



The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl was a region in the midwestern United States that was afflicted by drought (lack of rain) during the Great Depression.

Additionally, much of the farmland in the region had been plowed up by farmers growing wheat or grazing cattle. Wheat has very shallow roots, which did not help to keep the soil in place or help the soil to hold moisture. After many years, the top layer of soil had been destroyed, so in the drought conditions it quickly turned to dust. Nothing was able to grow there, and for about a decade, most of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico was like a desert.

During "dust storms," wind would blow the dust up into the air, making it hard for people to breathe. Like sand shifting in desert winds, dust could pile up so high that houses were buried. Some dust storms carried dust all the way to the East Coast. The biggest dust storms were called "black blizzards," and one of the worst took place on Sunday, April 14th, 1935. Whole cities and regions were covered in dust. The dust was so thick in the air that you couldn't see your own hand in front of your face. It was not uncommon for livestock to choke to death on the dust in the air.

It was difficult, if not impossible, to live in the Dust Bowl, so people began to leave. Many farm families moved, and those migrating out of the Dust Bowl were nicknamed "Okies." Though an obvious reference to Oklahoma, the name was applied to anyone fleeing the Dust Bowl. California was a common destination because there was rumored to be jobs there. But there were very few jobs anywhere during the Great Depression.

The federal government tried to help those that stayed in the Dust Bowl by teaching farmers how to farm in a way that preserved the soil. They also purchased farmland that was allowed to lie fallow (unused) so that it could regenerate. It finally began to rain again in 1939, and most of the land in the Midwest was farmable again by the 1940s.