The Worst Hard Time Study Guide

The Worst Hard Time by Timothy Egan

BOOKRAGS

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Summary

“The Worst Hard Time – The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl,” by Timothy Eagan is the story of the people of the Dust Bowl. Although it has facts and figures as to how many tons of silt, grit and dirt the “black blizzards” dropped in the area, “The Worst Hard Time” tells the story of the citizens of the area and their struggle to fight a vicious mutated nature that man helped create or to give up on the land and leave. Each man and woman faced the challenge of a lifetime – challenges that they would have never imagined or taken on if their backs hadn’t been against the wall.

Much of the region of the High Plains that would one day be tagged with the pejorative, “The Dust Bowl” was grassland. It was where the Indians rode their ponies and hunted bison. The grass was rich and thick and was the main food source of these giant buffaloes. Bluestem grass was short and dense and kept the earth in place even during times of drought, which was not an unusual event in this region. During a drought, summer temperatures could reach 120 degrees. The grassland had been nature’s gift to the Indians and bison and later to the cowboys who worked the grand cattle ranches of the Texas Panhandle.

When the drought of the early 1930s struck the area, a phenomenon known as a dust storm began to become a frequent event. The early dust storms were more annoying than threatening. But the money men behind the XIT Ranch – the biggest cattle ranch in the world – saw the drought as a threat to their profits and decided to sell off their vast acreage in small parcels.

Not big enough for a ranch, these small parcels were perfect for crop farmers. But the grassland had never been farmland, and plowing up the thick grass exposed the earth to the drought, heat and - worst of all - the wind. Although there were other contributing factors, the thousands of farmers who were encouraged to come to the area and make a killing in wheat production was one of the main causes of the top soil erosion that led to the creation of the Dust Bowl – a region that was not good for farmer or cowpoke.

The story, based on true events, allows the denizens of the Dust Bowl to tell their own stories. Each story is unique – why some stayed in the face of such impossible conditions and why some chose to abandon the land that they once loved and that once held such promise.

Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

Introduction – Live Through This

The land in the southern plains was scary… it was empty like a ghost house. People felt lost there. There was nothing. Not a tree anywhere on the flat land that didn't even have a bump much less a hill. It scared Coronado looking for the cities of gold, the Anglo traders heading to Santa Fe and even the Comanche. The terrain was unfriendly to strangers. It held no promise to give anything back. Towns only popped up occasionally. Some old shacks were literally buried in the sand. Old abandoned fence posts and structures dot the land.

The greatest grassland in the world had been turned upside down for most of a decade. It covered parts of Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. The transition took place when there was 25 percent unemployment. The crisis brought on fear, anger and shame. The population of the region harkened back to pre-frontier numbers.

Some felt that the current dry spell would become a second Dust Bowl. But old-timers, like Ike Olsteen, claimed that there was no comparison. He had grown up in a dugout – a dwelling that was dug into the prairie floor. Ike's father had traveled the Santa Fe Trail in 1909. It was the same time that the U.S. Congress tried to lure settlers to the region with a homestead act that gave settlers up to 320 acres. Like many others who came to the area, they were under the impression that a dam was being built on the Cimarron River and that hired hands would be needed. But there weren't any jobs.

The Olsteens had 320 acres of grass and a windmill that powered water for their cattle. They depended on the high winds that whipped through the region. The Depression hit and after a flurry of activity on the wheat market, prices crashed. Then the rains disappeared for years. The soil calcified and high winds blew it away. The dust would penetrate noses, hair, throats, houses, water wells – everything. The wind was so severe that people feared they'd be blown away.

People in the East thought the condition was being exaggerated. That is, until a dust storm blew up in May 1934 and carried the grit from the Dust Bowl and dumped twelve million tons on Chicago. Even New York and Washington and ships at sea were victims of the deluge. Cows went blind from the storm and choked to death. Cut open, the cows were found to have stomachs full of sand. Children died of "dust pneumonia." To save them, some families gave their small children away. Even world wars didn't compare to the destruction of the Dust Bowl.

Jeanne Clark needed an oxygen tank in order to breathe. Her lungs were scarred from dust pneumonia. Ironically, Jeanne's mother had been advised by a doctor to move to

the Southwest plains for the air. Many people had been given the same medical advice. Jeanne's mother's health did improve until 1934 when conditions changed and the Dust Bowl began to develop. In addition to the dust, temperatures in the region reached 117 degrees. The Red Cross came in and handed out respiratory masks to school children. Schools went through dust drills but there usually was little warning before the dust storms hit. When there was a bad storm, the school children were told to run home.

In mid-April 1935, a severe black dust storm overwhelmed the region. Birds screeched in the air, cars shorted out from the waves of sand that swept over roads causing cars to run into ditches and a train to derail. It was called Black Sunday. The storm contained twice as much dirt than that dug up to create the Panama Canal. Many vowed to stay no matter what. The balance of the land had been destroyed; it was broken. The people had to fight herds of rabbits and skies full of grasshoppers. Some blamed the white man for destroying it.

At the peak of the Dust Bowl, 100 million acres were under assault. The hardest hit was the southern plains. More than 250,000 people fled from the area in the 1930s. The majority of the people living in the epicenter stayed during the decade of the Dust Bowl. The land has really never recovered. It was used for the internment of Japanese and German prisoner of war during WWII. The region is besieged by tornadoes and grassfires, but they pale in comparison to the black storms. Many historians agree that the Dust Bowl represented the nation's worst environmental disaster.

Many of the players of that day have passed away, but those who remain have a story they want to tell.

Chapter 1: The Wanderer

In the winter of 1926, Bam White got some bad news; one of his horses was dead. He and his family had been on the road for six days, moving from Las Animas, Colorado to Littlefield, Texas. The family would have a new start. Texas was the place to be for a ranch hand like Bam. Texas was filled with boom towns and opportunity. But they got stuck in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Bam checked the rest of his horses. Their hooves were worn and their bodies bony. Their destination was still more than 200 miles away. They thought of selling their heirloom organ but they'd only get ten dollars which was not enough to buy a new horse, so they went on and hoped for the best.

While traveling through Cimarron County, there were no trees or even grass for the horses. Cimarron was a Mexican/Apache hybrid word meaning "wanderer." Plains Indians had survived in the region for several hundred years. They left little clue as to exactly how they had survived. They were helped by the horses that the Spanish brought. The horses allowed them to travel greater distances to hunt and trade. In the mid-1700s, there were about 20,000 Comanche Indians who dominated the region. The Comanche devised hand signals to communicate with when the wind was too loud to hear.

