“As far as you could see, there was a dust storm comin’ right towards ya. … This giant wall just coming towards ya. … And you still had the feeling, whether you would admit it, that something was gonna run over ya and just crush ya.” — Floyd Coen in Ken Burns’ “The Dust Bowl.”For Floyd Coen and the inhabitants of “No Man’s Land” — the Oklahoma Panhandle, the western third of Kansas, southeastern Colorado, the northern two-thirds of the Texas Panhandle and northeastern New Mexico — a storm coming was a way of life in the Dust Bowl.The era is described in graphic human terms in the new Ken Burns documentary, “The Dust Bowl,” airing at 7 p.m. Nov. 18 and 19 on KOED, channel 11.The region covered “onethird of the Great Plains, close to 100 million acres, 500 miles by 300 miles,” according to the Soil Conservation Service.It was a case of human nature colliding with Mother Nature and she won, said Dayton Duncan, writer and co-executive producer of the film, who will be in Tulsa on Monday to preview the film for a capacity crowd at OSU-Tulsa.It was a man-made disaster of biblical proportions, of the things you learn by looking at the 1930s Dust Bowl on the Great Plains is that you can count that every once in a while there will be a drought. That is the history of the Great Plains for as long as we have been recording it and even before as recorded in tree rings of specimens. So what made this different was the farming practices and the extent to which that preceded a very severe drought.“That was the catastrophe of what we now call the Dust Bowl.”Duncan, an Iowa native and a longtime collaborator of Burns, said he started out with the same shorthand knowledge about the Dust Bowl as most people. Most of what he knew came from the classic 1940 film “The Grapes of Wrath” about a Midwest family forced off its Oklahoma land by drought and dust storms.“That is not the story of the Dust Bowl,” Duncan said. The film tells the story through the journals, newspaper reports and the actual

voices of survivors.It’s a real story of human folly, human perseverance and heroism in the face of massive dust storms that often loomed hundreds of feet in the air, 200 miles in width and went on for up to 28 straight days.Storms that buried houses in sand and dirt, filled up fence rows so cattle — those that didn’t suffocate from breathing the dirt — wandered off in search of food.Dust that filled every crack and crevice, sanded paint off houses, derailed trains, destroyed livelihoods, and forced homeowners and businesses to live and work in midday darkness. Add to that the dust pneumonia that killed livestock, pets, the children and the elderly.“All of these elements make it almost a fable,” but it’s true, Duncan said. It started with plowing up the native grasslands of the Great Plains to plant wheat, which at first made huge profits. Then, with the Great Depression in the rest of the country, the price per bushel began to fall so farmers had to plow even more ground to sell more wheat to make the same profit. Combined with years of drought, the farming techniques made the soil vulnerable to the famed winds that come sweeping down the plains. And the drought went on for nearly 10 years.Other Americans were busy trying to deal with the Depression and weren’t aware of the situation out West until it was felt on the East Coast.“It wasn’t until you could wipe the soil of Oklahoma off the desk of the president of United States that attention started being paid to it,” he said. “That’s just the way the world works.”Part of that attention from the government included “demonstration projects” that put farmers to work, new farming practices and re-purchasing 4 million acres of land so it could be reseeded and permanently returned to grassland.But the regular folks from back east had their own ideas about how to solve the problem, according to the film. Ideas that included paving over the Great Plains or putting down wire mesh to prevent the sand and dirt from blowing away. They had no idea that the worst hit area of the Dust Bowl was the size of

the state of Ohio.Duncan has consulted with Burns on “The Civil War,” “Baseball” and “Jazz” and wrote and produced “Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery.” He said a catastrophe like the Dust Bowl is something that could happen today, even with modern farming practices. Plains states are using the Ogallala aquifer — which could be depleted in a few decades — to water their crops, and a shortage of rainfall is already affecting states like Oklahoma.“What we don’t know and are incapable of knowing is, is this the equivalent of 1932 and will be followed by eight years of drought, or will next year have moisture or not?” Duncan said.“We don’t know what it will be so we should be careful about how we treat the land because if we get arrogant about the notion of our relationship with the land — that it will do whatever we expect of it and nature will conform to our wishes — then we are setting ourselves up for some really bad things to happen.”