

# THE DUST BOWL

In the 1930s, the people of the southern Great Plains suffered through one of the worst ecological disasters in history

A black blizzard bears down on Stratford, Texas, in April 1935. *Far right:* People wore masks to try to keep out the relentless dust. But many got sick, and some died, from “dust pneumonia.”

Long after it was over, many people recalled how beautiful that April Sunday in 1935 started out. But that morning a cold front swept south from Canada through the **Great Plains**, picking up loose soil. Over hundreds of miles of flat land, the wind whipped up earth dried out by years of drought into an immense black cloud.

By the time it got to a section

of the Oklahoma Panhandle called No Man’s Land, the cloud was thousands of feet high and 200 miles long, traveling 60 miles an hour. “It was like a tornado that was on its side,” a farmer’s son later told filmmaker Ken Burns.

Close by in Liberal, Kansas, 11-year-old Lila Lee and a friend frantically sought refuge from the angry mountain of dust in a house. “I was sure I was going to die,” she told historian Paul Bonnifield.

While all over the region, people voiced a similar fear: “It’s the end of the world.”

That day would come to be known as Black Sunday. Robert Geiger, an Associated Press reporter who witnessed it, knew how the area’s farmers had already suffered from the long drought. “Three little words . . . rule life

today in the dust bowl of the continent,” he wrote. “If it rains.”

In his article, Geiger coined a phrase that gave a name to a region and one of the worst ecological disasters in history: the Dust Bowl.

## “Wrong Side Up”

The Dust Bowl covered about 150,000 square miles—mostly in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles and parts of Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico. The tragedy that unfolded there in the 1930s had a number of causes. But most experts say it was the actions of humans that made it so bad.

“The Great Plains at its best or at its worst is ruled by the wind and the sun,” Bonnifield wrote. Just as important are its long, natural periods of drought. An explorer in the 1820s said that

## WORDS TO KNOW

- **Great Plains (n):** a vast, flat grassland that stretches from northern Canada to Texas
- **New Deal (n):** a series of programs initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s to bring relief to Americans during the Great Depression