

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl catastrophe began with a plow and a dream. The escalating price of wheat during World War I encouraged the cultivation of large areas of the Great Plains previously used only for grazing. Through the 1920s, farmers confident in the bounty of the American heartland plowed under an area of 100 million acres, including parts of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico.

Farmers plowed the marginal land and reaped good harvests for years. But when cattle and sheep were returned to the land in the late '20s, they overgrazed soil that had already been loosened by cultivation. The native grasses that retained water were plowed under or eaten and rubbed away by livestock. A serious mistake in land management, the planting and overgrazing of the Plains needed only a small push to become a full-fledged disaster.

That push came in 1931 when the rains stopped. Within three years, the central Plains region became a vast desert. High winds blew loose Plains soil as far as the East coast, darkening closer cities under “black blizzards.” On a dry, windy day the sun could hardly be seen, and the dirt collected in drifts. In 1935 the area was dubbed a “dust bowl” by the Associated Press, a grim name that never went away. It became the worst drought in American history.

By mid-decade, the federal government was working to restore the land. Through progressive practices like contour plowing, crop rotation, shelter belts, and strip plowing, agriculturalists strengthened the Great Plains against human abuse and unfriendly weather. By the early 1940s, the area was already recovering.

The legacy of the Dust Bowl was harsh. About a quarter of the area’s population, perhaps as many as two million people, left the land. Some 200,000 ended up in California, where they accepted the ill-paid stoop labor of migrant workers. It was the most concentrated migration in United States history. When Woody Guthrie sang, “I’m a-goin’ where them dust storms never blow, blow, blow,/An’ I ain’t a-gonna be treated this way,” (“Blowin Down This Road”), he sang for a heartland population that had become refugees in their own country.

During the Dust Bowl years, what early explorers had dubbed “the Great American Desert”—the North American interior—lived up to its name. The Dust Bowl was not simply the result of prolonged drought but the consequence of humans and nature unwittingly working in concert toward a disastrous end.