In the mid-1800s, the Texas Rangers were tasked with the job of coming after the Comanche, but the Comanche were able soldiers and fought them off. The Comanche depended on the bison for all their needs. The Comanche had an agreement, the Medicine Lodge Treaty, signed by the President of the United States that they and other tribes had hunting rights to a large swath of the Great American desert. Post-Civil War, it was a region that white men didn't want. Yet, the treaty was violated when white hunters invaded the land and killed the bison by the millions. In retaliation, the Indians went after the white man's stock herds. The Comanche's were finally defeated in the Red River War of 1874-75. Indians were sent to camps or imprisoned. The region had an abandoned air after the Indians and the bison were gone.

At the Texas border, the White family entered the XIT ranch. Bam had looked forward to seeing the rich grassland that he had heard about all his life. The XIT was legendary. The state of Texas had offered three million acres to anyone who would erect a grand statehouse. A Chicago syndicate of investors took Texas up on the offer. In addition to the statehouse, the syndicate stocked the land with cattle, built windmills to pump water and erected fences. The XIT ranch became the biggest ranch in the world. Towns sprung up around the ranch and there were plenty of jobs for cowboys. The syndicate was strict with its cowboys – drinking, gambling and shooting without permission were not allowed.

However, towns in the region were lawless, and the cowboys could drink and gamble their pay away. The ranch struggled to make a profit; the weather was volatile and there were too many herds of cattle which drove the prices down. There were droughts, storms, blizzards and tornadoes to deal with. The volatile temperatures were rough on the cattle. The syndicate looked into selling off some of the land, but there were few sources of natural fuel and the lack of rain was not conducive to growing crops. The reputation that the area had – the Great American Desert – didn't bring buyers in either. Robert Marcy wrote that the area was "almost wholly uninhabitable by people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence."

But the syndicate made an aggressive attempt to sell the land off. They touted the cheap price of the land that they called farm land. They sponsored train loads of prospective buyers to come and see the great land for themselves. The salesmen sloughed off the problem that the lack of rain presented. The dusty earth could be used for mulch. The aggressive salesmen had an answer for everything. They even lied, promising the farmers that plowing the land would actually bring on the rain.

Current Panhandle farmers knew that the realtors were handing their clients a line. Whenever they had the chance, they'd tell these people to stay away from the Panhandle. They told these farmers the truth about the land. The Panhandle grew one thing well – grass. A common saying was, "Miles to water, miles to wood and only six inches to hell." By 1912, all the cattle were gone from the XIT ranch. Only 450,000 of the original three million acres were unplowed.

When Bam White and his family arrived in 1926, they spent the night in north Dallam County. Bam prayed the horses would get them to Littlefield. Lizzie White, Bam's wife,

hated the wind and wondered why anyone would live there. They found a place to camp on the outskirts of Dalhart with Littlefield still 176 miles away. Dalhart was a town that had sprung up during the heyday of the XIT ranch. Locust trees had been planted by original residents of Dalhart, but they didn't stand up to the winds, drought and freezing weather. Prospectors were drawn to the Panhandle when word that oil was gushing causing thirty towns to pop up in area.

Farmers growing broomcorn found a lucrative market for corn whiskey during the prohibition. Bam walked down the main street of Dalhart and spotted a large two-story sanitarium run by Doc Dawson and his wife, Willie, a legendary beauty in the region. There was an opera house and a clothing store run by the only Jews in town. There was a new yellow-brick hotel called the DeSoto where locals played cards. Next to the hotel was a movie theater. None of Bam's children had ever seen a movie.

Uncle Dick Coon owned most of the town. He was from a poor family and was a self-made man. He lived through the Galveston hurricane of 1900 in which he lost everything. He made his money building Dalhart.

When Bam returned from his tour, he was met with the bad news that another horse had died. They couldn't travel on without a team of horses, and they didn't have the resources to purchase another. Bam took it as an omen that the family was meant to stay there. There were plenty of job opportunities there.

Chapter 2: No Man's Land

Boise City, Oklahoma, was a town up the road from Dalhart. It was founded on fraud – even its name was a fraud. It was named after the French word for trees, but there wasn't a tree in sight. There really wasn't a town. The Southwestern Immigration and Development Company sold lots at $45 each in a ghost town in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Brochures sent out to sell the town depicted it as a lovely town with paved streets set among the trees and the railroad was being built through the town. A farmer could grow anything there and the plots of land were going fast. Despite the fact that it was all lies, 3,000 lots were sold in1908, a year after Oklahoma became a state. Needless to say, when the new buyers came to view their lot in the boom town, they were shocked to find nothing. The company didn't own the property they sold. The town "developers" were arrested for fraud, tried and sent to federal penitentiary.

But eventually the town did build up and became the Cimarron County seat. By 1920, there were 250 residents in Boise City. Many officials were guilty of hyperbole when it came to Boise City. One senator announced that the town would someday be the "greatest wheat-growing country in the world." But it was a No Man's Land and land that nobody wanted. Spain had been the first to fly its flag over No Man's Land but then quickly abandoned it. The French took over next and then sold it to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase. Mexico had ownership over it after that.

In the late nineteenth century, a corner of the Panhandle was a haven for outlaws, thieves and murderers. The Coe Gang dressed liked Indians and attacked wagon trains

on the Cimarron Trail. Beer City was the first settlement in No Man's Land. It was established across from Kansas which was dry. The town only lasted a few years.

The name Oklahoma is a blend of two Choctaw words – "okla" which means people and "humma" which means "red." But the "red people" lost their land to real estate surges that founded Oklahoma City and Norman among other cities. The lure was the free land offered to settlers. Young Hazel Lucas' family arrived in No Man's Land in 1914, the peak year for homesteads. The Federal Government was anxious to settle No Man's Land; it provided train rides to the regions for prospective settlers.

Hazel's father, William Carlyle, built a dugout in 1915 for his family and began plowing his dusty half-section. The family would have never survived without the windmill they had. With the heat, lightning, dry grass and wind, fire was always a concern. One fire a few years before had burned 200 miles of land. Homesteaders often dug trenches to serve as fire lines to protect their homes and property. The fires spread so rapidly that even a man on horseback couldn't outrun it. The year that the Lucas family moved into the land, there was a terrible flood. Lucas began to experience a profit from growing wheat with the onset of WWI. From the profits, the family was able to build a house above ground. Just as they were about to complete the building of their house, a wind storm blew up. The fierce winds lasted two days. On the second day, the new house was swept away. The family went hunting for the pieces of their house.

