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# DUST BOWL DISASTER



Written by Brian Roberts

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## Introduction

Hurricanes. Floods. Forest fires. Earthquakes. Every year these natural disasters strike somewhere on Earth. But during the late 1920s and 1930s, two **disasters** of another kind swept the United States, inflicting pain and suffering on its people. These disasters were particularly troublesome because they lasted for years rather than hours or days, creating hardships for thousands upon thousands of people.

The first blow was not a natural disaster but an **economic** one. This disaster became known as the **Great Depression**. It began with the crash of the stock market in 1929.

The stock market began falling and by the time it stopped falling, stocks were worth about 20 percent of their previous value. People lost their life savings, their jobs, and many of their possessions. Banks and factories closed.



## The Dust Bowl region



The Great Depression was not limited to the United States. It spread to other countries throughout the world and became the worst economic slump in history.

To make matters worse, the second blow to strike during the 1930s dried up the soil just like money dried up during the stock market crash. It affected the southern region of the **Great Plains** of the United States, covering large parts of Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and Oklahoma, but also stretching throughout the Great Plains and into the prairies of Canada. The disaster was labeled the **Dust Bowl**, and the period of history became known as the Dirty Thirties.



Wheat fields cover the plains as far as the eye can see.

## From Prosperity to Poverty

Farmers in the Great Plains had been prospering for decades before the Dust Bowl struck. World War I (1914–1918) prevented European farmers from growing wheat, so farmers in North America sold their wheat to buyers who shipped it overseas. The demand for wheat drove prices upward. Farmers plowed up more and more of the **grasslands** to feed the needs of European countries. The farmers of the Great Plains continued to prosper while many others suffered under the Great Depression. But the **prosperity** would soon end.

Plowing up the grasslands to grow more wheat caused two problems that the farmers did not expect. First, it made so much wheat available that wheat prices began to drop. Storage bins became filled to capacity, and farmers began to dump their harvested wheat onto the ground and onto roads.



$1 = 3 + 5 + 2 = 10 - 4 + 10 \div 2 = 14 \times 2 - 3 = 25 - 5 - 5$   
 $* 2 = 17 + 3 \times 2 - 20 \div 2 - 1 = 3 + 5 + 2 = 10 - 4 + 10 \div 2 = 14 \times 2 - 3 = 25 - 5 - 5$

### Math Minute

From July 1930 to July 1931, wheat prices dropped from 68¢ a bushel to 25¢ a bushel.

In 1930, farmer Beck planted 100 acres of wheat and harvested 12 bushels per acre. In 1931, he planted another 100 acres and harvested 12 bushels per acre. How much more did he make in 1930 than he did in 1931?



A choking dust storm whips across the plains.

Second, when the Great Plains entered a period of prolonged **drought**, plowing up the grasslands caused the fields to dry up. With too little moisture to support crops, the fields were left bare. From one hot summer to another, the sun baked the soil. When winds increased, the exposed dry dirt was whipped up into dark clouds of choking dust that swept across the land. The thick, billowing walls of dirt hid the sun and forced people to light lamps in the midday darkness.

## Living in a Dust Bowl

For years, the Dust Bowl gripped the Great Plains. Every time the wind whipped up the dirt and carried it skyward, another **dust storm** moved across the Great Plains. These storms took on names like *dusters* and *black blizzards*.

People living in the plains did everything they could to keep the dust from entering their homes and their lungs. Windows and doors were stuffed with newspapers and rags. Men, women, and children tied rags over their faces. Children even went to bed with damp cloths over their mouths and noses to keep the dust out.

### Do You Know?

A mysterious disease known as **dust pneumonia** infected thousands of people living in the path of the dust storms. The disease killed men, women, and children, especially the very young and the very old.

A farmer puts on a mask before working.



Still, the dust found its way into homes and into the bodies of every living creature. It clogged up motors in cars and trucks. Livestock wandered blindly in the clouds of dust. Many animals fell dead when their lungs became caked with dust.

Outside, dust piled up like snowdrifts during a blizzard. The only difference was that the dust drifts did not melt. They just got higher and higher, burying tools, farm equipment, and small buildings. Roads had to be plowed, and trains were literally stopped on tracks covered by heaps of dirt.

Conditions got so bad that winds carried the dust eastward to fall across cities such as Chicago, Atlanta, and New York. Dust even blew over the Atlantic Ocean and fell upon decks of ships at sea.



