

THE BLACK BLIZZARD

Morton County, Kansas

Written by Edna January



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Every time I think of those dust storms, I shudder and thank my lucky stars that I have been able to survive them, as several people were not able to do. Many, many people, especially children, died of what was called “dust pneumonia”.

Before we had the real bad dust storm on Sunday, April 14, 1935, we had day after day of dirt storms. The dirt seemed to start blowing at the break of day and continued all day often until after midnight, stopping only a few hours and then starting again. At one time, I recall twelve continued days of this dust. It seemed to slow down at night and would stop blowing about an hour earlier each day until finally, it stopped altogether.

We would have a few days of the prettiest weather possible and then along came another dirt storm that spoiled all our hopes and wishes of no more aggravating dust.

If a woman in the dust bowl area wanted to keep her house spotless, she could never be seen without a broom, a dust mop, dust rags, and a vacuum cleaner in her hands. Some remarks came to us here in Western Kansas from those in the eastern part of the state saying, “Why, I could write my name in the dust on my furniture.” However, they do not know what “real dirt” is, compared with the knowledge and experiences we have had here.

The dirt came into the houses no matter how well they were built. It seemed to penetrate the walls, landing on the furniture and floors. In fact, someone remarked, "I don't see how it gets in unless it comes in through the walls." There were many things done to try to keep it out. Brown building paper was fastened to the screen of storm doors. Some folks would not take the risk of dirt coming in through the tiniest cracks. Each window had adhesive tape added around the glass. The windowsills were taped with gummed paper or adhesive tape. All of the windows were taped shut and many houses had only one door, used to enter and exit the house. Every little crack that could be found in the house was sealed with gummed tape. Many people covered their windows from the outside with waxed cloth to prevent dirt from coming in and still permit some light to enter the house.



April 1935
ELKHART, MORTON COUNTY, KANSAS
Dust storm as it approaches and when it arrives



As mentioned earlier, the first real bad dust storm... and I firmly believe it was the worst one we have had, came on Sunday, April 14, 1935. In the far north, we saw a grey cloud coming up. Many of the people thought that it was a rain cloud and began to feel hopeful that there might be a good rain. It would certainly be welcome after having so many dirt storms. But the cloud became larger and larger, blacker and blacker, closer and closer. Everyone's hopes crumbled for it was evident that the cloud was nothing more than one of those awful "dusters".

The more practical-minded people rushed in to close their houses as tightly as possible against the approaching enemy. Some remained outside to study the formations in the cloud. It was a mountain-high, awe-inspiring, rolling whirling mass. It reminded some people of a vast army marching steadily and rapidly across the prairie toward its destination.

It swooped in and engulfed all of its victims in a mad whirling, choking mass of very fine, powdery particles of sand and dirt. When it hit Rolla (*in Morton County*) about four o'clock in the afternoon, all was quiet and still. There was not a breeze stirring that afternoon, and people were wondering what was going to happen next. Everything was plunged into an inky blackness that could not be penetrated by the human eye. The houses across the street became invisible even after the lights were turned on. We put our hands before our eyes and could not see them. I have never seen a night as dark as that day was at about 4:30 in the afternoon.

Then following the darkness came a strong wind blowing around the corners of the houses and bending the trees. This wind with the bad dirt storm sent fear and questioned the hearts of many. Many people ran to their storm cellars in fear of what might be following. Gradually the blackness became less and changed to a reddish color, then to a sandy color, and finally cleared away entirely.

The following is what some of the people experienced during the "Black Blizzard"...

Harold Dixon of Rolla (*at the age of 19 years*) was out herding cows and was caught before he could reach the house. Had he remained on the horse he was riding, he would have been much better off, but he decided to use his own judgment and follow a barbed wire fence to the house. The horse got home safely and when Harold's parents saw that he was not with the horse, they began to worry. They had just started to search for him when they saw him struggling to find the door. He was fatigued and almost gasping for breath, his clothes were torn, and the barbed wire fence cut his hands very badly. Harold suffered with his hands for several days and had to keep them wrapped up for a week.

Many people were out enjoying their favorite sport, hunting for arrowheads. They could not get home before the storm hit and had to remain in their cars. They said that they almost suffocated while waiting for the dirt to stop blowing. They sat looking out their car windows and seeing nothing but the vast darkness. Some boys who were

hunting for the arrowheads remained afoot and could not find shelter. They ran until they couldn't see any longer and the storm caught them far from any dwelling of any kind. They used their handkerchiefs for dust masks and managed to brave the dirt that way. When they arrived to town after all had quieted down, they were a bunch of exhausted young men. They were covered with dirt and had sandburs on their skin and in their clothing. The dirt had gathered around their eyes and caused tears to come thus collecting more dirt until there were small balls of mud formed around the eyes.