In the fall of 1922, Hazel got her first job – as the school teacher for thirty-nine students in eight grades. At seventeen years of age she was barely older than some of them. Part of Hazel's job was to clean the schoolhouse before and after school. Hazel would read of a better life in the Kansas City Start that arrived in the mail once a week. But in ten years, the wheat farmers of the Great Plains became wealthy small businessmen. During the world war the price of wheat had doubled.

When Carlyle Lucas first came to No Man's Land he hoped to make enough to feed his family. But within a few years he became part of the wheat boom and was selling a bushel that cost him thirty-five cents for two dollars. He made $8,000 a year, which was a fortune in 1917. Even though the land was dry, it was able to produce an abundance of wheat by proper cultivation.

Hazel married fellow teacher Charles Shaw when she was eighteen. They left the panhandle for Ohio in 1929. The couple lived in Cincinnati but when money got tight, they decided that Hazel should return to the Panhandle where she was able to secure a teaching job. One man, Big Will Crawford who was the fattest man in three states, found a bride in Wichita. Will's neighbors, the Folkers, came with Will on the train. Katherine Folker was college educated and cried herself to sleep at night many nights lamenting over the desolate place she had found herself. Fred Folker didn't do well with the horse-drawn plow but reversed his fortunes with the advent of the tractor. He and Carlyle Lucas and the other farmers in No Man's Land used their tractors to deliver their wheat crop to the train which was finally established 25 years after it had been first promised. The people did their best to create a good life. The first settlers in the area were the aristocracy of the town.

Boise City, originally sold on lies, was thriving with every harvest. Horses were being replaced by Model-Ts. Churches of various denominations were erected. Loans that had been impossible to get were being granted throughout the region. It was no long considered risky to lend the people of No Man's Land money. Those who came for just a small piece of land found they could attain a bigger piece of land by taking out a loan. People poured into the area to make their fortunes. After the Federal Farm Loan Act in 1916, every town with a well and a sheriff had a farmland bank offering forty-year loans at six percent interest.

The Folkers built a new house for Katherine and his daughter. Their old house was lost in a hailstorm during construction of their new house. They bought a new Dodge and a new piano for their daughter. Big dances were held and the population was growing. Fred sometimes stopped and thought… it was all happening too fast.

Analysis

The conditions that led to the Dust Bowl were fueled by exploitation of the land. There was overuse of the land and there was misuse of the land. Although people in the East thought it was exaggerated, those who lived through it knew that there was no modern comparison to the disaster. The untold story is that of the people of the Dust Bowl, the small farmer and the cowpoke who just wanted to make a living and provide for their families. Those who live on have a story they want to tell.

As Bam White traveled with his family to the Texas Panhandle, they were disturbed that there were no trees or grass for their horses through Cimarron County. As they passed into the Panhandle they learned that ranches like the legendary XIT ranch had no jobs for ranch hands. Things were changing and changing quickly. The rich grassland was being parceled off to farmers. What was causing these changes? Bam and his family settled in the small Panhandle town of Dalhart, Texas, which is where his story is traced.

Boise City, Oklahoma, was in No Man's Land in the Oklahoma Panhandle and literally just up the road from Dalhart. The French word for trees is "boise" but there wasn't a tree in sight. Promoters had lured farmers there with the promise of a chance for a better life. It was another case of investors seeking profits by exploiting both the land and the naïve and vulnerable people. The story of Hazel Lucas White is part of the Boise City thread of the account.

Vocabulary

claustrophobic, immensity, monotone, perspective, convulsed, calcified, amenities, epicenter, emaciated, susceptible, heirloom, manifest, disparaged, charismatic, endowment, arroyo, salubrious, vigilante, subsistence, hedonist, aphorism, aquiline, corrosive, artesian, hyperbole, meticulous, tableau, ecosystem, commodity, audacious, preposterous, hubris

Chapters 3 - 5

Summary

Chapter 3: Creating Dalhart

Bam found a shack outside of Dalhart. The man who owned it gave Bam permission for his family to live there and grow whatever he wanted to on the ground. Bam figured it would be better to stay there than travel south. Besides, cattle wasn't paying and the ranches were disappearing. The years between 1926 and 1929 were wet years, and everyone forgot about drought. They grew turnips and sold them in town. Bam continued to look for ranch jobs. Lizzie had a stillborn baby girl. She blamed the land. It wasn't good for them. Bam, however, was positive of a good future there.

Dalhart had a country club and a ball park. Doc Dawson bought more land and contemplated planting cotton which paid more than wheat. The sand storms blew for days but didn't seem threatening. Doc Dawson had no luck with cotton. He envied those who were making a pile on oil or wheat. In 1929, film man, Hickman Price, came to the area and bought 35,000 acres of land to raise wheat. He had calculated that he'd make a million a year. Total acreage for wheat crops grew from 876,000 to 2.5 million between 1924 and 1929. Wheat was a safe-bet, Doc Dawson was told, because it was so cheap to grow. The James ranch, the last large cattle ranch, folded after losing parcels of its land to pay off loans.

Bam held fast to the belief that the area wasn't meant to be plowed up for wheat. It was grassland that was ideal for grazing cattle. It was a shame that it didn't pay to raise them. At one time the James ranch covered 250,000 acres that spread into Oklahoma and New Mexico. Dick Coon, who owned the hotel, was making money in town and out. He raised prize bulls for show and breeding on his ranch; meanwhile, in town he owned most of the businesses that were experiencing growth that paralleled the success of the wheat farmers.

John L. McCarty walked into Dalhart in 1929. He bought the Dalhart Texan and became its editor and publisher. He had plans for the newspaper to have a big impact. He wanted to spur the town onto greatness. He loved the theater and the hotel and the clothier where he bought his suits. He was the loudest cheerleader at baseball games and was a good writer, some said better than Will Rogers. People came to Dalhart because they'd missed the earlier land rushes and the best stolen Indian land. The land was literally drying up and didn't have much left in it to grow anything. However, people felt they still had a chance to make it in the southwest, which in 1923 the government referred to as "The last frontier of agriculture." People were drawn from to the region from every corner of the country and from Mexico and even Russia.

In the northern plains, people cursed by the false promises that the railroad had brought them. Towns collapsed and families were broken. In the southern plains people

welcomed the railroad without acknowledging what happened up north. They took no warning from that experience. McCarty praised civic leaders like Dick Coon and stressed that the town needed a real hospital, a second bank and second car dealer. McCarty paid no heed to the lack of a water supply. In 1929, President Hoover told the nation that it was closer to winning the fight against poverty than any time in the nation's history. The prairie states had all voted for him in a landslide.

