

The Worst Hard Time

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One of two books that the Pasadena Covenant Men's Book Group read about the dust bowl, this is a documentary collection of stories from actual survivors, descendants of survivors, and people who are still resident in the area. They could have interviewed my mother. She was a child growing up in the south end of the dust bowl.

The region from Lubbock, Texas to Inavale and Red Cloud, Nebraska, from Baca County in eastern Colorado, Cimarron County in northeastern New Mexico, all of western Kansas and all of the Oklahoma Panhandle over to Shattuck and beyond comprises the American dust bowl. It is unclear that it should ever have been settled by farmers or even ranchers. At the end of the 19th Century the area was the last free-plains area inhabited by the un-westernized Native Americans. The area was all grasslands from antiquity with a few remaining buffalo, no trees and precious little water. Most of the buffalo had been eradicated by the Europeans moving in, however, and it was becoming hard on the natives.

In any case this didn't last long. At the turn of the 20th Century, the white man reneged on his treaty to leave that area to the natives in perpetuity. The only reason they had ever had such a treaty to start with was because they thought there was no use for the land. Everyone who had moved west and gone through, for instance, what is now Amarillo, had kept on going through the Great American Desert, then the badlands, to some place where a farmer or rancher could live and make a living. No one had stopped there. No one thought anyone would ever stop there. So, it was good enough for the pagan, supposedly uncivilized natives.

By about 1900, however, the promoters thought they had a use for it. It was the last place in the country, perhaps the last place on earth, where a person could homestead, "prove up" and own land without having to start from a position of means. People who had no chance left at making a good life on their own moved west again, but stopped in what had previously been No Man's Land. Some of them were just crowded out of farming further east, like my great-grandpappy Slagle who moved his family and the entire farm to Panhandle in 1914 as part of this movement, renting half of a railroad train to do so. Or great granddad Duncan who homesteaded near what would be Floydada, then was involved in forming and running the town. Or great granddad Courtney who made it only so far as Olney and lived and died dirt poor, all during this time of history, all in this region of the country.

At first they were ranchers. Texas' contribution to the abrogation of the treaty was to sell off about three million acres of the northwest panhandle for funds to build the new state capitol

building in Austin. That sale was the XIT ranch and they ran several acres per cow over that property for a few decades. When there was consternation about the treaty between Washington and the natives, the Texans claimed sovereignty going back to the Republic and the deal struck when they entered the union in 1845. Sounds very Texan doesn't it?

Next came the farmers who, in a stroke of planetary luck in the teens and twenties of the new 20th century, made a good living growing wheat. World War I provided kind of an Indian Summer phenomena on a decadal scale. The weather was unseasonably wet for the region and events in the war in Europe and Asia drove the price of wheat up above two dollars a bushel. Not only could you make a living out here, but you could make a good enough one to borrow money and buy a tractor, and a piano.

Promoters said that all the planting and cultivation would change the climate to be more suitable for agriculture. It was looking like they might be right. What mass hubris! (Later when things went bad, they didn't believe that anything mere men had done could have caused the disaster. This, too, sounds familiar.)

After the Great War price started to fall. The only way to make those loan payments was to plant up more ground, so en masse they took the sod out of more land and put it into more wheat. Some tried cotton and failed. Some tried corn and did alright, at first.

Next, having read the papers about getting rich in the region, people started moving in to get in on the boom. The President of the United States (Hoover) was saying that a man who hadn't made a million by the time he was forty wasn't worth much. There were even suitcase farmers. They'd get off the train, stay in a hotel, plant up some acres, reap the profits and leave.

But the price was falling because the demand, artificially jacked up worldwide by the war, was re-balancing. Soon there was no market at all, wheat was in the \$0.10 per bushel range. Grain elevators had surplus stacked up outside and wouldn't take anymore. They couldn't afford to ship it to a non-existent market.

And then the weather returned to normal. Less than ten inches of rain a year, screaming winds nearly all the time and temperatures in the hundred and teens during the summer growing season.

In March 1930 an unprecedented weather anomaly occurred. At first it looked like rain, dark skies to the north, but it wasn't cloud or water, it was dust. Dust blew in from the north and coated everything in the region. Whole sections of topsoil were ripped from the earth and carried hundreds of miles south. Meteorologists took note. This was only the first of many many dust storms.