Flashlights did not affect the dust storms. An example was when two men from Elkhart, Kansas were walking separately down a back alleyway with flashlights and ran into each other. In addition, a man with a flashlight ran into a telephone pole while trying to find his way home.

Several cars ran into each other. Even though the car lights were on, many cars ran into curbs, telephone poles, and fences.

My sister and her husband were going back to their home in Hugoton, (*Steven County, Kansas*) from a day's visit with my mother who lives in Elkhart. They got about four miles out of town when they saw the cloud in the north, which they, like many others, thought, was a prospective rain cloud. After it became closer, they discovered their mistake and started driving faster to outrun the dust. They drove about four miles farther and decided they could not travel faster than the dust storm. They were caught like a mouse in a trap, but there was a farmhouse about one-half mile off the highway and they were invited to stay there during the storm. They stayed about one hour and decided to try to make it the rest of the way home. They went to the car and started it, but when they turned the lights on, they found the lights could not penetrate the darkness of the dirt. Then the car stopped running. When the storm was over, they found that the car's carburetor was so stopped-up with small grains of sand and dirt that there was no way for gas to get to the engine, and thus kept the car from starting.

One man explained his experience as follows; *"I was in the house when I saw dirt coming from quite a distance. Normally I am not easily frightened but for some reason that scared me. When I saw it coming, I started running from the house and out into the pasture. I guess I saw that I could not possibly get away from the monster, so I dropped down flat on the ground and started praying. I guess I thought the world might be coming-to-an-end. The small dark cloud did look very suspicious and it kept getting larger and blacker. I was frightened and I DO mean very frightened."*

People living in the southern part of Elkhart saw the cloud and thought that a fire had broken out somewhere in the northern part of town. Many people left the security of their homes in the southern part to see if they could be of any assistance to those in the north. However, they ended up in one of the largest and worst black blizzards known in the history of Kansas.

Those are only a few of the experiences that happened during this large dirt storm. So you see how much one of those big black blizzards of the southwest can cause fear, trouble, danger, and terror. In some places, children were lost from their parents and remained lost for several days. Sometimes when they were found they were either dead or so near death that it took several weeks to get them back to their normal state of health.

The big black dirt storms were not the only ones that did the damage. They would come and be gone in the course of a few hours, while the dirt storms that did another type of damage lingered for days at a time, cutting the young plants out of the ground by their roots, and carrying the topsoil away from the fields. The farmers would work their land one day, preparing the ground for planting and the next day they would find their yesterday's work all covered with blown sand and dirt, which had blown in during the night. Sometimes the farmers did this over and over again before the dirt finally stopped blowing.

I worked for a lady, Mrs. Heath, in Liberal (*Seward County, Kansas*), helping her clean her home after the dirt storms hit, which happened many times. She was taking everything so calmly and not saying much about the result of the storms. One day I was there after a dirt storm had been blowing hard for about eight days straight. I was cleaning in the bedrooms and she was in the living room. I heard a low moan but thought it was the wind. Next, I heard a scream and ran to the living room to see what was wrong. There by the piano sitting on the floor was Mrs. Heath waving a dust cloth in one hand and pulling the hair out of her head with the other. She was screaming loudly. I finally got her quieted down and got her to bed where she remained for two or three days. About three weeks later, she took sick with a very bad case of pneumonia and had to remain in bed for about three months.

The wind and dirt blew so hard and incessantly for a while that the Santa Fe had to put out several crews of men. Some of the men volunteered to go out and help dig dirt from the tracks. They worked two or three days at it, yet it seemed that every day the dirt blew back onto the tracks. The train was delayed for eight hours one time, and it was always hours off the schedule while we were having the storms.

The worst storms were not always the ones that came and left quickly, to be gone again in a few hours. Yes, they were bad, but the daily "dusters" did the worst damage. The government is doing a lot to help the farmers stop the soil erosion and continue farming by loaning them money. The farmers are also planting trees on their soil to help stop some of the blowing dirt.

We are hoping that we will get enough moisture to raise good crops this next year. We also hope that the weeds will grow and thus hold the soil and keep it from blowing. The prospects just now are promising. We have already had more moisture than we had last fall in this county.