The grassland of the Panhandle continued to be plowed over for wheat growing. McCarty called the area the best country "God's sun ever shone upon."

Chapter 4: High Plains Deutsch

There was a food surplus in the summer of 1929. Every town along the railway system had stacks of unsold wheat piled in grain elevators. There was a glut in Europe after Russia resumed its wheat production. It was a warning of things to come. Prices were heading down. They crashed to just a third of what they had been. The farmers could either cut back or raise more to have more output. As a result, more grassland was plowed up and more unwanted wheat was planted. In their desperation, they plowed up land in the fall which exposed it to the harshness of winter.

In September 1929, German George Ehrlich told the story of his rough beginning in Russia. His father was a horse tanner, and to thwart horse thieves, father and son chained the horses to their ankles while they slept in the barn. He would have followed his father into the tanning business had he not been drafted into the military. His parents feared they'd never see him again. To avoid conscription, in 1890 the family boarded a ship in Hamburg that headed for New York. During the crossing they encountered a typhoon that furiously tossed the boat about like it was a toy. The ship took on water the second day and the captain sent out an SOS and told everyone to prepare for death. George and his family survived the trip, however, thanks to the heroics of a young German boy that crawled out on the overturned boat and sawed the mast off which allowed the ship to right itself.

The Russian/German influence on No Man's Land was substantial. The residents preferred German shoes to cowboy boots and featherbeds to mattresses. Everyone drank schnapps and ate wurst and knew all the German Christmas carols. Without these people it is very likely that the region would not have become a giant in wheat production. On their trip over, the Germans brought with them turkey red seeds – a hardy winter wheat. The seeds were resistant to cold and drought and well suited to soil in No Man's Land. In Russia, the Germans successfully used these seeds in dry farming – cultivating soil that is dry with no natural water source. The Germans were also responsible for bringing thistle to America where it became known as tumbleweed.

The Germans who lived in Russian maintained their culture – their food, dress and rituals. The German Mennonites who settled near the Black Sea were conscientious objectors and opposed to war. Other Germans from Russia were warriors, killers. What these Germans would not do is fight for the Russian czar or for the Bolsheviks. They had an agreement with Catherine the Great who was a German that gave them tax

breaks, homestead land and freedom from conscription. When the agreement was broken, many Germans fled from Russia. Catherine viewed the German peasants as sturdy stock and a buffer against her enemies the Mongols, Turks and their blood enemy, the Kirghiz. The Kirghiz had plundered and burned Schasselwa on the Volga and kidnapped their women and boys in 1771. Russia offered respite to the poor and tired long before America did. Catherine wanted to increase Russia's population – she needed more people. She even considered polygamy as a way of increasing the population. Native Russians became envious and resentful of the Germans for getting special treatment.

In 1872, Czar Alexander II made the agreement with Catherine invalid and ordered that all German-speaking Russians henceforth speak only Russian. And able-bodied Germans had to sign up for the military. The harsh requirements by the czar compelled many Germans in Russian to head for America. Before long, German was heard in the streets of Lincoln Nebraska and Ellis County, Kansas. By the 1920s, 303,000 Russian Germans populated the Great Plains.

Two months after George and his family embarked on the trip to New York, they hobbled into New York Harbor on New Year's Day, 1891. George missed the 1893 rush to Oklahoma when Indian land was being given away. In the autumn 1900, George and 20 other young men travel from Kansas to Shattuck looking for free land. George found his land six miles out of town and staked it. He, like many Germans, felt it was his last hope. The Germans were shocked by the desolate state of the land when they arrived in Oklahoma. The terrain was black and charred from fires set by angry Indians who felt they were betrayed by yet another homesteading of their land.

They started off in a blizzard in which they lost some of their horses and other animals. Shopkeepers in town refused to sell to them. George's first job was as a ranch hand during which he learned to speak English. He burrowed a dugout on the side of a hill. He married a German girl and plowed his land in planted rows of corn and wheat and raised a few dairy cows. The couple eventually had ten children. During World War I, they were nearly run out of Shattuck. He was accused of being a spy because a tutor saw a picture of the Kaiser in George's house.

George and the others appeared before a judge who found them guilty of nothing. They all supported America in the war. The judge ordered that George and the others be sent home. Tragedy hit the family when the youngest child - and George's favorite - Georgie was run over by a cattle truck. The wind was blowing up dust and the driver didn't see Georgie. The suffering that George and his wife endured was almost unbearable. Their hurt never healed.

Even when wheat prices fell, George considered himself lucky to be in America. Still, the next five years following the tragedy were more horrific than anything he'd ever imagined.

Chapter 5: Last of the Great Plowup

The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. At first the brokers said it was merely a correction. But things got worse. In subsequent weeks, the market lost 40 percent of its value – more than 35 billion dollars in shareholder investments. Manipulation with bank loans had contributed to the collapse. When stocks spiraled down, banks went broke. A cigar company's owner plunged to his death from a skyscraper when he found out his shares went from $113 to $4. But most people didn't own stocks. In 1929, a quarter of all jobs were on the farm.

At first the crash seemed to have no impact on the ordinary person. But the value of wheat was plummeting, too. Grain speculators bet on wheat and borrowed against the future. The Lucas family was getting ready to harvest their winter crop. Carlyle had died and his wife and her children were running the farm. Life was still a struggle for the Lucas family. They hadn't reaped the rewards of the land yet. A short distance away, Fred Folkers was oiling his tractor. He had recently gone into debt buying many things on credit. Fred turned to whisky to ease his worries. A hail storm blew up when the Lucas family was about to harvest. Mrs. Lucas ordered her children to the storm cellar. The hail balls, some of which were the size of grapefruits, had leveled the wheat field. Fred Folkers lost his crops as well. It was a year's worth of work gone in minutes. Fred and Mrs. Lucas both fell to their knees and sobbed in front of their children.

The Germans from Russia were able to salvage much of their crops. They brought so much wheat to Shattuck that they were warned that if they brought any more, it would be turned. People were burning grain and surplus corn for heat. Wheat was stacked in silos, molded on the ground or blew away. By 1930, wheat sold for one-eighth of the highest price from ten years before. Selling it barely covered the cost. Yet farmers plowed more grassland thinking that planting more wheat was the solution.

