

Black Sunday rolls into area 75 years ago

Monday, 15 April 2013 10:10

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This rabbit drive ended abruptly when someone spotted a “big one” on the northern horizon. The storm arrived in silence on April 14, 1935, and was considered the worst of the worst. The day has become known as Black Sunday. Courtesy Seward County Historical Society

• www.srh.noaa.gov/oun/?n=blacksunday The 1930s were times of tremendous hardship on the Great Plains. Settlers dealt not only with the Great Depression, but also with years of drought that plunged an already-suffering society into an onslaught of relentless dust storms for days and months on end. They were known as dirt storms, sand storms, black blizzards, and “dusters.” It seemed as if it could get no worse, but on Sunday, the 14th of April 1935, it got worse.

The day is known in history as “Black Sunday,” when a mountain of blackness swept across the High Plains and instantly turned a warm, sunny afternoon into a horrible blackness that was darker than the darkest night.

Famous songs were written about it, and on the following day, the world would hear the region referred to for the first time as “The Dust Bowl.”

The wall of blowing sand and dust first blasted into the eastern Oklahoma Panhandle and far northwestern Oklahoma around 4 p.m.. It raced to the south and southeast across the main body of Oklahoma that evening, accompanied by heavy blowing dust, winds of 40 mph or more, and rapidly falling temperatures.

But the worst conditions were in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, where the rolling mass raced more toward the south-southwest – accompanied by a massive wall of blowing dust that resembled a land-based tsunami. Winds in the panhandle reached upwards of 60 mph, and for at least a brief time, the blackness was so complete that one could not see their own hand in front of their face. It struck Beaver, Okla., around 4 p.m., Boise City, Okla., around 5:15 p.m., and Amarillo, Texas, at 7:20 p.m.

The following are several cases in which history was impacted by Black Sunday:

‘Dusty Old Dust’

Singer-songwriter Woody Guthrie, who was born and grew up in Okemah, Okla., moved to Pampa, Texas, in 1931. Many of his early songs were inspired by his personal experiences on the Texas High Plains during the dust storms of the 1930s.

Among them is the song “Dusty Old Dust,” which also became known as “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh.” In the original lyrics, he sings, “Of the place that I lived on the wild windy plains, in the month called April, county called Gray...” (Pampa was, and is, in Gray County.) Also among the lyrics:

“A dust storm hit, an’ it hit like thunder;

It dusted us over, an’ it covered us under;

Blocked out the traffic and blocked out the sun,

Straight for home all the people did run,

Singin’:

So long, it’s been good to know yuh;

So long, it’s been good to know yuh;

So long, it’s been good to know yuh.

This dusty old dust is a-getting’ my home,

And I got to be driftin’ along.”

The lyrics are highly representative of the events of Black Sunday in the Texas panhandle, and suggest that Black Sunday may well have been the specific event that inspired those words more than any other.

The Dust Bowl gets its name

Robert E. Geiger was a reporter for the Associated Press. He and photographer Harry G. Eisenhard were overtaken by the storm six miles from Boise City, and were forced to wait two hours before returning to town. Mr. Geiger then wrote an article that appeared in the Lubbock Evening Journal the next day, which began: “Residents of the southwestern dust bowl marked up another black duster today...”

Another article, also attributed to “an Associated Press reporter” and published the next day, included the following: “Three little words... rule life in the dust bowl of the continent – ‘if it rains’.”

These cases generally are acknowledged to be the first-ever usages of the phrase by which the events of the 1930s have been known to history ever since: The Dust Bowl.

Dust goes to Washington

The blowing dust that blasted the High Plains in the 1930s was attributed not only to dry weather, but to poor soil conservation techniques that were in use at the time.

In March 1935 (several weeks before Black Sunday), one of President Roosevelt’s advisors, Hugh Hammond Bennett, testified before congress about the need for better soil conservation techniques.

Ironically, dust from the Great Plains was transported all the way to the East Coast, blotting out the sun even in the Nation’s capital.

Mr. Bennett only needed to point out the window to the evidence supporting his position, and say, “This, gentlemen, is what I’ve been talking about.”

Congress passed the Soil Conservation Act before the end of the year.

17 deaths reported in Kansas from dust pneumonia and three died from dust suffocation

- www.crh.noaa.gov/news/display_cmsstory.php?wfo=ddc&storyid=50702&source=0 The dust storms were caused by a drought during the 30s and by the way land was plowed back then. For many years, deep plowing eventually left the land with little top soil. With the natural grasses no longer in place, there was nothing left to anchor the soil. The soil had turned to dust during the drought and whenever the winds would howl, the loose dust would be lifted into the air resulting in dust storms. In April 1935, Dodge City recorded 14 days of dense dust (visibility 1000 feet or less) and 12 days of light dust (visibility above 1000 feet up to 6 miles). March 1935 saw 12 days with dense dust and 14 days of light dust. The April 10th dust storm at Dodge City may have been nearly as bad as the one experienced on April 14th.

The dust storm on April 10th caused the visibility to range from 60 to 300 feet nearly all day. The wind was from the west to northwest at 20 to 30 mph. There was semi-darkness at intervals for most of the day and it was almost as dark as midnight for long stretches in the afternoon. Reports that day were that conditions were the same into eastern Colorado and the rest of

western Kansas. Travel in Dodge City was very difficult and all but impossible in the rural areas. One story explained how people knew to get to their destinations before the dust arrived. If caught out in it while traveling, they could only tell where they were by opening the car door and looking for the side of the road. Dust continued on the next day on the 11th with visibility less than 300 feet for most of the day. It was reported that "wheat, what is left alive, was burnt by the electricity in the air during the storm more than at any previous time." People began cleaning out the dust on the 12th. The downtown streets were covered in dust an inch thick in places. Where the sidewalks were cleared off, the gutters and streets were a foot deep in great piles of dust. The city had to haul loads of this dust away before the water hoses could be turned on to wash off the streets.

On April 14th at 2:49 p.m., a great black dust cloud came in from the north. It was estimated at 500 to 600 feet in height and was moving at a rate of 50 to 60 mph. The instant it struck almost total darkness set in. The following is a quote from the Weather Bureau logs: "The onrushing cloud, the darkness, and the thick, choking dirt, made this storm one of terror and the worst, while it lasted, ever known here."

Some observers had seen hundreds of birds, geese, ducks and other kinds flying in front of the dust cloud. A number of dead small birds were found on the ground after the storm.

The Red Cross established a relief setup for dust sufferers. The headquarters was in Liberal, Kan. According to Red Cross officials, 17 deaths had been reported in Kansas from dust pneumonia and three died from dust suffocation. This was from the Weather Bureau log on April 24th. Dust pneumonia resulted when lungs were filled with dust. Symptoms included a high fever, chest pains, coughing and breathing difficulties.

More than a half million people were left homeless as a result of the Dust Bowl era. Farm families lost their land and homes due to the barren land. As many as 2.5 million people had migrated from the Great Plains by 1940. The rains eventually returned and farming practices were improved.

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