

# **DUST STORMS**

## Wichita County, Kansas

Written by Elmer Fletcher

*Consultants: William Rickford and Bertha Lake*

It is hard to find the right words when giving a complete description of the Southwest Kansas dust storms. The storms put terror into the hearts of the people who experienced them and did not give much warning to the people before they struck. One could look and see a dark bank along the horizon, which resembled a cloud in every way. In an hour or so, the storm was in full force. Those which struck in the daytime looked as if great pillars of smoke rolling and twisting up into the air and down along the earth. One could not see anything after it struck, as the dust was very heavy in the air. The storms did not always strike with a high wind, but the dust just came drifting down as dense fog, and then about fifteen minutes afterward the wind would strike and blow, sometimes for twenty-four hours.

In the year 1906, some of the old-timers claim that these storms had been happening since their arrival. These storms did considerable damage and left everyone in a helpless frame of mind, especially the housewives.

The fine dust drifted into every opening of the houses and covered all the furniture with a dust film. This made it very disagreeable for the husbands, as the wives would clean up the dust after each storm and it was too dusty to sit in the house. The housewife would lament about not having a home good enough to keep the dirt out.

The farmers were disgusted, as their chances for wheat grew slim. Against the fences were Russian Thistles (*also known as tumbleweeds*) that the wind had blown in. The dust sifted down among the thistles until the fences were completely covered. The weeds, left in the fields, were covered with fine dust and it looked like the foothills of the Rock Mountains. It was a hard job bringing the dust piles down and digging out the fences after the dust storms were over. The chances for spring crops were very slim at the time of the storms.

All livestock suffered tremendously and many of them died from the exposure to the dust. Because there was a shortage of feed, the livestock were underfed. The Farm Bureau had straw and alfalfa shipped into the dust-covered area. The straw was very wet and musty and the cattle would hardly eat it. The alfalfa was almost too high in price to feed to the cattle. Many of the farmers would have to haul the feed out, a few bales at a time through the dust storms.

One of the storms overtook the schoolmistress as she started to walk home from the schoolhouse. She could not see her way anymore so she just pulled her coat up over her nose and sat down by a fence post. She says that the fence wires covered with

balls of fire from the electricity in the wind, created sparks that were on her hair and jumping around. It was four o'clock when she had started home and it was eleven o'clock before the storm let up enough that she could find her way home. This caused quite a bit of anxiety for those at home who were wondering if she was okay. It would have been impossible for anyone to go search for her, as a person could not see but a few feet ahead and it was very hard to keep your eyes open long enough to see anything ahead.

When one of the storms was approaching, it was quite interesting to watch the people moving about. Everyone was looking for a place to refuge and if they were in cars, they wanted some place to put the cars, so they could be out of the dust. Some were caught out in the storm because their cars could not go any longer. The electricity was so heavy in the air that one had to drag a chain around just to ground the electricity.

While eating supper one evening, I looked out the window and noticed it was growing dark very rapidly. Looking closer, I saw one of the dreadful dust storms approaching. My father and I both ran out to put our car in the garage but the storm struck before we got back to the house. We started to run for the house, but to our surprise, we both ran into the clothesline that was about fifty feet south of the house. It was dreadfully dark and mother put the lamp in the window so we could find our way into the house. We reached the house all covered with dust and dirt, but the light could not be seen twenty-five feet, from where it was.

One of the worst storms started at about four o'clock in the afternoon and lasted 36 hours. This time the high wind sifted the dirt into the best of houses. It was very uncomfortable breathing the fine dust in the houses. Many of the people put damp towels over their mouths and nose to catch the fine dust. They even tied blankets at the top of the bed and the foot of the bed so that they could get under them and out of the dust at night. The attics of the house were soon full of the dirt and dust. It was a terrible sight to see some of the nicest furniture and rugs covered with this dust. The attics became so heavy that it bowed the ceiling down causing the plaster and wallboard to fall.

Two of the neighbor ladies decided they would go visiting one day. Upon their return home, one of the dreadful storms overtook them. The car stopped and they became frightened and started to walk to the nearest house that was about one mile away. They got lost and could not find their way. They struck a fence and decided to follow it. One woman kept one hand on the fence and led her partner with the other hand. Her hands and arms were all scratched and cut from the ordeal, but they did reach the house by following the fence. If it had not been for that, they probably would have been lost and perished in the storm.

A small boy was playing in his own yard when one of the storms struck. His mother ran out to find him, but the dust was so thick that it was impossible. Sent to find

him, after the large storm was over, was a search party of four hundred. They found him about one-half mile from his home in a field. The dust had become too much for him and he was found next to a thistle bush, where he had perished. After this death, the people feared the dust storms more than ever. The radio helped as it would broadcast ahead of the storms. Most people took precautions and did things to be on the safe side when the storms struck.

The government appropriated money to give to the farmers for gasoline. This was to help work their fields while the storms were so active. After the storms were over the pastures were almost bare. It seemed that the dust had lodged every place and whenever a gentle breeze would blow, one could look out across the prairie and see the fine dust sifting along as snow. However, the fine dust seemed to help the grass crop. It covered up the roots and caused new grass to start up.

The tourists passing through this part of the country thought it to be a regular desert. When told of the storms they would look at you as if they thought you were telling them a fairy tale of some kind. Many of those tourists, caught in the storms, claimed they would not live in Western Kansas for even a great sum of money.

Human suffering amounted to several deaths in the western counties. The doctors claimed that the hospitals would be full of "dust pneumonia" patients unless rain fell soon. However many people claimed their lungs hurt from breathing the dust but did not get the disease. Only one known death due to "dust pneumonia" was in Wichita County.

Many of the citizens of this county became disgusted and moved away after the dust storms had tormented them for several months. It would seem as if the storms were over and then a dust storm came as usual. One was horribly black and then it started to rain. The first big drops that fell were big large mud balls. Then the sky became clear and you could see the dark rain clouds that had been hiding behind the dust clouds. Wichita County received one-quarter of an inch of rain. The people all had a new life ahead of them, so it seemed. They thought their troubles were over as the drought had been broken. The weather was nice for almost one week and then came another one of the dust storms. The people were more disgusted than ever.

The dust storm kept up for another month and then Western Kansas received another good rain and the drought was broken this time. It kept raining almost every week and the farmers raised a small amount of wheat and planted their spring crops as usual. Of course, it was hard work tilling through the great mounds of dust that were deposited by the storms.

Most of the people who moved away during the storm have returned and like living in Western Kansas as well as ever before. They say that Western Kansas has its drawbacks, but other states also have their own drawbacks. It seems that people who have always lived in Kansas cannot leave it.