A tractor sits unused after being buried by the dust.

## Word Wise

During the winter, winds often whipped up a mixture of snow and dust. These storms became known as *snusters*.

## Visualize

Take a moment and think of what it must have been like on April 14, 1935. Draw a picture of the scene as you visualize it.



The Black Sunday storm approaches a town in the Texas panhandle.

Perhaps the worst day of all during the Dust Bowl occurred on Black Sunday—April 14, 1935. The day began with the sun rising in a clear blue eastern sky and a gentle breeze whispering from the west. Without warning, a gigantic wall of dirt and dust appeared on the horizon and rushed across the rolling plains at 60 miles (96.5 km) per hour. It rushed eastward so fast that the storm swallowed up birds and rabbits trying to out-fly and outrun it. Animals dropped to the ground, dying of exhaustion and suffocation. People ran for any shelter they could reach—sheds, barns, homes, and cars.



The Black Sunday storm nearly overwhelms a couple of people.

### **Living to Tell Their Story**

Some people who lived through the Dust Bowl recorded accounts of their experiences.

Melt White of Dalhart, Texas, was just a child when Black Sunday occurred. He described his memories of that day in interviews for a documentary film about the Dust Bowl.

He described the wind blowing very hard and the house shaking violently. He was frightened that the house might blow away. Outside, the dust filled the sky until it became very dark. He tried to see his hand in front of his face and couldn't. He kept bringing his hand closer to his face. It was so dark that even when he touched his nose with his hand, he couldn't see it.

One Kansas farmer, Lawrence Svobida, kept an extensive written record of his experience and later wrote a book about being a farmer on the Great Plains before, during, and after the Dust Bowl. Here is a description of what he said:

### *Before*

Svobida described the beauty of seeing many miles of waist-high wheat fields swaying in the breeze. He could think of nothing in the world more beautiful than a golden wheat field in the summer sun. The sight would take his breath away.



During the Dust Bowl, farmers hoped to see blowing wheat instead of blowing dust.

## *During*

With the Great Plains gripped in a drought, Svobida's thoughts were much different. He described the wind and the dust that cut visibility to almost nothing. People's eyes would be filled with dust and wearing goggles didn't even help.

In a documentary film, Svobida talks about the ferocity of the wind and how it seemed to never stop. He had never even imagined such a wind. It felt to him like everything would be blown away, and wherever he looked, his fields were empty.



In his book, Svobida wrote about how the experience changed his feelings on farming, which had once provided him with joy. When he knew his crops were **irrevocably** gone, he described feeling as if there had been a death. Nature had **flouted** his desire to work the land and the dreams he had of being a farmer. He felt like giving up on everything, including any attempts to make something of his life.



Farmers wait for rain that won't come for years.

## *After*

Svobida, like many others, still clung to the hope that rain would end the drought. In his book, he talked about searching the sky every day for rainclouds. He watched his neighbors' crops die out one by one, until finally the skies poured out five inches of **precipitation** over two days. The water soaked into the soil and finally stopped the dust and drought.

Eventually, inhaling blowing dust for years seriously affected Lawrence Svobida's health. He had to admit defeat and leave the Great Plains.



Not much was left for cattle to eat in Oklahoma in 1936.

## Leaving the Dust Bowl

People living in the Great Plains were hearty souls who settled the area when there were no houses, water wells, roads, or fields. They were accustomed to difficult times. Many persevered one way or another through the Dirty Thirties. When they couldn't grow wheat, they turned to raising thistles and a plant called soapweed, which could be chopped up and fed to livestock.



