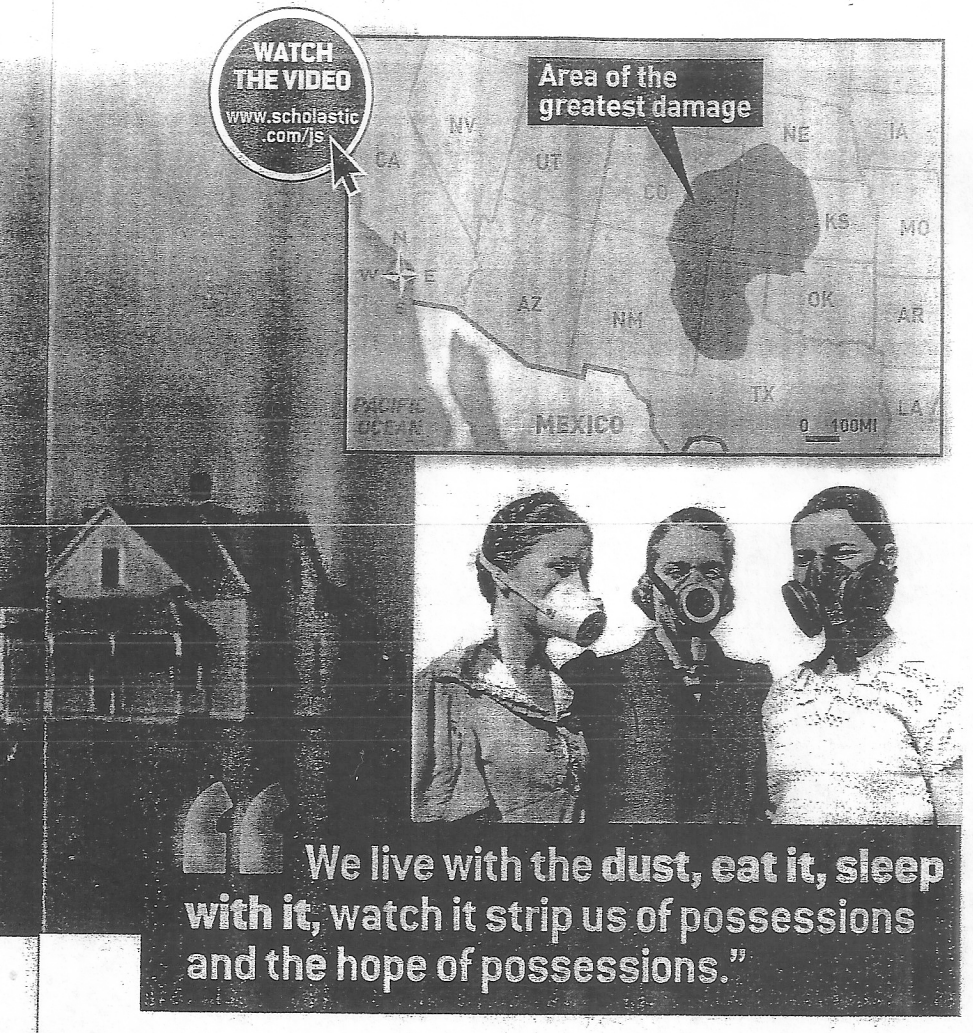

> "We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions."

the land was "almost wholly uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture."

Yet early in the 20th century, a steady stream of people began to settle there, encouraged by expanding railroads and real estate speculators. "Thousands of people rushed to the Great Plains to take up a homestead," Bonnifield tells *JS*. But, he adds, "they really didn't know what they were doing."

The worst thing that settlers did was to plow up the area's buffalo grass to plant wheat. Millions of acres were cultivated in what was called the Great Plow-Up. The grass, which had been there for centuries, was "the organic material that knitted the soil together," Bonnifield says. Without it, trouble was bound to come.

At first, things went the settlers' way. During World War I (1914-1918), there was good rain and wheat prices were high. But after the war, prices collapsed. Then the Great Depression, which began in 1929, hit the area hard. Farms began to fail, and some people abandoned their land.

At the same time, the rains stopped. Drought was a part of the natural cycle of the Great Plains. But because so many people had plowed up so much grass, and because so much land was vacant, the results were disastrous.

In January 1932, Bam White watched a dust cloud 10,000 feet high approach his farm in Dalhart, Texas. Decades later, his son Melt told the story to writer Timothy Egan. "The earth is on the move," White had said to his son. "Why?" Melt asked. "Look what they've done to the grass," White said. "Look at the land: Wrong side up."

Living With the Dust

"Black blizzards" soon became a frequent part of life. "The middle of the day was just like midnight," says a survivor of No Man's Land, in Burns's film *The Dust Bowl*. Children died of "dust pneumonia," their lungs assaulted by the fine particles. Relentless storms took an enormous psychological and physical toll on people. "We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions," Avis D. Carlson wrote in 1935.

The crisis didn't pass until the end of the 1930s. New Deal programs, along with universities and farmers, developed methods to fight soil erosion. The federal government restored millions of acres to grass. Finally, in 1939, the rains returned to the Great Plains.

Could there be another Dust Bowl? Bonnifield says it's not likely, because modern farmers know better how to plant their crops and safeguard the land. "They are very, very sensitive to that wind and that dirt," he says. "Their awareness of it, and how they're doing things, is deeply ingrained in them."

But today there are concerns about the Ogallala Aquifer. This geological reservoir under eight Plains states is being drained by a vast number of pumps and wells. "As the Ogallala goes down and we're no longer able to pump the water up," Bonnifield says, "we're going to have serious problems."

—Bryan Brown

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