Dust storms were dangerous. Cars wouldn't run. They dragged chains behind them to get rid of the static electricity. People and livestock couldn't breath, and whatever crop you had in the

field was destroyed or buried. It was impossible to keep anything clean. When the air wasn't full of dust it was sunny and dry. There was never any precipitation.

But surely, they all thought, this was just a run of poor luck. The weather would turn around and return, if not this season, then next year. They had those mortgages to pay on farm equipment after all. Their land was hocked. It might get tight but they could make it, right? It's a fundamental principle: Capitalism works. The unseen hand would reward the stalwart. This was their only chance at having a place of their own, not having to work as a hired hand for someone else.

But people started leaving. Publisher of the newspaper in Dalhart, John McCarty, called them sissies. He formed a local "Last Man Club" where you would sign up to stay here no matter what happened. But when McCarty tried to editorialize against the 126 House just outside of town, the local center of prostitution, the printer wouldn't run it. They needed the cash that the business brought to town. They ran something else that day instead.

Prohibition also brought employment to the area. Going out and shutting down stills in rotation, that would just start back up later kept some law enforcement people in regular work while Prohibition lasted.

The story of Melt White was told. He brought his family down from Colorado on the way to homestead a ranch somewhere down near the Palo Duro Canyon, but when yet another horse from his team died on his feet near Dalhart, they didn't have a means to keep moving so decided to stay and homestead there. He was one of the wheat farmers and when a government documentary about the dust bowl was made, Melt was the guy shown out on his property demonstrating a plow in the unproductive, sod-gone dirt. The people of Dalhart hated him for being the one to show them up for this behavior to a national audience but he made a little acting money and survived a few more days.

With the incoming Franklin Roosevelt administration they started looking at ways to aid the folks in the dust bowl and to motivate them to work together to face the problems that they, together but unknowingly, had caused. They even started paying people *not* to plant in an attempt to control the market and raise prices. All such measures went against the grain of the individualist, Capitalist, "don't need no help from nobody" folks who had come out to homestead the Great Plains in the first place. On the only visit that FDR made to Amarillo, it came a frog drowner. I don't think English has a printable word describing that sort of highly unlikely coincidence. Ironic?

Author Egan does a pretty good job of weaving the interview material he has together into a coherent story of the era and the region, Nebraska to Texas, immigrants from Russia, Germany, or Missouri. He includes excerpts from actual diaries where people are measuring the ground temperature and living from day to day without knowing what is going to happen tomorrow, or next year. People went to school when they could. They struggled valiantly to have their babies

born and cared for out of the dust, but they died anyway. Marriages were strained because people had to separate to be doing some kind of work somewhere.

Black Sunday, April 14, 1935, was the date of the the worst dust storm of all. It began as the first nice day in weeks. People opened their windows and did some cleaning. People who had something besides gunny sacks to wear went to church. There was a double funeral that afternoon. A baby who, despite heroic efforts from her parents, died from “dust fever” and her great grandmother who finally just gave up in the midst of the dirt and poverty.

That afternoon during the funeral procession, the storm blew in. People had just enough warning to get to the nearest house a quarter mile away where the their neighbors would share a wet rag with them to breath through. Other folks stopped in the road and got under their sand-blasted cars to get out of the blowing dirt. Burials were delayed. People who were out were just trying to survive. People who were in were just trying to survive.

Read the book to see what happened to McCarty, the founder of the “Last Man Club.” Suffice it to say, he wasn’t “last.”

My own heritage being from this culture I’ve found this in-depth account disturbing to my preconceived notions of how things should work. My mother’s father was a free-lance accountant, keeping business, car dealers, banks, and other such establishments in Borger, Texas honest during this period. They were city people and though they had severe problems of their own, were partly isolated from the full brunt of the dust and the Depression that hit the farmers head on. My dad’s dad ran an Abstract and Title Company in Canyon on the other side of Amarillo. He had the right idea to get rich by being in the real estate business during this era but ... things went wrong, some of them personal, some of them professional. All these folks were strongly individualist, children of strong individualists, and so am I. But the problems of society are rarely made or solved by individuals, apparently. Maybe the government, or some other broader organization of people, does have a role in preventing or controlling mass stupidity. They certainly have had a role in encouraging it.