Soapweed

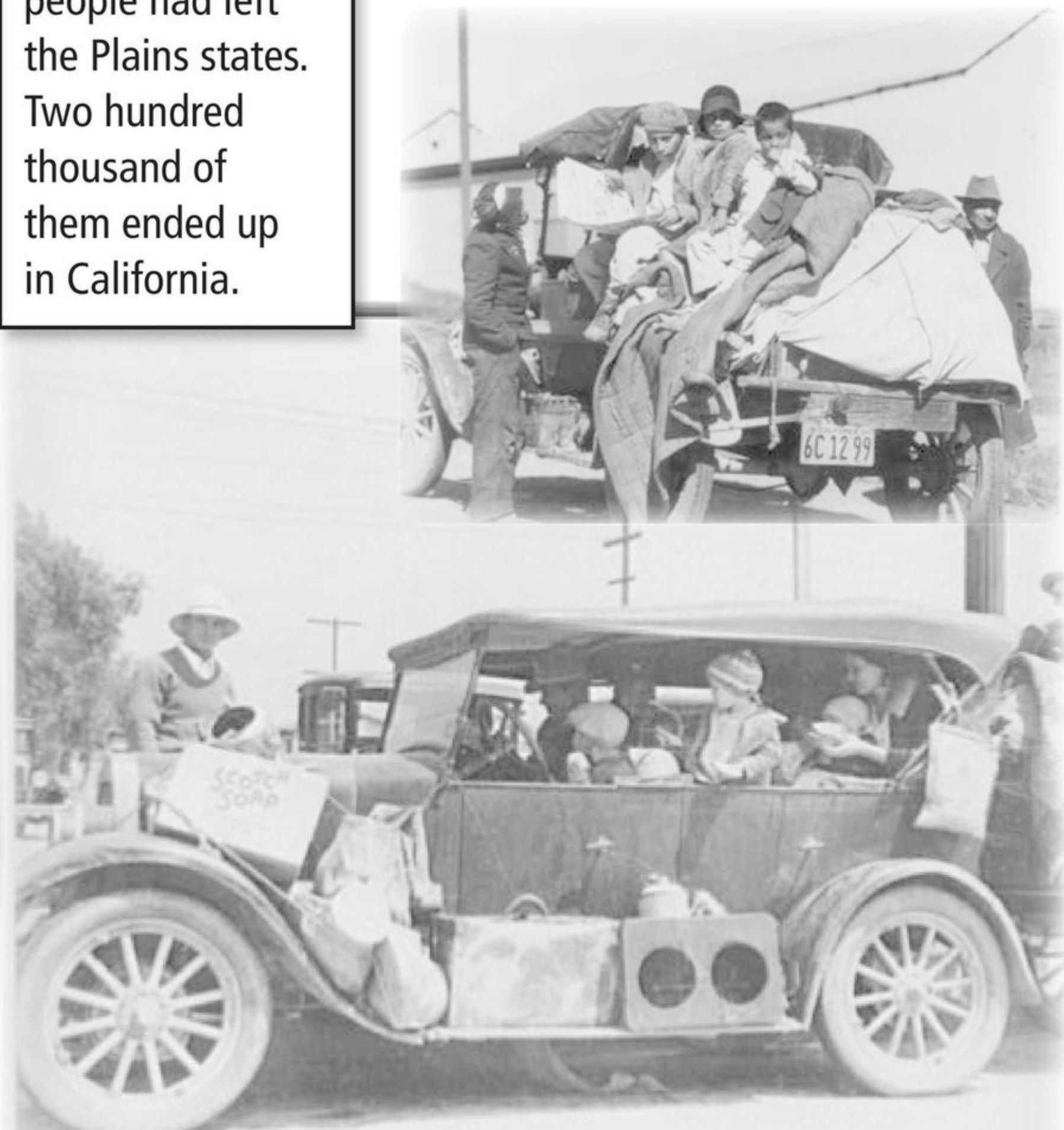
Many farmers turned to raising dairy cattle at the beginning of the Dust Bowl years. Part of the milk was skimmed off and fed to pigs and chickens. But as the drought worsened, farmers could no longer raise enough feed for their cattle and other livestock.

With no source of **income**, farmers grew tired and hungry. Many could not keep up payments on their farms. They eventually left the Great Plains to seek a better life elsewhere. Thousands

were drawn westward to California to seek work in the state's rich farmlands. But there were fewer jobs there than there were people.