Hazel Lucas was looking for a job and a place to live in Boise City while she awaited her husband's return. When Charles returned, he had grim news. The country was "sick." He had seen people lined up in food lines and sleeping under bridges. By the end of 1932, a quarter of all banks closed and nine million people lost their savings. The stock market had lost fifty billion dollars and two million Americans were out of a job. People were starving in No Man's Land. A mob stormed a grocery store in Oklahoma City. Ironically, people were rioting over food while grain elevators were stuffed with wheat. Hazel was offered a teaching position but the pay was zero.

The wheat crop came in and although there was a slight rebound in the price it was short-lived. Fred Folkers turned to whiskey when he learned that a bushel would only pay him twenty-four cents. At that rate, a year's worth of wheat crop would only garner $400 for the Lucas family which wasn't near enough. The same amount of wheat used to bring $4,000. Foreclosures became common events. As far as further planting, the soil had become stripped and barren.

Baca County in Colorado wasn't fairing any better. The ground was over-plowed and over-sued. Leading up to the stock market crash, there had been new towns springing up the new rail line from Satanta, Kansas, to Baca County that was completed in 1927. Ike Osteen's family got their first tractor in 1929. Ike and his brother Oscar were hired by

neighbors to plow their land up. The prohibition of 1920 had been a boom to Baca County in black market whiskey trade. But Ike Olsteen didn't get involved. He made good money with his tractor. By 1930, Baca County was the biggest wheat producer in Colorado.

Dick Coon saw opportunity in the market collapse. Property value had plummeted and he bought up real estate in Dalhart confident that he'd profit when the prices went back up. John McCarty was certain that Dalhart would not falter in the crash. Loretto Hospital had just been opened. Doc Dawson was getting concerned about the money he'd invested in property outside the city. But the new hospital allowed him to be a full-time farmer.

The price of oil had crashed when the market collapsed. The world economy was tanking; the depression was global. German currency was nearly worthless. In America there had been no regulation when the economy soared. Strict tariffs instituted after the fall made matters worse. Consumers only consumed the basics. The bank in Dalhart was in trouble. The Dawsons lost their savings and profited nothing from all their holdings. He tried growing crops with no success.

By 1930, Bam White and his family still lived in a rental house for $3 a month. He decided to look for permanent roots for his family and prove that good things would still come to them in Dalhart. With odd jobs, Bam saved enough to purchase his own partial dugout. It was not much but it was Bam's.

Wheat was stored in the elevators at the train station next to last year's wheat which had not moved. The elevators became stuffed and farmers were warned not to bring any more. Farmers were producing too much and what they earned did not cover their costs. Farmers pleaded with the government to buy their surpluses but President Hoover rejected the idea. Violence broke out – farmers went on strike burning out railroad trestles to stop their grain from going to market.

George Ehrlich wouldn't walk away from his land. Bam White finally had his own home. Hazel and Charles were trying to start anew at the worst time in history. To Ike Olsteen the land was still pure magic. They were all linked to the High Plains each in their own ways. On September 14, 1930, a windstorm blew up dust from Kansas southward to Oklahoma. It grew stronger and blacker by the time it blew through the Texas Panhandle and over the High Plains. The weather bureau was stumped. It wasn't a sandstorm or a hailstorm. They couldn't define it; it was black and rolling and carried static electricity. It was the first black duster. The weather bureau shrugged it off.

Analysis

Bam White couldn't find a job as a ranch hand. The family was growing a garden and living in a shack outside Dalhart. The famous James Ranch, one of the biggest in Texas, folded. Growing wheat was a safe bet – at least for the time being. Bam agreed with the cowboys who were adamant that the grassland wasn't meant for farming and shouldn't

have been plowed up and that the region would pay for this misuse. John McCarty came to Dalhart and bought the newspaper, “The Texan.” He wanted to propel the town and the people onto greatness and planned to help through articles in his paper. Towns up north were broken when the railroads came in but the people of the southern plains didn’t take their experience as a warning of things to come. In 1929, President Herbert Hoover made a statement about the economy – the U.S. was closer than ever to eliminating poverty.

The overuse of the land for farming caused a glut of wheat in the U.S. as well as in Europe which resulted in a downward spiral in prices. The situation was worsened when farmers figured they had to produce more wheat in order to earn what they did before the price decline. Thus, the land was even more stressed. Many Russian Germans settled in No Man’s Land. The story of George Ehrlich and his family’s experience in Russia and in America is part of the story of this region.

The stock market crashed in October 1929. It caused the value of wheat to plummet. The price of oil had also crashed. The world economy was in a deep depression. Like many people in all parts of America, citizens of the southern High Plains lost their savings to bank closures. Wheat farmers were desperate to sell their grain. But wheat from the year before was still stacked in the elevators at the train station. President Hoover rejected the pleas of farmers for the government buy up their surpluses. On September 14, 1930, the first of hundreds of dust storms blew up. The weather bureau was stumped. What in the world was the black cloud that contained static electricity and “rained” dirt?

Vocabulary

forage, herbivores, grimcrackery, judicious, flimflam, visionaries, pulverized, pungent, agronomists, migratory, manifesto, autonomy, fortuitous, steppes, dulcimer, gyrations, blasphemous, capricious, exhorted, reparation, dormant, furtive

Chapters 6 - 8

Summary

Chapter 6: First Wave

The First National Bank of Dalhart closed its doors on June 27, 1931. People banged on the door but the bank was broke, insolvent. That same day the temperature rose to a record-breaking 112 degrees. Doc Dawson lost the money he had in the bank. He had no pension and Social Security didn't exist then. He was in ill health suffering from Bright's disease, tuberculosis and asthma. Yet, he had to keep working. He ran from one operation to another. After suffering a heart attack, he resolved to make his land work for him. But with the temperature at 112 degrees, his fields were dry and his chances bleak.

A crowd demanded that the sheriff open the bank. The people wanted their money. The sheriff tried to calm the people down telling them it was a federal matter. Although he tried to keep up a happy façade, even Dick Coon was in trouble. The properties he bought were yielding no rent, no income. His hotel was empty. Everyone was broke – even wildcatters who usually had money to throw around were broke. Oil had fallen to a dime a barrel. Newspaper man McCarty still believed in the town but was angry that the only business still on its feet was a bordello. He wanted to drive out the madam and her "girls" and wrote a scathing expose on the bordello. However, the printer refused to print the story. Dalhart needed the women he told McCarty.

