

Some Remembrances from the Dust Bowl Era



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Background

Born: 2 May 1914, Norton, Kansas, Northwest corner of Kansas

College: Sept. 1932 - June 1936, Kansas State U. Manhattan, KS, Eastern Kansas

All time in Manhattan except: June-August 1933 in Norton on farm; May- September 1935 in Garden City, KS, southwestern corner, on a state agricultural experiment station, the only one in Kansas with irrigation.

1 July 1936 entered graduate study at the University of Minnesota.

The economic depression began in 1929 and continued until the beginning of World War II in 1939. The United States World War II entered on 7 December 1941.

The dry period began in 1932 and the Dust Bowl in 1933.

The description of the dust bowl conditions as described in the early chapters of the book *Dust Bowl*¹ by Worster is realistic and as I remember them. This was a prolonged period of low rainfall, high temperatures and strong winds. The latter were associated with the weather fronts which passed through the region on schedule but usually, especially June to October, without meaningful rainfall.

The farming methods, continuous cropping and relatively small machines often horse-drawn, and high rural human populations all contributed to the problems of wind blown erosion. It also contributed to excessive water erosion whenever heavy rains occurred. There were several serious spring floods during the 1930s. The situation in farming in the region today is such that a repetition of the 1930s Dust Bowl is unlikely. Isolated areas of wind blown soil loss may still occur due to poor management and/or very atypical weather patterns.

The epilogue in the book *Dust Bowl* is likewise realistic. I drove through the area from Trinidad, Colorado to Dodge City via Baca County, Colorado and Stanton County Kansas, in the early 1980s and found nothing similar to the conditions in 1935 when I spent the summer at the agricultural experiment station in Garden City, Kansas. That summer I made three trips to the agricultural experiment station in Woodward Oklahoma via Liberal Kansas, collected plants for herbarium specimens along the Cimarron River in Kansas and inspected a few wheat fields for certified seed production near Sublette, Kansas. These latter fields produced some grain in the low spots of fields (alleged to be buffalo wallows – they are natural low depressions).

Some specific remembrances of dust storms, floods, and other experiences in the 1930s.

The year, 1930 or 1931, was one of the most favorable for crop production in Northwest Kansas. The National Corn Husking Contest was held in Norton County (five miles from the Murphy farm). There was one problem, with the depression, corn grain was as low as \$0.22- \$0.25 cents per bushel. Many, including the Murphys, used ear corn for fuel in stoves in lieu of coal or wood (hailed from 10 miles) because it was cheaper. I rented land and tried to

1 Worster, Donald. 1979. *Dust Bowl: the southern plains in the 1930s*. Oxford University Press, NY. Personal recollections recreate experiences of two Dust Bowl communities

grow corn in the summers of 1932 and 1933 in order to get some income for college expenses. In both years, very dry, no grain was produced. In fact, the corn was harvested by a small grain reaper and put in a silo for ensilage for the cattle.



The Murphy Farm near Norton KS (photo provided by the Murphy family)

I experienced two floods. In 1930 or 1931 very heavy rains (~10 inches) occurred in Northwest Kansas. I was at the County Fair which was along the Prairie Dog Creek, a major tributary to the Republican River. The entire area was under water (6-10 feet of water). We had to move all livestock out of the area during the period of intense rain, wind, and occasional hail. The highest water occurred a few hours afterward. There was loss of equipment and one life from among the circus and side show groups which are common components of county fairs.

The other flood, one of the most serious for Kansas, Nebraska, Eastern Colorado occurred in late April and early May in 1935. This was one of the driest years for Kansas but most of the year's significant rainfall occurred in this storm. The entire Republican River Valley in southern Nebraska and eastern Kansas was decimated. The floods continued in the Kansas River and Kansas City, KS and Kansas City, MO experienced their most serious flood to that date. I left Manhattan by bus during the rain, about May 1, for Garden City. It was purported to be the last bus to leave for about 10 days, the bridge went out soon after we left. It rained continuously until we got to Garden City, an over-night trip. The roads were gravel and very slick in spots. Between Dodge City and Garden City the bus slid into the ditch. Other transportation came from Garden City to bring the passengers. Fortunately for me

this was my destination. One memorable fact about the bus in the ditch: Water was running everywhere including the road since the ditch was full of dust. The dust (dirt) was drifted in this country as snow drifts. All ditches were full, any fence row with tumble weeds had drifts, some huge, and any obstacle to the wind such as weeds, low hills, buildings, machines, etc. became the point for a drift to form. This loose dust was as difficult as loose sand to drive on or “in”. The bus was “stuck” because of the mud but even more so because of the dry soil under the mud. These drifts of dust were rather impervious to water – it simply flowed over them or off them because of the fineness of the soil particulars, as fine as flour. Many farms had timber claims and/or shelter belts. These areas might contain several kinds of trees not present on the uplands. They included oak, locusts, wild cherries and plums, elms, cottonwoods and others that were native along fresh water streams. Some pines from the West and two introduced species, Chinese elm and Russian Olive, were common. The timber claims were required when homesteaders claimed a 160-acre tract. The wind breaks were planted around farmyards. When these drifted full of dust, they were killed except for a few trees at the edge. The dust was impenetrable to water from rainfall.