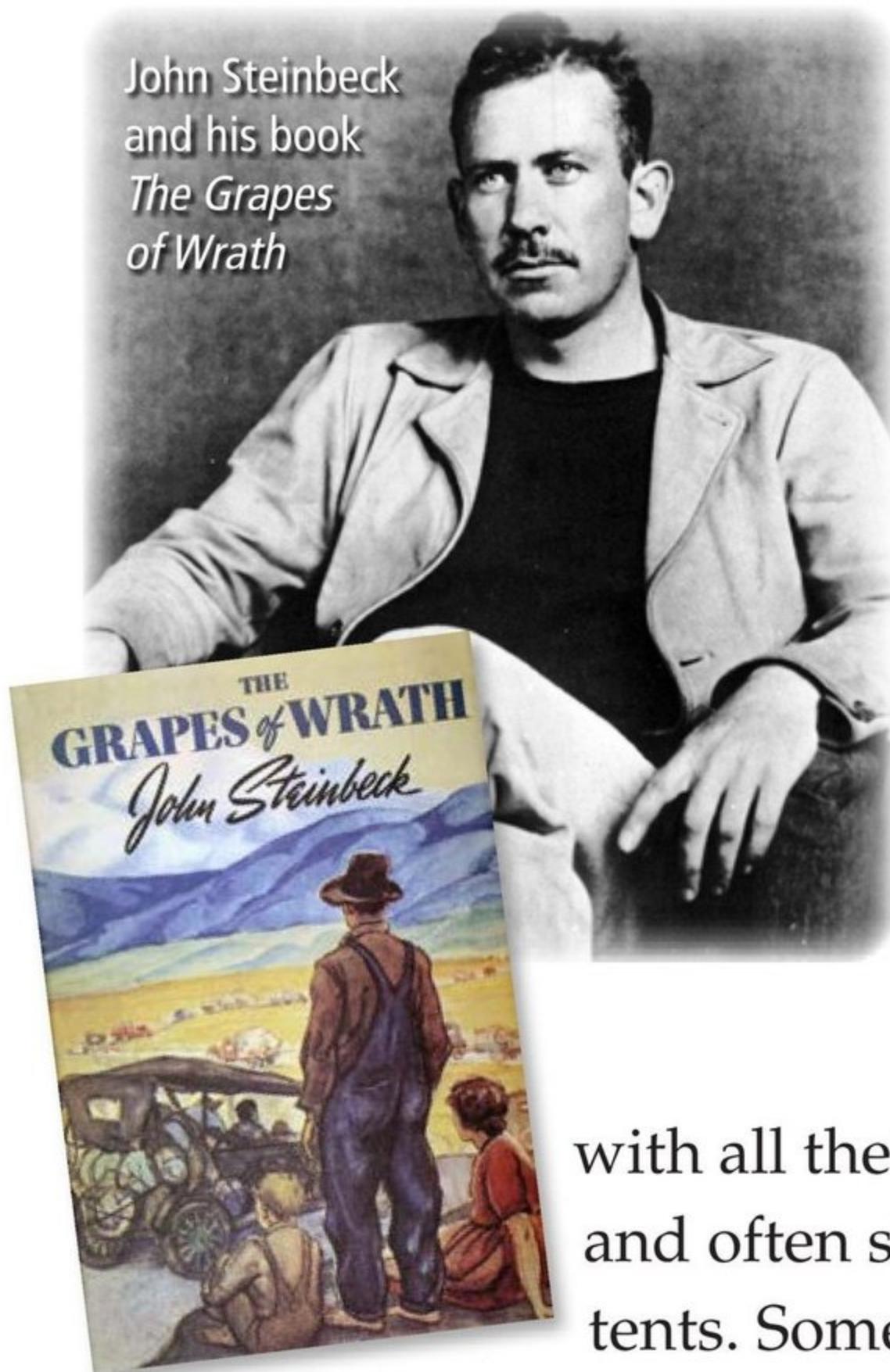
## Do You Know?

By the end of the 1930s, 2.5 million people had left the Plains states. Two hundred thousand of them ended up in California.



Many Oklahomans reach Calif. via the cotton fields of Ariz.

John Steinbeck  
and his book  
*The Grapes  
of Wrath*



John Steinbeck describes the westward **migration** in his famous 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. He wrote about the hundreds of thousands of people who came over the mountains towards California. They came in cars loaded with all their worldly possessions and often slept in their cars or in tents. Some formed caravans, or

groups of cars that traveled together, for safety. People didn't stay in one place long. They were always moving, searching for work, and desperate for food.

## Think About It

Imagine coming to the Great Plains in the early 1900s and starting a farm. You have built a home, dug a well for water, plowed up grassland to grow wheat, and raised a family. A drought comes and makes it difficult to grow crops. What do you do? Do you stick it out? How do you survive? Or do you pull up stakes and move to another place?

## The Government Steps In

It was clear that people living in the Great Plains needed help. They were losing their land, their farms,

and their hope.