The jobless began riding the rails in search of work. Two million Americans were nomads in search of jobs. Hoover declared that people had lost their confidence but the crash's impact on unemployment would pass in sixty days. But by the end of the year, some eight million people were unemployed and the banking system was in total disarray. In 1930 alone, 1,350 banks had failed. By 1931, 2,294 more banks went under. At the end of 1931, the Bank of the United States collapsed with deposits totaling two-hundred million dollars. The collapse caused another twelve million people to be jobless. McCarty focused on trying to save his paper. He promised his advertisers that he'd report only good news. He would see the sunny side of every story.

In 1931, over 28,000 businesses failed. Money did not circulate. Those who kept their jobs saw their wages decline by a third. Some people blamed Jews for the collapse. The Jewish system of banking was what had failed. The Herzsteins owned the ready-to-wear store in Dalhart, but they had been part of the town longer than most residents and they were left alone. For their part, the Herzsteins had fought for their place in the High Plains and weren't going to walk away.

The Herzstein family had literally spilled blood for their place in the High Plains sun. Levi Herzstein, one of the original family members to come west, was shot and killed by Black Jack Ketchum who was a thief and murderer. Black Jack was caught four years

later and hung at a highly advertised execution. His hanging misfired and decapitated him instead. The Herzsteins had paid their dues. Simon Herzstein who ran the business later extended credit to his customers and never kept books; it was all in his head. The Herzsteins ran into money troubles just like everyone else. They hadn't paid their taxes in years. Dick Coon owned the property where the Herzstein store was located - but did he want to foreclose on the only person who was trying to keep the residents of Dalhart well-dressed?

People were literally starving across the United States. Family members took turns eating their evening dinners. A half-million New Yorkers were on relief having to subsist on eight dollars a month. On the High Plains wheat production was in high gear, but the heat and the wind was also in high gear causing stress and discomfort. There was no sign of rain and there wouldn't be a drop for nearly eight years.

Chapter 7: A Darkening

A fast-moving winter snow storm moved through the High Plains, its icy fingers finding every crack in the dugouts and above-ground shacks. Montana was suffering from a severe drought but the winter storm there was just wind and cold - no snow. Farmers needed winter moisture for spring planting, but they got nothing. Wheat on the high plains rotted from the last two harvests. The grain elevators were still stuffed drawing vermin who gorged themselves. The harder people worked the poorer they got. The Farmers were frustrated and policymakers in Washington were bewildered.

Famers were in crisis. They're savings were gone and their prospects for earning money were bleak. Hoover still refused to step in. By 1932, a third of the farmers in the plains faced foreclosure for non-payment of taxes and loans. Farmers suffered across the entire country. A judge who was preparing to sign foreclosure documents was nearly hung by an angry crowd. Revolution was a clear possibility.

The Folkers used wheat in all their meals. Fred no longer planted and harvested – it just made him poorer. The idea of moving wasn't a viable one; everyone everywhere had been hit. The only thing that was flourishing in No Man's Land was the wind which was unrelenting and gaining strength. The ground was too dry to plant and without any ground cover at all, the land began to erode. Tumbleweeds were the only plants to survive but of little value to anyone. Fred Folker went to see a doctor about his stomach ache. It turned out to be stomach cancer. The doctor was a quack and sucked the little money Fred could amass from selling his cattle and car. Her remedy was the application of a salve every day that would draw the cancer out. The doctor left town and was never seen again. Fred didn't have cancer. He had appendicitis and was saved by a real doctor.

Fred's neighbors, Will and Sadie Crawford, went into hiding. When they were seen, they were dirty and in tattered clothes. They stayed alive on the vegetable garden that Sadie planted.

Money was tight in Boise City, a township that was blighted and had become an eyesore. There was no joy in Boise City, but the city was determined to survive and wanted no charity from anyone. A businessman, desolate over his losses, murdered his wife and then shot himself. The Cimarron County sheriff, Hi Barrick, would bust local moonshiners, confiscate their sugar and give it away to Boise City residents. The sheriff didn't like taking property from anyone at the weekly foreclosure action.

The new governor of Oklahoma, William Murray, declared he couldn't do anything about the weather but he vowed to fix the broken land. Murray relied on the National Guard who he called out twenty-seven times during his first two years. He sent the guard to force the oil fields to shut down 3,000 wells to drive up prices. He also declared martial law when blacks tried to hold an Emancipation Day parade in Oklahoma City.

The land dried up in early 1932. There was no rain in sight and the heat was relentless. In the face of 29 percent unemployment, the governor urged people to grow vegetable gardens and mine for deep levels of water. Insurgent farmers who had once flooded the area were all gone by that winter. They had stripped the panhandles of both Texas and Oklahoma and left the spoils behind them. Others deserted the land while still others felt conditions were as bad or worse elsewhere.

The land was becoming increasingly fallow. Experts found that the accelerated erosion of the land was due to weather conditions and neglect. When it was grassland, the land could withstand wind, hail, heat and storms. The deterioration of the land was not a priority in anyone's mind in the early 1930s. What was paramount to everyone was merely survival. But the winds of 1932 began to pick up the soil and take it with them.

On January 21, 1932, a brownish gray cloud that was 10,000 feet high appeared near Amarillo. People called it a black blizzard. The weather bureau was fascinated because the cloud defied explanation. The cloud began to move northward. Bam saw the huge dark cloud and thought a mountain had suddenly appeared. As the cloud moved over Dalhart, it blocked the sun and plunged the sunny day into an early dusk. The cloud left a trail of black dust behind that covered the streets and cars. The black dust worked its way inside houses and shops and the big hotel. It made people hack and cough.

Chapter 8: In a Dry Land

The second year of the drought brought on a strange amalgamation of insects. Bugs bred and hatched in seasons when they normally would have frozen to death. But the winter wasn't as cold and wasn't wet. Grasshoppers swarmed over the fields chewing the tender shoots of wheat in abandoned soil. Centipedes crawled all over inside houses and sheds. A tarantula with two-inch-long legs was found in the Dawson's kitchen. A few more showed up the next day. A big dust cloud had carried them there. An elderly man died of the bite from a black widow. A young boy in Rolla, Kansas, also died from a bite. Rabbits dominated the land – in the fields, yards and even the streets. John McCarty organized a posse to rid the town of the rabbits. They came equipped with bats and clubs and killed several thousand in one afternoon. Rabbit drives became a weekly event on some quarters. Some killed 6,000 in a day.

