

WESTERN KANSAS DUST STORMS

Meade County, Kansas

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1935

SOUTHWEST KANSAS DUST STORM

During the last several years, Western Kansas and some of its neighboring states have been given the name of "The Dust Bowl". The reason for this is... the area has been a playground of winds moving with a great velocity and driving force. It picks up small particles of dust along the surface of the ground and carries the particles to form piles of "blow-dirt" behind a house, barn, or other form of shelter.

Blow-dirt is easily carried by the wind. When a pile of it has been formed, you can take a handful, and since it's so fine, it will run between your fingers. If you pour water over it, it will run off as if you were pouring it over flour.

Once a field has started to blow, it will continue to do so until rain stops it or the ground has been cultivated. Even rain does not do a great deal of good, and at times, it even does some harm, because it packs the surface of the ground and makes it smooth. Then the sun dries out the surface of the ground, and it will start blowing again unless the weeds have grown enough to keep the ground covered or the ground has been cultivated and the surface of the ground has been broken.

When the dust starts to blow in the winter, it is sometimes very difficult and sometimes impossible to stop it. Take a case, for instance, in which a field has a creditable amount of moisture, which of course will freeze in the severe cold of the winter months. The ground will have frozen to a depth of one to three feet. The sun will shine enough during the middle of the day to dry out the surface of the ground,

although, it will probably not thaw the ground. When a field in this condition starts blowing there is practically nothing to do to stop it because there has not been an implement that can properly cultivate a field that is frozen. During the past few years, however, several newly invented implements have come into use for the special use of preventing soil erosion caused by both wind and water.

All of us, whether we live in "The Dust Bowl", in the East, or in the West, have read accounts of dust storms in the papers and have heard several incidents about them over the radio. To a person who has not gone through a dust storm, many of these tales are very hard to believe and even seem impossible. Let me say at this point, however, that these stories are seldom exaggerated. In fact, in a larger number of cases, I believe that the stories of dust storms have been underestimated and too conservative rather than overestimated or exaggerated. I have never read or heard of a dust storm that, from its description, made me think it was as bad as some I have experienced. By this, I am trying to make clear that unless you have actually lived through one of them it is hard to imagine how bad it is.

They have indeed been so terrible that they have cost hundreds of people their lives with a sickness that has come to be called "dust pneumonia". The person stricken has breathed so much dust into their lungs that their organs cease to function properly and in a very short time die. I have a very vivid illustration of this in the case of a close friend of mine who died in this manner in April 1935.

He started working for a farmer on a Thursday. He was out in the field plowing. The dust was blowing quite a bit, but he kept working. Friday it was much worse. Saturday afternoon he complained of not feeling well. Saturday night he came to town and went to a doctor, who told him to go home and go to bed. That night and the next morning, he was breathing very fast in gasps and he was practically burning up with fever. He died that afternoon about 5 o'clock.

So far, there is nothing the doctors can find that will help a person who gets dust pneumonia. The dust gets into their lungs and there is no way of getting it out. Possibly a way will soon be found to cure it. This is the hope of all those who are in any way connected with it.

One of the dust storms that I will always remember is the one that occurred in the spring of 1934. It had been a bit dusty all day long. In the middle of the afternoon, we noticed a very dark embankment arising in the northwest, which was coming our way. We rounded up the chickens and everything lying around loose and all went inside. In a little while it struck. The dust was so thick inside the house that it seemed as if there was a heavy fog right inside our home. It was so dark that you could only vaguely see the outlines of the windows and we had to light the lamps to see in the house. With so much dust in the house, we could hardly breathe. We each put a wet cloth over our face and that helped us breathe. The wind finally subsided

around sundown and we were able to get things cleaned up a little bit and were able to get some sleep.

Many times the dust was so bad that spring that we were unable to sleep because it choked us. When we did sleep, we again had to put a damp cloth over our faces to keep out the dust.

One of the hardest things to bear during the dust storms was the dirt and dust in the house, on the floors, ceilings, walls, on our clothes, beds, food, water, and everything else we had in the house. It would take about a day to get everything cleaned up so it would be fit to live in again. We would have to sweep and scrub all the floors, dust all of the furniture, hang out the bedclothes to air them and get the dust out of them, take the curtains down and clean them, and in fact, clean everything in the house. The dust storms really worked a hardship on all of the mothers, as it created much more work for them to do.

Another very bad dust storm that remains very clear to me is one that occurred in March 1935. My uncle's family and I had gone to church one Friday evening. The wind was blowing a little and there was some dust flying, but it was not bad. During the services, we noticed that the wind had come up and could tell that the dust was blowing very badly. It had become so bad that we had to strain our eyes to see the front of the church. I was in the choir loft and it was about one hundred feet to the front of the church. After the services were over we went outside and the dust was really blowing. We had a hard time locating our car, but we finally found it. Then we began the tiresome and perilous journey home. It took us about an hour to drive home which was four miles from town. We drove in low gear most of the way. My uncle was driving and he had his window rolled down and stuck his head out and watched the ditch. By driving 2 or 3 feet from the ditch, he was able to see it from the glare of the headlights of the car and was able to keep the car on the road. When we had to turn a corner, I would roll down a window on the other side of the car and watch for the other ditch.

We finally got home, and I got out and walked ahead of the car about five feet. My uncle followed me and in this way, I led him to the car shed. We put the car in the shed, shut the door, and started for the house. We had to hold each other's hands. We could not see the light shining from the house, which was about one hundred feet away from the car shed, so we struck out toward where we thought the house should be. After we had gone about three-fourths of the way to the house, which was straight east of the car shed, we finally noticed the light from the window off to the southeast of us. We were going northeast and would have missed it entirely if we had not seen the light. We went into the house and it was hazy with dust.

I did not wear a hat to church, and I had put oil in my hair earlier. Therefore, when I took a comb and started combing it, I believe I combed out about one-half of a pound

of dirt. It was some time before the wind went down enough so that we thought we could sleep.

By far, the most vivid of any of the dust storms that I have gone through was the one that occurred on Palm Sunday, April 14, 1935.

It was during the year that I taught school, and I was doing some school work, grading examination papers, and getting report cards ready. My uncle and the rest of the family were gone, but the hired man was home with me. As I was busy working he stepped outside. He rushed back in and told me to "come outside". I went out and saw what seemed to be a big, black, rolling cloud approaching us from the northwest. It seemed to be about one-half mile away. The hired man rushed out to run in some baby chicks and lock them up. I went into the house. The storm struck while the hired man was out tending to more chickens. He began running back to the house and ran into the fence. He found his way to the door, stepped in, and called to me. I was standing right inside the door not two feet from him, but he could not see me. It was so dark outside that I was not able to see where the windows were. We discussed the advisability of going into the cellar. He was strongly in favor of it, but I told him that it probably wasn't necessary since dust storms had not caused much property damage and I thought it would be quite safe in the house. We finally agreed to stay in the house. The storm lasted about three hours and then let up. I believe it was the worst dust storm that I have ever seen.