

The Worst Hard Time Revisited: Oklahoma in the Dust Bowl Years

The tumultuous decade of the 1930s—the “Dirty Thirties”—marked one of the greatest ecological and economic disasters to strike the once prosperous agricultural and cattle regions of the Southern Plains. Beginning in the summer of 1931, eight years of extreme weather conditions ruined farm communities in Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and New Mexico. Ill-suited farming techniques coupled with lack of rain and high winds resulted in a relentless series of choking dust storms. By 1934, seventy-five percent of the United States suffered unusually dry conditions. The term “Dust Bowl” was coined to describe the parched, barren landscape of the Southern Plains, and the Oklahoma Panhandle in particular became a No Man’s Land of despair—ground zero in this great American tragedy—as a way of life seemed to come to an end.

The Great Depression in 1929 compounded problems. Faced with desperate conditions and no hope of relief, vast waves of destitute Oklahomans and other Midwesterners moved to California in search of a new beginning. By 1940, more than two million people had relocated from the Southern Plains to the West Coast, many from Oklahoma, giving rise to the infamous moniker “Okie.” Much of the agricultural land in California was company-owned and the new settlers wound up in squalid tar-paper shacks. Conditions on relief farms set up by the Farm Security Administration were often harsh, and migrants’ hopes for a promised land soon faded into the dust as well.

By the end of the decade, the rains returned and farmers adopted new farming techniques that respected the natural cycles of the terrain; but the damage to the land and to the psyche of the people could never be wholly undone. The Dust Bowl era profoundly affected the way Oklahomans saw themselves, transforming them—both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the nation—from energetic, progressive “Sooners” to a “cultural identity of a dispossessed people” [Fossey 12-13. See “For Further Reading” section].

Out of these hardships emerged courage and determination to survive in the worst hard time imaginable. The histories, memoirs, and tales of those who lived through the 1930s can teach us how ordinary people cope with extraordinary circumstances. Reading their accounts gives us the courage to go on in our own hard times. This series gives voice to the sorrows, struggles, and great endurance experienced by Oklahomans and other survivors of that age. Together these books move us, provoke us, inform us, and offer us hope.

The Worst Hard Time

by Timothy Egan

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Timothy Egan takes us on an emotional journey as he follows several families who homesteaded in or near Dust Bowl areas of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Colorado. *The Worst Hard Time* focuses on immigrant groups such as Germans and Russians, on dirt poor ex-cowboys, and on simple farmers trying to subsist in an unforgiving environment. Egan details the agriculture and weather patterns of the region, and how the ferocious dust storms came to be. As the book progresses, he explores the political landscape as the government sought to bring relief to the blighted area. He introduces us to colorful political characters such as Alfalfa Bill Murray; Hugh Bennett, who tried to restructure farming to end the Dust Bowl; and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who won his first election on a platform of help for struggling farmers. Egan traces family roots, how families coped with the dust and drought or gave up and moved on, and what happened to them in later years. In doing so, he makes the Dust Bowl experience personal.

Letters from the Dust Bowl

by Caroline Henderson, edited by Alvin O. Turner

Letters from the Dust Bowl presents an unusual inside look at life during the Dust Bowl through the eyes of an educated homesteader in No Man's Land. Caroline Henderson moved to the Oklahoma Panhandle in 1907 to teach and soon met and married her husband. In joining a homestead with her husband's, she hoped to help build civilization in the dry, windy conditions of western Oklahoma. She and her husband were still farming in their eighties, but watched as neighbors gave up and moved away. Henderson submitted "letters" or articles to magazines to supplement their meager income. Her views on surviving before, during, and after the Dust Bowl give us a fascinating glimpse of farm life through much of the twentieth century. Through her letters she shows the fierce independence and refusal to bow to the elements that characterized Dust Bowl farmers. Since the letters begin in 1907, well before the drought of the 1930s, and end in the 1960s, after the rain returned to the Panhandle, we see the Dust Bowl years as merely one of the worst times in the midst of many "ordinary" bad times.

Now in November

by Josephine W. Johnson

Winner of the 1935 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Josephine Johnson's moving novel tells the story of the Haldemarne family from the point of view of Margret, the second of three daughters. Margret paints vivid portraits of her family circle: her restless older sister Kerrin, her resilient younger sister Merle, her embittered father and hardworking mother, and the farm hand Grant whom Margret secretly loves. Her account reveals a journey from girlhood to adulthood against the backdrop of a pastoral landscape turned

bleak and oppressive by the drought. Although Margret's world is limited to the narrow confines of her family's land and nearby farms, the novel touches on the turmoil of labor unrest, strikes, racism, and other social issues of the Great Depression. The roles of men and women in rural America and their relationships to family and the land figure prominently in this poignant story. The tragedy of the Haldemarnes still touches us with its poetry and meditations on the themes of nature and family.

Whose Names are Unknown

by Sanora Babb

Sanora Babb wrote *Whose Names Are Unknown* in 1939, but her timing was unlucky. Bennett Cerf of Random House called it "exceptionally fine," but John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was published that same year and Cerf felt that the market wouldn't bear two books about such similar topics. The manuscript remained in a desk drawer until the University of Oklahoma Press published it in 2004. Babb's powerful tale of Julia and Mil Dunne and their daughters is one of the great novels of the Dust Bowl experience. Like so many others of the era, the Dunes are lured to California by the promise of work only to encounter brutal, degrading conditions on work farms. Babb used her own childhood experiences and her work with Dust Bowl refugees through the Farm Security Administration to create a realistic story. *Whose Names are Unknown* combines the epic sweep of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* with a story of ordinary people facing extreme adversity and hard choices. Babb provides a gripping account of human survival and the poetry of everyday life in both good and bad times.

Out of the Dust

by Karen Hesse

I just want to go, / away, / out of the dust.

In 1993, Vermont resident Karen Hesse and a friend drove through the Kansas plains on their way to Colorado. From that trip Hesse found the inspiration to write her Newbury Medal-winning book *Out of the Dust*. Drawing on accounts of the "Dirty Thirties" from the Oklahoma Historical Society and the *Boise City News*, a 1930s newspaper from the Oklahoma Panhandle, Hesse created her young heroine, Billie Jo Kelby, an aspiring poet and pianist who tells of her plight through a series of free verse poems. With hands disfigured by a fire that also took the life of her mother and newborn brother, Billie Jo must come to terms with her own tragedy and the tragedy facing farmers as drought and dust destroy their way of life. She yearns for an escape from her pain and from the relentless dust, but finds her way back home. As Hesse commented in her Newbury acceptance speech, "It just so happens that in life, there's pain: sorrow lives in the shadow of joy, joy in the shadow of sorrow. The question is, do we find a way to grow,

to transform, and ultimately transcend our pain?" Billie Jo's journey and the portrait Hesse paints of Panhandle life are captivating.

For Further Reading

Histories

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Memoirs and Autobiographies

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Rutland, Robert Allen. *A Boyhood in the Dust Bowl 1926-1934*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1997.

Svobida, Lawrence. *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1986.

Fiction

Peery, Janet. *What the Thunder Said: A Novella and Stories*. New York: St. Martin's, 2007.
Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath* (50th Anniversary Edition). New York: Viking, 1989.

Films and DVDs

American Experience: Surviving the Dust Bowl. WGBH Boston Video (PBS)

Black Blizzard. The History Channel.

Grapes of Wrath (1940). 20th Century Fox.

“The Worst Hard Time Revisited” theme was developed by Dr. David Oberhelman, Associate Professor in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division, and Barbara Miller, Professor in the Documents Division, Oklahoma State University Library.

