

Black Sunday:

The Storm That Gave Us the Dust Bowl

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BACKGROUND

Since the mid-nineteenth century, farmers had been flocking to the Great Plains of the American Midwest, which offered large plots of land for raising crops and livestock. This migration changed the landscape of the region, replacing the native prairie grasses with plowed fields. In 1930, a severe drought hit this altered environment creating dust storms that raged for nearly a decade. This selection recounts one of the worst dust storms in the era known as the Dust Bowl.

^ An enormous dust storm descends on the town of Springfield, Colorado, during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s.

¹ It seemed like an ordinary day at first. Like any other day, folks on the Great Plains were struggling to get by. People walked to church, swept up from the dust storm that had blown through the week before, perhaps discussed the Congressional hearings that had brought the **plight** of the region, which had been **ravaged** by drought and the economic effects of the Great Depression, to the attention of the rest of the nation.

² But Black Sunday—April 14, 1935—was no ordinary day.

³ That afternoon, a gigantic cloud swept across the Great Plains.

It was 1,000 miles long and blew at speeds up to 100 miles per hour. It was made of 300,000 tons of dust whipped from the ground of northern farmlands, where poor soil conservation techniques¹ had led to **widespread** erosion made worse by the **unending** drought.

1. **soil conservation techniques** methods that farmers can use to stop soil from being removed by natural forces.

plight (PLYT) *n.* serious or harmful condition or situation

ravaged (RAV ihjd) *v.* destroyed or damaged badly

widespread (WYD sprehd) *adj.* occurring in many places

unending (uhn EHN dihng) *adj.* never stopping; constant

READ TO UNLOCK MEANING

1. First read the text for comprehension and enjoyment. Use the **Comprehension Check** question to support your first read.
2. Go back and respond to the Close-Read note.
3. Identify other details in the text you find interesting. Ask your own questions and draw your own conclusions.

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE In paragraph 6, mark details that describe the reactions of humans and animals.

QUESTION What effect do these details have?

demoralized (dih MAWR uh lyzd) *adj.* discouraged; defeated

impoverished (ihm POV uhr ihsht) *adj.* extremely poor; miserable and exhausted

COMPREHENSION CHECK

How did this period in time come to be known as the Dust Bowl?

- 4 Great Plains residents were used to dust, but they had never seen anything like this. One observer compared it to “the Red Sea closing in on the Israel children² . . . it got so dark that you couldn’t see your hand before your face, you couldn’t see anybody in the room.”
- 5 “You couldn’t see the street lights,” recalled Jim Williams, who watched the storm from his home in Dodge City, Kansas. “It rolled over and over and over and over and over when it came in,” another witness remembered, “and it was coal black; it was coal black, and it was terrible that afternoon. It was hot and dry.”
- 6 Humans weren’t the only ones terrified by the storm. Birds fled ahead of the cloud. Confused by the dark, chickens started to go inside to roost. Cows ran in circles.
- 7 Once the storm subsided, a simple spring day had become the worst day in recent memory. The “black blizzard” that swept across the plains states left a trail of devastation in its wake—leveled fields, crashed cars, reports of people who had been blinded or given pneumonia by the storm. Everything was covered in dust, which choked wells and killed cattle. “Black Sunday,” as the storm became known, was the death knell³ for the poor farmers of Oklahoma and Texas. **Demoralized** and **impoverished**, thousands of so-called “Okies” cut their losses⁴ and began the long migration to more favorable locations like California.
- 8 In Boise City, Oklahoma, an Associated Press reporter named Robert E. Geiger had weathered the storm with photographer Harry G. Eisenhard. “Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue,” he wrote after the storm, “rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains.” Some speculate that Geiger meant to say, “dust belt,” a term he used to refer to the devastated region before and after Black Sunday.
- 9 Inadvertent or no, the term was picked up almost immediately. Geiger had given name to a phenomenon that would come to define the economic and social impacts of the Great Depression. But though Black Sunday and the Dust Bowl it helped name drew attention to the plight of the plains and turned soil conservation into a national priority, its effects were best summed up by a folk singer, not a reporter or politician. These are some of the lyrics to Woody Guthrie’s “Dust Storm Disaster,” which tells the story of the “deathlike black” cloud that enveloped America that day in 1935:

*It covered up our fences, it covered up our barns,
It covered up our tractors in this wild and dusty storm.
We loaded our jalopies and piled our families in,
We rattled down that highway to never come back again. ♫*

2. **the Red Sea closing in on the Israel children** According to the Bible, the Red Sea opened up for the escaping children of Israel and then closed in on the Egyptians who were chasing them. The term “children of Israel” refers to both adults and children.
3. **death knell** *n.* sound signaling an end or failure.
4. **cut their losses** abandoned an unsuccessful occupation or activity before anyone suffered more harm.