In the 1930s, disaster struck the middle of America. Storms of dust buried whole

By Arthur Goldwag

It was a sweltering Sunday in April, 1935, in Pampas, Texas, as 11-year-old Lisa Smathers and her father walked home from church. A hot wind whipped around them, and they knew a big storm was on its way. What worried them most were the birds—geese, ducks, swallows, and sparrows, thousands and thousands of them, honking and quacking and twittering across the sky, frantically winging their way south. And then a towering wall of blackness rose above the northern horizon.

"Maybe it's rain," Lisa said. But she knew that it wasn't. It was a dust storm, and she and her father were directly in its path. For years, these storms had been slowly burying Lisa's town—and her family's dreams. But this one looked bigger and more violent than any Lisa had ever seen.

"Lord save us," gasped Mr. Smathers, seizing Lisa's hand. Behind them, the monster storm roared Lisa and her father started to run for their lives.

Blizzards of Dust

The 1930s had brought hard times everywhere. From the Outback of Australia and the capitals of Europe to the cities and small towns of America, millions lost their jobs and their savings in the terrible economic crisis known as the Great Depression. The misery had been especially acute in the rural center of the United States, in an area about the size of Pennsylvania, where Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico meet. Record-breaking heat and relentless drought had parched the crops and baked the fields into powder. Then the winds came, kicking up blizzards of dust like nobody had ever seen. Animals died. Children became ill with "dust
pneumonia.” People despaired. As the Kansas farmer, Avis D. Carlson, wrote in the magazine, The New Republic, “We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions.”

Life in the region had not always been this way. The weather had had its extremes—bitter winters and scorching summers, with long periods of drought. But for thousands of years, nature had been in balance. Buffalo grazed on the long, thick grass; small bands of nomadic Indians followed the vast herds across the prairies. Buffalo meat provided the Indians with food; buffalo skin

Drought and dust caused years of misery in a swath of America the size of Pennsylvania. This arid area that spread across six states had once been grassland where millions of buffalo roamed. White settlers ripped up the grass and turned it into farmland. Drought and wind turned the land into dust.
gave them leather for their clothes and tents; they fashioned tools from buffalo bones.

**No Man’s Land**

By the end of the 19th-century, a new generation of frontiersmen had discovered this “no man’s land,” and these men were determined to make it their own. In short order, the buffalo were hunted almost to extinction, then the Indians were forced to abandon their ancient ways of life and move to reservations.

The first settlers were ranchers: They fenced off the open prairies and let their cattle feed on the rich grasses. Next came the farmers. They ripped up the grass, exposing the fertile soil, and planted wheat and corn. Life was hard at first. Since trees, and hence lumber, were scarce, many homesteaders lived in tiny dugout houses whose roofs and walls were fashioned from bricks of sod—soil that was held together by grass roots.

But the American dream of cheap and plentiful land, and a chance to start over and achieve prosperity, was a powerful force; the people persevered, and they were lucky, too.

The years between 1911 and 1928 were unusually rainy, and the fields they planted thrived. Because of World War I and the Russia Revolution, grain was in short supply around the world, and prices were at an all-time high. New wealthy farmers traded their sod shacks for farmhouses and their horse-drawn wagons for the latest American invention: Henry Ford’s “Model T” car. Lisa’s father put in a phone and bought a piano so Lisa could have lessons.

When grain prices began to fall in the early 1920s, farmers just ripped up more land and planted more crops. And why shouldn’t they? The American government itself had declared that America’s soil was one resource that “cannot be used up.” By 1930, millions of acres—thousands of square miles—had been transformed into a new landscape.

But then the rain stopped. Crops withered. Orchards died. Between 1931 and 1939, it was as if someone had turned off a faucet in the sky. The Indians could have told the farmers that droughts occurred roughly every 25 years in the region. But this was different. The new settlers...
had changed the environment. Now that the grass was gone, there was nothing to protect the precious topsoil. The sun baked the soil to powder. When the wind started to blow, it took the dry, powdery soil with it—tons and tons of it. One storm was so huge that the dust traveled all the way from Montana to New York City, 1,500 miles away. The daytime sky grew so dim that many New Yorkers thought they were witnessing a partial eclipse of the sun.

Knocked to the Ground

Of course that was nothing compared with the disaster farther west.

Between the drought and the Depression, Lisa’s family lost almost everything. In 1935, Lisa’s father hadn’t even bothered to plant wheat and corn. Even if it survived, prices had fallen so low it wouldn’t have paid to harvest it. Their tiny kitchen garden and their chickens and cow provided them with most of their day-to-day needs; they bartered for the rest. Through it all, they kept their hopes alive—tiny flickers of light amidst all that brown.

Then came the Sunday storm.

As the blackened sky swirled around them, Lisa’s father held tight to Lisa’s hand. Flying sand and pebbles bit into Lisa’s skin and burned her eyes; grit crackled between her teeth and caught in her throat.

And then the storm hit them with all its force, knocking Lisa to the ground and sweeping her away from her father. It was pitch black; worse, she could hardly breathe. Coughing and choking, she wrapped her church scarf over her nose and mouth. Staggering to her feet, waving her hands around like she was playing blind man’s bluff, she took a few tentative steps and stumbled into the ditch beside the road. Lisa remembered a story she’d heard about a little boy who’d been in the fields when a duster blew in; searchers had found his body the next morning.

It seemed like hours passed. Lisa saw a shadowy figure stagger into the road. It took her a moment to realize it was her father.

Lisa and her father survived Black Sunday, but it destroyed their way of life. Their garden was buried under the blizzard of dirt; their
By 1938, thousands of farmers and their families had abandoned their land and moved, many of them to California, where farming jobs were plentiful.

What do you think it was like for families to start all over after losing everything?

Today, just a few small swaths of prairie are left in America. A growing number of scientists are working to preserve what remains of this beautiful American landscape.

Why is it important to preserve wilderness areas? What might happen if these areas are lost forever?

chickens and cow were killed. A few months later, the Smathers picked up stakes and moved to Arkansas, where Lisa’s mother’s family came from. By the end of the 1930s, almost half a million people had joined them in the exodus from the Great Plains. More than 100 million acres of land had been destroyed.

Hard Times Everywhere

Many people felt that nature had turned against them. But even in the 1930s, there was an understanding that the catastrophe was created by humans. “Land must be nurtured, not plundered and wasted,” declared Hugh Hammond Bennett, the chief of the Federal Soil Conservation Service. Those who ripped up the grass had upset nature’s balance. Could the balance be restored?

Millions of acres of grassland have been replanted. Better farming practices have made it less likely that we’ll ever see the likes of Black Sunday again. But the spirit that drove the 19th- and 20th-century sod busters to kill off the buffalo and cultivate the southwester plains, heedless of the consequences, still lives on. If anything should have taught us how much damage humans can inflict on the natural world, it was the Dust Bowl. Yet in this era of global warming, it is a lesson we may need to learn over again.

Write to Win!

Complete the Sentence Chef activity on page 15, and send it to “Dust Bowl Contest” by November 15, 2007. We’ll pick 10 winning entries and send their writers a copy of Karen Hesse’s Newbery-winning book, Out of the Dust.