

Excerpt from

Years of Dust: The Story of the Dust Bowl

by Albert Marrin

- 1 In April 1935, a reporter, Robert Geiger, set out by car across the Great Plains. As he headed east, heat waves made the air shimmer, causing him to squint. Temperatures rose to over one hundred degrees in the shade. There was nothing green visible in the fields; obviously no rain had fallen for many weeks. Then, while driving across Oklahoma, Geiger encountered a “black blizzard,” an immense dust storm. He had never imagined, let alone experienced, anything like it before. It was as if nature had gone insane.
- 2 At noon, darkness enveloped the earth. It seemed like an evil spirit had splashed an immense bucket of black paint across the sky. Within minutes, from horizon to horizon, the sun disappeared and noontime became “midnight.” But such a midnight! There was no moon, no stars, no meteorites flashing across the heavens. Instead, billowing clouds of dust, some rising more than two miles into the air, whipped across the plains. Driven by howling winds, the clouds easily overtook speeding cars. As the dust fell back to earth, it drifted like dirty, crunchy snow, choking roads and bringing trains to a grinding halt. Worse, the dust buried crops and livestock, destroying farmers’ homes and livelihood.
- 3 The storm left Geiger shaken. Afterward, he interviewed some farmers. These old-timers, with calloused hands and deep crease lines in their dim faces, seemed desperate. This was not the first dust storm they had experienced, nor, they reckoned, would it be the last. “Three little words,” Geiger concluded, “achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains.”
- 4 Dust bowl! Geiger used the phrase as a way to make fun of gala sports events, like the Rose Bowl or Orange Bowl, two well-known football games. Geiger’s phrase, however, took on new meaning. It stuck, instantly grabbing the public’s imagination. During the 1930’s, as today, “Dust Bowl” became a dramatic term for parts of the Great Plains stricken by the worst environmental disaster in American history.
- 5 Coming at the same time as the Great Depression, the dust storms not only ravaged the land, they tore at the human spirit. . . .

6 There is no way to understand the Dust Bowl tragedy without first understanding the ecology of the Great Plains. Ecology is the branch of science that deals with the relationships between living beings and their physical environment. Mountains, rivers, lakes, deserts, jungles, Arctic regions—to name a few—are all special environments. Each has unique life forms that interact with each other and depend on each other to survive. So does the Great Plains.

7 A region of seemingly boundless open spaces, the plains lie at the heart of North America. Reaching southward from the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, they extend into northern Mexico. The plains also stretch eastward from the banks of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. . . .

8 The Great Plains is a place of extreme, violent weather. Weather can change suddenly from heavenly to horrid. With no trees to block it, the winds blow constantly. Often the wind reaches speeds seen nowhere else but at the seashore, blowing over one hundred miles an hour. Its moaning, whistling and howling often tormented the first white settlers, people unused to such sounds. “A high wind is an awful thing,” a woman wrote, “it wears you down, it nags at you day after day, it sounds like an invisible army, it fills you with terror as something invisible does.” . . .

9 Depending on the season, the wind brings scorching heat and numbing cold. Summer winds whip out of the Mexican desert. Plains’ temperatures soar past one hundred degrees in the shade, and stay there for weeks, with no relief even at night. The dry heat is a killer. Streams vanish, leaving only a channel littered with dry stones. Animals die of thirst. Plants shrivel up, as if caught in the blast of a gigantic furnace. In summertime, railroads might have to stop service because the heat expands the steel tracks, putting them out of alignment.