmers: farmers who did not live on the land they farmed and spent minimal time planting and harvesting crops, or who outsourced the labor. When the price of wheat fell, many farmers were unable to make a profit and abandoned their fields. The farming practices of the suitcase farmers were widely blamed for the Dust Bowl.

wind erosion: the erosion, transportation, and deposition of topsoil by the wind, especially in dust storms.