Because of the fineness of part of the air borne soil particles, they remained in the air for extended periods. Although there was little erosion near Manhattan, the air was so full of dust during storms, that the street lights remained on during the day for visibility — autos used headlights; the sun could not be seen; classrooms used lights at all times; and physical education classes were cancelled, as were other physical activities – games, ROTC, etc. Autos driven during dust storms without air cleaners had the motors ruined. They required new piston rings and main bearings after only a few hours of such operation.

A few examples of the dust include these three. I went home to Norton in 1934 in early spring² during a lull in the storms. It was a nice day but I knew from letters from home that they had just experienced their most serious storms. I went into our home on the farm and the living and dining rooms were clean and bright. My mother said I should go into the parlor. It was sealed off – the piano and upholstered furniture were covered with sheets and the rugs were rolled up. There was a fine layer of dust on everything. It was much more pervasive than snow. The windows were all sealed with tape.

Another time I came home when a cousin (Glenn Murphy, 30 October 1935) died from a ruptured appendix. It was a very sad time but my aunt (Blanche) had her home very clean for visitors. Everyone complemented her and asked her how she did it. She said that work helped her with her grief but that the first tool she used to clean the house was a scoop shovel. They had just come through one of the most serious storms in 1935 and there were drifts of dust by every door and window. As an aside, some people had so much dust in the spaces under the roofs but above the ceilings of rooms that the drifts broke through into the rooms below. I did not see this happen.

Even with such disasters people often survive not only by perseverance and diligence but from a bit of wry humor.

One story which was related to me as a true one involved a rural mail carrier who became stuck in a large dust drift that developed between the banks of the country road during a severe blow from the southwest. He needed help but the storm was increasing in intensity so he arranged for some one to come and pick him up for the remainder of his route to town. The next morning the wind had changed to the Northwest, but was intense. He brought some help with him in order to dig his car out of the drift. Much to their surprise when the party arrived, the car was sitting free of any drift. The strong wind had blown the loose dust away. There was much “kidding” of the mail carrier over this but it makes the point that until above normal precipitation years came, the dust could always be on the move.

Other stories were the result of man’s ability to “kid” himself, often in stressful times. One farmer said he had learned to live without rain but he would like to see one again because he did not want his 10-year old son to grow up without this experience.

Another farmer told how he had just experienced a local heavy thunderstorm at which time all the frogs in the ponds around the farm buildings drowned – they had forgotten how to swim.

2 He attended Kansas State University from September 1932 through June 1936.

Another farmer told of finding a lot of dead prairie dogs on his farm. It seems a thunderstorm had come up suddenly and congealed all the dust and the prairie dogs fell to their death. The dust was so thick that they had been several hundred feet up in the dust

The dust bowl became a verdant area in the 1940s. Huge crops of wheat were grown under a new system of farming. Many fields are terraced to retain rainfall on the fields and to control water erosion. For dry-land, agriculture crops are grown every other year - the alternate year the fields are fallowed (free of crop and weed growth) but tilled so as to control wind erosion under most conditions. Of course where ground water use is economical, irrigation is used. However, the ground water in much of this area is a finite source (similar to petroleum) and some of the area will revert to dry-land farming or cattle ranching in the next few years.

Post Script

After reading this, I find I have overlooked one experience, that of the black-walled storm — see Black Sunday in 1935 in *Dust Bowl*. I was in Manhattan when this one occurred but similar ones occurred that summer in Garden City. These are ominous storms and came from the Northwest. They are the front of a cold front without significant clouds or moisture (rain). The air was still but one could see the dust rising at the front of the storm to several hundred or thousand feet. It was black behind it and within two or three minutes of its arrival one needed lights to get about in a building or to attempt to drive on a road. For the first few minutes there was little wind. It was an eerie sensation to note the dust rising straight up. However, the wind began to blow and soon increased to storm densities. One storm I remember well. I went into the office-laboratory building at the experiment station to close all doors and windows in an effort to keep the dust out. It was so dark I bumped into the furniture and then I heard something like pellets, not as hard as hail, hitting the building. I went to the windows and door and found that we were being hit with small dust balls (mud balls if you will). They splashed and stuck to everything. It was due to a very light rain which was absorbed by the dust before it hit the ground. Unfortunately, the rain ceased without removing these. I had the job of hosing down the outside of the building, some shrubs and equipment. I also had to wash all the windows.

End