

The Dust Bowl

For nearly a decade the dust blew across the Southern Plains. Women hung wet sheets over doorways and windows in an effort to stop dust from invading their homes. Children wore dust masks on their way to school and back. Farmers helplessly watched as their crops blew away. This period in history is known as the Dust Bowl, and it is one of the worst environmental disasters the world has ever seen.



Both man and Mother Nature are responsible for this disaster. During the previous decade, farmers began using new farming equipment. These machines allowed them to farm more land than ever before. By doing this, the native drought-resistant grasses were replaced with wheat. The surplus of wheat caused the prices to drop. Many fields were left bare.

The area affected by the Dust Bowl had little rain fall, light soil, and high winds. When what little rain the area did receive stopped falling, the soil dried very quickly. With no grass to hold the dirt in place, the winds easily picked up the dirt and swirled into dust clouds. The dust clouds, known as “black blizzards,” carried dirt everywhere, and it was impossible to escape it. Dust covered everything.



People had dirt in their clothes, hair, and teeth. It even covered the food they ate. Over time, the dust that they breathed and ate built up in their lungs. This led to a disease called pneumonia. The body was often sent into coughing fits in an effort to rid itself of the dust. Dust pneumonia killed thousands of people. Babies, children, and the elderly were most likely to die from this.

Due to the conditions in Oklahoma, many people left the state. Some chose to leave; others were forced out when banks took their homes and lands. This was the greatest migration in American history. Of the 2.5 million people that left the plains, 200,000 headed for California. These “Okies” as they were called were not met with a warm welcome. Many Californians were angry about the competition for the jobs, which were already scarce. Farms there were much different than the ones in Oklahoma; they used more machines and needed fewer people to provide labor. Some farmers took advantage of the Okies. With so many people hungry and looking for work, there were able to pay very low wages.



Many of the migrants gave up farming when they reached California. They established homes near larger cities. These cities were called Little Oklahomans or Okieville. These homes were built from scraps and had no electricity or plumbing. Outbreaks of diseases such as malaria, typhoid, smallpox, and tuberculosis were caused by polluted water.