Franklin Roosevelt

Millions more had lost their jobs because of the Great Depression and had no hope of finding new jobs. All were hungry and poor. Many were dying.

In 1932, the citizens of the United States had elected Franklin Roosevelt as their

next president. He quickly offered a program for **recovery** known as the *New Deal*, which included government agencies and programs to help farmers and **unemployed** workers.

Roosevelt appointed Hugh Bennett, a man well-known for his work in soil **conservation**, as director of a new agency called the Soil Erosion Service. Bennett worked to change farming methods in order to help stop blowing dirt in its tracks. He worked to convince Congress to pass the *Soil Conservation Act of 1935*.



Roosevelt's inauguration

Roosevelt also provided other programs to help the weary farmer. Some of these programs were:

### **1933 – *The Emergency Farm Act***

The act set aside \$200 million to help farmers who could not make payments on their farms to refinance their bank loans.

### **1935 – *Drought Relief Service***

The government bought cattle from farmers to prevent farmers from becoming bankrupt. The government paid them more than they could have received from selling on the regular market.

### **1935 – *Soil Conservation Service***

This service developed programs to stop soil erosion and paid farmers to use soil-conserving methods to farm.

### **1937 – *Shelterbelt Project***

This project paid farmers to plant trees all across the Great Plains. Trees planted along fencerows would stop wind from carrying away soil.



The plan of the Shelterbelt project was to plant four million trees, stretching from the Canadian border down into Texas.

In addition to these programs, the New Deal offered many programs aimed at creating jobs for all those who were out of work. The largest of these programs was known as the *Works Progress Administration* (WPA). The WPA employed millions after it was created in 1935.



## A Song of the Dust Bowl

Stories and songs were written about the Dust Bowl. Perhaps the most famous songs coming out of the Dust Bowl years were written by popular folk singer and writer, Woody Guthrie. Of his many songs, *So Long It's Been Good to Know Yuh (Dusty Old Dust)* and *Dust Bowl Blues* were two of his best known. Above, Guthrie plays to a New York City crowd in the 1940s.



Pawnee National Grasslands, Colorado, is just one of several areas protected by the government to help prevent another Dust Bowl.

## Conclusion

As the Dirty Thirties drew to a close, rain clouds began to replace dust clouds. The drought was finally over for much of the Great Plains and the Canadian Prairie in the early 1940s. Farmers went back to planting wheat. Familiar golden fields waved across the plains once again; however, farming methods had changed and thousands of acres of grasslands had been set aside by governments to try to prevent another Dust Bowl.

By 1939, World War II had started in Europe, and by 1941, North America was in the war. With the coming of the war, much of the world pulled out of the Great Depression. The two clouds of the Dirty Thirties had lifted.

## Glossary

<b>conservation</b>	efforts to preserve, protect, and restore natural resources (p. 19)
<b>disasters</b>	sudden terrible events (p. 4)
<b>drought</b>	a long dry spell without rainfall that causes a water shortage (p. 8)
<b>dust</b>	a disease of the lungs caused by breathing lots of dust (p. 9)
<b>pneumonia</b>	
<b>Dust Bowl</b>	a disaster that struck the USA in the 1930s (p. 5)
<b>dust storm</b>	a whirlwind that causes dust to fill the air (p. 9)
<b>economic</b>	related to buying and selling of goods and services (p. 4)
<b>erosion</b>	the gradual wear on land surfaces by water, wind, or ice (p. 19)
<b>flouted</b>	treated as meaningless (p. 14)
<b>grasslands</b>	open areas where grass is the main vegetation (p. 6)
<b>Great Depression</b>	the severe downturn of the U.S. and world economy from 1929 to 1939 (p. 4)
<b>Great Plains</b>	a flat, mostly treeless region of the central United States and Canada (p. 5)
<b>income</b>	money that is received from work or another source (p. 17)
<b>irrevocably</b>	cannot be taken back (p. 14)

<b>migration</b>	a movement from one location to another (p. 18)
<b>precipitation</b>	moisture, such as rain, that falls from clouds (p. 15)
<b>prosperity</b>	success or good fortune (p. 6)
<b>recovery</b>	the return of something to a normal state after a setback or loss (p. 19)
<b>unemployed</b>	lacking a paid job, but able and available to work (p. 19)

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