The Dust Bowl

The Great Depression, a severe downturn in the American economy, lasted for the decade of the 1930s. The Great Depression negatively affected about sixty percent of the population as hundreds of thousands of workers could not find jobs. Other families who were fortunate enough to have savings lost their safety net when banks across the country failed.

Major Drought

As if the state of the country at the beginning of the Great Depression wasn’t already bad enough, weather severely impacted the southern Plains, especially western Kansas, eastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, as well as the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandle regions. These areas were affected by a drought that began in 1931 and lasted for ten years. Along with drought came winds which turned the dry topsoil into dust and the region was plagued with dust storms.

A dust storm consists of clouds of dust blowing across the land, covering everything with a layer of dust particles. Residents of areas experiencing dust storms had difficulty breathing when outside and used bandanas as masks. The ever-present dust invaded the inside of homes even though housewives hung wet sheets over the windows to capture the dust.

A dust storm could last for days at a time, filling the air with dust. Dust storms were called “Black Blizzards.” In 1932, at the beginning of the drought, there were 14 major dust storms; in 1933, there were 38. Think about what happens when there is a single major snow blizzard that impacts a wide area, change the snow to dust, and multiply by 38 to get an idea of what people lived through.

In the hardest hit areas, the dust buried homes, making them unlivable. Hundreds of thousands of people left the country’s midsection, looking for a better life elsewhere. John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel The Grapes of Wrath graphically describes the plight and migration of displaced families traveling westward seeking not only a better life but the bare necessities of life. Along with others in the United States, they lost everything during the Great Depression. Many went to the San Joaquin Valley in California seeking jobs as migrant farm workers.
The drought and dust storms first spread to nearby areas. By 1934 the worst drought in American history affected 75 percent of the land in the country across 27 states. The drought lasted until 1939 when the rains finally returned. The year 1934 brought the worst dust storm of the decade.

**Farming Practices**

The original plains of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Colorado successfully withstood periodic and extended droughts for centuries before; why were they turning to dust during the 1930s? A natural thick covering of prairie grasses had protected the soil from blowing until farmers arrived and disrupted the natural balance of the plains. Farmers had plowed under the prairie grasses that previously held the soil in place during the periodic droughts that affect the region.

Besides “busting the sod” by plowing, the idea of crop rotation was unknown to these farmers. Planting the same crop in the same place every year eventually depletes the soil of nutrients and “worn out” soil turns to dust. Modern day China is facing a similar problem today as over-farmed acreage is turning to desert and winds are creating dust storms that are now affecting not only the farming areas but also major cities in that country.

**Remedies**

Under President Franklin Roosevelt, who took office in 1933, Congress enacted the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act that provided federal funds to keep banks from foreclosing on farm mortgages. The Farm Credit Act of 1933 established local banks and credit unions in farming areas. In 1934 the Frazier-Lemke Farm Bankruptcy Act provided additional protection from eviction for distress farmers. Originally a short-term emergency measure, the act remained in force until 1947. In the same year Congress enacted the Taylor Grazing Act which sought to stabilize 140 acres of federal land by restoring grasslands for grazing.

In 1935 Congress voted to add a new branch to the Department of Agriculture, the Soil Conservation Service which remains a federal agency today. This agency introduced methods of preventing soil erosion such as contour plowing, crop rotation and using “cover crops” to prevent soil erosion between seasonal crops. These measures lessened soil erosion during the remainder of the drought. Farmers continue to practice these techniques to reduce soil erosion.
Circle True or False after analyzing each of the following statements.

1. True  False  The Great Depression negatively affected over one-half of the American population.

2. True  False  A major cause of the Dust Bowl was a major drought that began in 1931 and lasted for ten years.

3. True  False  A dust tornado consists of clouds of dust blowing across the land, covering everything with a layer of dust particles.

4. True  False  Another term used for dust storms was “Dust Blizzards.”

5. True  False  F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1939 novel The Grapes of Wrath graphically describes the plight of farmers affected by the Dust Bowl.

6. True  False  By 1934 the worst drought in American history affected 75 percent of the land in the country across 27 states.

7. True  False  Modern day Japan is experiencing dust storms brought on by drought and poor farming techniques.

8. True  False  Many farmers displaced by the Dust Bowl migrated to find work on farms in California.

9. True  False  The Emergency Farm Mortgage Act and the Frazier-Lemke Farm Bankruptcy Act were enacted by state governments to prevent farm foreclosures.

10. True  False  A branch of the Department of Agriculture, the Soil Conservation Service introduced methods of preventing soil erosion during the Dust Bowl years.
Answers

1. True
2. True
3. False
4. False
5. False
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. True