The temperature broke all records that year. One day it was 115 degrees in Baca County. It was impossible to withstand the heat in the Osteen dugout. The boys dumped water on the roof to cool it but it just steamed like a sauna. People of the High Plains began to look back at old Black Jack Ketchum as a noble thief. After all, the bankers were the real thieves and the government didn't care. All Jack did was rob banks and trains. He was a manly thief and killer. The people got together and decided to move Jack and his head to a more distinguished grave in the new Clayton Cemetery. The Herzstein family did not approve of the attention the murderer of their relative was getting. Nearly 3,000 people gathered on September 11, 1933, to watch Jack's pine box dug up and opened. He was identified by a former sheriff and taken to the new cemetery and buried a distance away from the other graves.

In the fall of 1932, most farmers did not bother to plant a crop for the next year. It could just move them closer to complete bankruptcy. The people lived on what they could kill or grow. They had to wait out the rain for their lives to resume. It was difficult for the farmers to keep up their spirits. Every hot rainless day was the same. Every dinner was rabbit hind and wheat porridge. Those who had said the land was not fit for normal agriculture had been proven right. In 1932, a total of 12 inches of rain fell in the region. Black dust was now covering everything – the ground and the measly shriveled plants that some folks tried to grow. Hazel Lucas tried to remember the beautiful countryside and the bountiful flowers instead of the brownness that had taken over and destroyed everything. Hazel was sure that this stretch of dryness was just another trial and the flowers would bloom again and the hard work of the High Plains people would no longer be futile. Hazel was confident that things would return to normal in 1933. She wanted to start a family soon.

The black dust clouds continued to plague the area. They weren't as severe as the huge cloud of January that year but they were all black, seemed to roll and were abrasive to the skin. The March winds were fierce and they turned into the April winds without a break. A particularly bad storm occurred when Hazel was holding class. Suddenly there were loud bangs. The wind had broken out all the windows allowing the black dust to blow in and cover everything. The land was no longer a victim - it was a threat, an evil force. Sitting Bull had predicted that the land would have its revenge on the white man for forcing the Indians off the grasslands.

Mexicans had inhabited the land longer than any white men. They were asked about the earlier days. Had there ever been a dry spell to match this one? The Mexicans, like the Indians, felt the white man had brought the troubles on himself. They had ruined the grasslands and upset the balance. The old Mexicans recalled other droughts but the people and animals were saved by the grass that survived the heat and arid conditions.

Don Juan Lujan and Joe Garza were hacking and coughing relentlessly. Lujan's wife was dying of a lung disease. Although Lujan was an American, he and other Mexicans feared deportation because of the panic and chaos that dominated the country.

Hugh Hammond Bennett, a cultivation expert, toured the High Plains and had never seen anything like the black blizzards. He concluded that it wasn't the drought or the

heat; it was man who had brought on the awful conditions. The soil had been stripped of its life. He attributed some of the exploitation of the land to the government who, for a period, urged the farmers to overproduce. The farmers of the Great Plains had been working against nature and asking for trouble. And, it seemed, trouble they got. Bennett cited a report that stated Oklahoma alone had lost 440 million tons of topsoil and an incredible 16.5 million acres in Texas had been unnaturally eroded.

Analysis

A troubling sign that brought the Great Depression home to the southern High Plains was the closing of the Dalhart bank. People understandably were upset and a violent crowd gathered and demanded the sheriff to open the doors of the bank. But the bank was insolvent; it lost the people's savings. People began riding the rails in search of work. Some 28,000 businesses failed in 1931 alone. Some blamed the Jews and the Jewish banking system. However, Simon Herzstein, a Jew and Dalhart's clothier, had been in Dalhart longer than most people and was not persecuted by the people who'd lost their money. People in the southern High Plains were starving and there was no sign of rain.

Farmers were in crisis. What little money they had had been wiped out by bank closure or used to survive. There were no prospects for employment or earning money off the land. Governor William Murray of Oklahoma called in the National Guard twenty-seven times in two years. He sent them to force the shut-down of 3,000 oil wells in order to drive up prices. By 1932, the land had dried up, there was no rain or even hope of rain and the heat was oppressive. Some left the area but many other stayed – it was as bad or worse any place else. In January 1932, a black blizzard blew through the area coating everything it passed over in black silt.

Nature was turned upside down. Not only did the people have to deal with drought, no work and the strange dust storms that were becoming more frequent, they faced a huge challenge with an over-abundance of insects. Bugs were hatching off season because of the warm weather. Centipedes, tarantulas and black widows found their way into shacks and dugouts that the people lived in. The dust storms were also depositing insects in the region, bringing them in from other states.

That fall, most farmers didn't bother planting a crop. It cost more to plant and raise the crops than they were worth at market. Mexicans and Indians in the area felt that the white man had brought the problems on himself. Hugh Bennett, a soil expert, agreed with them. The soil had been stripped of its life.

Vocabulary

insolvent, infirmities, vagrancy, lethargic, normalcy, capitalistic, prophesied, fallow, scourge, mastication, cur, disinterment, ubiquity, anomaly, malevolent

Chapters 9 - 11

Summary

Chapter 9: New Leader, New Deal

Bam wandered the country side looking for skunk hides to sell. He learned from those encountered on the road that most people were suffering as badly as he was. The country had tossed out the president and elected a new one. Bam picked up odd jobs whenever he could. He stumbled onto a “Hooverville” in Oklahoma City where thousands of homeless people were living out of orange crates and old cars. School houses closed because there was no money to pay the teachers or heat the classrooms.

Hungry people listen to politicians who talk about food. The people became interested in the concept of democracy. Bill Murray promised if he were president no one would go hungry. But he felt the people had grown soft and lost their will to fight. He wanted to turn back the clock and get the people out of the cities and back to the land that everyone would own a piece of.

When the presidential campaign got into full swing, Hoover’s chances for reelection were bleak. Unemployment was at 25 percent. The only worse time in the history of mankind, one historian commented, was the Dark Ages which lasted 400 years. Al Smith a Catholic who had been the Democratic nominee who had lost to Hoover was running as were Murray and some socialist candidates. The New York governor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, emerged as a candidate. He was from the moneyed class and was seen as having no chance. How could such a high-tone wealthy man understand what the poor were going through? FDR was running on the strength of his family name – his cousin Teddy had been president.

But then Roosevelt began to speak about the forgotten man, the broken farmer of the plains. Although he spoke with a strange accent to those in the Midwest and West, he seemed to speak from his heart. He gave people hope and urged them to be outraged at the same time. Roosevelt had been through his own struggles. He had nearly died of double pneumonia and contracted polio that left him partially paralyzed. He was told that he had no future, would never walk again and wouldn’t live long. But he survived it all and knew personally what a real fight was.

