

The Great Plains Becomes a Dust Bowl Farmers who survived the tumble in prices were still not safe. Through the mid-1930s, a drought in the Great Plains added to their problems. Water was a constant problem in the region. Normal rainfall seldom exceeded the 20 inches a year that traditional American agricultural practices demanded. As a result, droughts on the Great Plains were often more devastating than those in the East and Midwest. In the years before America's western rivers were dammed and irrigation practices became widespread, there were few answers to the drought threat.

New farming methods made drought conditions worse. Intensive farming came to prominence throughout the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Farmers then had moved onto the plains and plowed under much of the natural grasses in order to plant oceans of winter wheat. The landscape shift tipped the ecological balance of the region. In the past, plains grasses prevented the topsoil from blowing away during periods of drought. By the early 1930s, that dwindling grassy safety net could no longer do the job.

By 1932, the combination of drought, loose topsoil, and high winds resulted in disaster on the Great Plains. The winds kicked up towering dust storms that began to blow east. These gigantic clouds of dust and dirt could rise from ground level to a height of 8,000 feet. The dust storms moved as fast as 100 miles per hour and blotted out the sun, plunging daylight into darkness.

Most of the dust storms started in the southern Great Plains, especially the high plains regions of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, New Mexico, and Colorado. This swath of parched earth became known as the **Dust Bowl**. For people living in these hardest hit regions, depression and dust storms defined the misery of the "dirty thirties."

Those unfortunate enough to be caught in a dust storm were temporarily choked and blinded by the swirling dirt. The storms killed cattle and birds, blanketed rivers, and suffocated fish. Dirt seeped into houses, covering everything with a thick coat of grime. Some dust clouds blew east as far as the Atlantic coast, dumping acres of dirt on Boston, New York, and Washington. Altogether, dust storms displaced twice as much dirt as Americans had scooped out to build the Panama Canal.

Desperation Causes Migration Many farm families trapped in the Dust Bowl had no choice but to migrate out of the region. They had lost their farms to the banks. Dust storms had destroyed most remaining opportunities. They were low on everything except despair. Although only some came from Oklahoma, Dust Bowl refugees were generally referred to as **Okies**, regardless of their states of origin.

Okie families packed onto rickety trucks and headed toward California or Oregon or Washington, any place where a job might be found. Before the pace slowed, 800,000 people migrated out of Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas alone.

Agricultural collapse and the Great Plains Dust Bowl forced millions of Americans to leave the midwestern and southern regions where they had been born. Many moved to California, lured by the promise of jobs, but were crushed when that promise too often proved empty. Others headed to the cities of the Northeast and Midwest, again looking for jobs, shelter, and relief. As a result of the migration, rural states lost population while states with large cities gained population.

WITNESS HISTORY DVD

Watch *The Dust Bowl* on the United States Witness History DVD to learn more about the causes and effects of the Dust Bowl.

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Okies Flee the Dust Bowl

The Okie exodus from the Great Plains carried thousands of Americans west to the rich farmlands of California. Okies also packed up and headed east to great industrial centers like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York. Here, a migrant family arrives in California.





There were other effects of the Dust Bowl. The farmers best able to survive the Great Depression were the ones with the biggest operations. They often bought repossessed land at rock-bottom prices and expanded their holdings into large commercial farms. The Dust Bowl also motivated the government to help Great Plains farmers. After the initial crisis, immense federal projects dammed western rivers. Dams eventually provided irrigation that made farm profits possible on the Great Plains.

✎ **Checkpoint** How did the Dust Bowl make life even more difficult for farmers on the Great Plains?