Forget what you've heard in the classroom. Or saw in the film "The Grapes of Wrath." Throw away any assumption that "The Dust Bowl" resulted from a few storms rolling over the Great Plains and watch as documentary filmmaker/director Ken Burns, writer Dayton Duncan, author-historian Timothy Egan and their staff at Florentine Films take you inside the worst man-made ecological disaster in history. Watch Caroline Henderson on PBS. See more from The Dust Bowl. That is "The Dust Bowl," a four-hour documentary vividly telling the stories of that decade in the '30s through the voices, tears and heartbreak of people in their 80s and 90s who lived through it. It airs at 7 p.m. Sunday and Monday on PBS, channel 11. The storms weren't just bad and there weren't just a handful, said Burns in a recent phone interview from Seattle. "There were hundreds of them — gigantic as mountain ranges and 1 to 1½ miles high," he said. "And, when they were coming at you, people understandably thought it was the end of the world. While the rest of the country was dealing with the Great Depression, it wasn't until the dust from millions of acres of farmland flowed to Washington onto the desk of Roosevelt and ships at sea were covered with a patina of it, that help was sent. "Those left were mostly land owners who had never owned a bit of land before and were now struggling to make a go of it in an industry that was already a gamble, in an area that was marginal, who were seduced into tearing up that grass and plowing it up for cultivation, tens of millions of acres. But then the normal climate came back, and you have a recipe for the worst man-made ecological disaster." Acres of native grassland were plowed up to make way for wheat fields but, when the Great Depression came and the natural cycle of the rains turned into drought, there were no buyers for wheat, and the soil was at the mercy of the winds sweeping down the plains. The landowners of the Oklahoma Panhandle, the western third of Kansas, southeastern Colorado, the northern two-thirds of

the Texas Panhandle and northeastern New Mexico kept telling themselves the rain would come next year. And the next year. But it didn't. In 1935, less than 10 inches of rain fell in the area around Boise City, Okla., the geographic center of the Dust Bowl. Crops, cattle and children died. Distraught business owners committed suicide while others finally gave up and moved away. Also, in 1935, an estimated 850 tons of vulnerable soil fell victim to the wind and drought and blew as far away as New York City and Washington, D.C. It was a disaster of biblical proportions. And it's a story best told by those who lived it, and what sets most if not all of Burns' documentary films apart from others is his method of using "emotional archeology" to tell the story. Be it of "Jazz," "The War," "Baseball," "America's National Parks," "The Civil War" or "The Dust Bowl." "What I have called it since my first film is emotional archeology," said Burns, who has films on the Central Park Five, Franklin and Roosevelt, the Vietnam War and country music in the works. "We're interested in the true emotion of the story," he said. "Not sentimentality or nostalgia because those are the enemies of good anything." Duncan and Burns found survivors who were children in the Dust Bowl days by visiting nursing homes, talking to the local newspapers and running ads. Because of their ages, four have already died since the film was completed. "We found more than two dozen who opened their hearts and shared some of the most endearing memories from when it seemed like the world was coming to an end," Burns said. "It was just great. When you watch (brothers) Floyd and Dale (Coen) speak, it reminds you of something and that is a memory. The memory of the death of their little sister Rena Marie from dust pneumonia — a little girl who had been gone since 1935 and was only two years old then — and it is in the present, like it just happened. I watched audiences break down and cry with Floyd and Dale. "(The year) 1935 is a long time ago.

I’m sure they, in their late 80s, who didn’t expect to answer questions, found themselves overcome. I didn’t conduct that interview (with Dale) about the day she died but, as soon as it came back, I was speechless." The emotion is also right on the surface in the testimony of Cal Crabill, 87, who talks about his father having to sell his horses and how he was never the same again. “We lost all our stock,” said Crabill, who moved to California when was he was 10. “We lost everything in six months and so, when we had nothing, we left … There was no reason to stay." Burns said one of his goals with the film, in addition to it being a cautionary tale about trying to bend the land and climate to our collective will and paying the price for it, is how history has become a cliche. Descendants of Washington don’t like the historical “facts” bandied about the country’s first president any more than Oklahomans like to be labeled job-stealing Okies like the fictional sharecropping Joad family in John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath." “It is sad and must be frustrating for those who remained to see all of their history reduced to a cliché,” said Burns, who did his first on-camera interview for his first film in January 1971 with a 16 mm camera. “You’d think we would never forget the details of Washington and his life. But we all know he had wooden teeth (not true), that he always told the truth (not true, all people tell lies) and that he could throw a coin across the Potomac (not possible). Imagine the descendants of Washington looking at the trivialization of it all. History in class has been reduced to lists and dry facts. “Just as I say yes, ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ is part of it. I say let’s open the door and invite you into a much more human history, and the good news is it isn’t homework. There will be no quiz next week. “The word ‘history’ is made up of ‘story,’ and I think what most teachers have forgotten is that it is mostly the word

‘story.’ ” ‘THE DUST BOWL’ When: 7 p.m. Sunday & Monday Where: PBS, channel

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