In a speech, Roosevelt called for a return of faith “in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.” He understood the financial impossibility that farmers were living under. Murray tried to stop Roosevelt but was crushed at the Democratic convention by FDR’s momentum. Roosevelt won in a landslide that included Oklahoma and Texas.

Roosevelt was sworn into office in March 1933. His predecessor left him but a shell of a nation. Roosevelt immediately took action. He called a bank holiday for four days to allow the system to stabilize. He addressed the nation on radio about banking. Although he told the people that the banks would be safe to use when they reopened, he privately feared a run on the banks. The people trusted him. By the end of the first week, deposits exceeded withdrawals. There was no run on the banks. Roosevelt added more provisions to the new banking laws that insured individual deposits up to 10,000 dollars.

Roosevelt addressed the farmers next. He knew how they had been encouraged to over produce and how their crops were too expensive to produce. The government would henceforth institute regulations that would control the price and flow of food. He wanted the farmers to work hard but he also wanted them to make a living. The new president had the government buy up surplus food and distribute it to the needy. The next year, the government asked farmers and ranchers to reduce their crops and cattle in exchange for government cash. The Agricultural Adjustment Act created the program and the Civilian Conservation Corps implemented it. The goals were to restore the land and improve the infrastructure. Roosevelt signed a bill to help farmers who were threatened by foreclosure. The Volstead Act allowed the sale of 3.2 percent beer followed a few months later by the repeal of prohibition.

Hugh Bennett still raged against the damage that had been done to the land. In his opinion, it was tragic. The majority of scientists blamed the blighting of the Great Plains on weather not on man. The condition of soil at that time was not thought of as a part of smart conservation. It wasn't an exciting or dramatic subject. But Roosevelt wanted to know more and summoned Bennett to the White House. Bennett told the President that the grassland had been over-farmed. Exploitation and neglect were two of the chief causes of the dust storms that were gaining the nation's attention.

Roosevelt made Murray the director of a new agency in the Interior Department with a goal to stabilize the soil. It was estimated that some 80 million acres of land in the southern plains had been stripped of top soil. Murray began to get the word out. He made speeches that placed the blame on an unsound use of land. The rich loam that had taken millions of years to be deposited on the land was held in place by the dense grass. There was some doubt that the soil could be restored to its original richness.

Still, the drought was relentless. The forecasts were dry and windy with dusters. When Roosevelt visited the area, a farmer said that he'd given them beer, now they needed rain. Roosevelt was not optimistic.

Chapter 10: Big Blows

Fields were barren. The skies carried away the soil. There had been no rain to speak of in more than two years. On a winter day in 1933, black clouds loomed over No Man's Land. At high noon, the sun could not be seen. The clouds let loose with layers and layers of dust that coated the streets of Boise City, rained down on dugouts and fledgling gardens and seeped into bedrooms and dining rooms. Even though windows were taped shut, the black grit found a way in. In February 1933 the temperature

plummeted in Boise City, dropping 70 degrees to fourteen below in less than 24 hours. But the dust still blew in. Driving became a risky undertaking with waves of dust at times making visibility negligible.

March and April 1933 were the worst two months representing a steady two-month block of dirt storms. The cold temperature had killed whatever plants may have made it through to the spring. There was nothing for animals to feed on. Fred Folkers fought the dust with a shovel. After a day of blowing winds, it was not unusual for four feet of dust to be piled up against fences which Folkers had to shovel out. Left alone, these dust piles then blew off in other directions. At the end of April a single duster lasted twenty-four hours.

In May, a huge rain cloud formed which at first seemed to be good news. But stacked on top of it was a series of dusters. The rain came down in big dirty globs. Then a funnel cloud suddenly appeared. It was a vicious tornado that killed four, destroyed structures and left 800 homeless. The tornado was followed by more muddy rain. The summer was the driest ever recorded and ended with another destructive tornado. The Red Cross couldn't keep up with the needs of the people. The High Plains was in ruins.

The people of Dalhart were defiant. They didn't want hand-outs; they wanted jobs. Some farmers left the region but most decided to stay and fight it out. The drought couldn't last forever!

Chapter 11: Triage

In the third year of the drought, government representatives came to the High Plains with a plan to kill off as many farm animals as possible. The dust storms had done great damage to the animals. Most were already half dead and there was no grass for them to graze on. There would be no new growth in the flyaway ground. The goal of the government was to eliminate meat and grain surpluses. The government offered to pay the farmers for the livestock. The meat from the animals would go to the hungry. Most farmers realized that it was a good plan, really the only plan. The slaughter of these dying animals would bring prices back up. Many predicted that the land would eventually be abandoned as uninhabitable. A Kansas newspaperman wrote that it was time for the farmers to acknowledge what they had done.

With the killing of the animals, a little money was available to boost Dalhart's economy. McCarty encouraged people to get out and have fun. There was a baseball game scheduled. He talked of a bright future and tried to convince people to stay. Rain and prosperity was just around the corner. The rabbit drives were on-going. Some felt it was them or the rabbits. Reverend Joe Hankins held a revival on the Fourth of July. A huge dust cloud formed in the Dakotas and Montana and moved in a southeasterly direction. It dumped six thousand tons of dust on Chicago alone. It moved on to Boston and New York slipping the latter into darkness. The storm was 1,800 miles wide and weighed 350 million tons. In 1934, New York City was already considered a "dirty" city. The dust typically measured 227 particles per square millimeter. But on May 11th, the reading soared to 619 particles. The cloud hovered over New York City for five hours, dumping

dirt the entire time. Washington, D.C., Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia were all victims of the dirty deluge. But it was just a one-time event. In No Man's Land dust storms were a common occurrence.

Black-flaked snow that fell in No Man's Land that year. Late in March, the sun was blocked for six days in a row. Debilitating dust storms occurred every month that year. Lesser dust storms swirled every day. The worst storms were experienced in Colorado, Kansas, the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas and in northeastern New Mexico. It was impossible for the people in the region not to inhale the dust particles. People lost their possessions and all hope.

Analysis

When President Hoover ran for reelection, his chances were slim to none. There was 25 percent unemployment. Governor Murray of Oklahoma was a Democratic candidate for president. But he and the others seeking the highest office in the land were outshined by the Governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Even though he was a rich elitist, he was the first politician to speak about the forgotten man at the "bottom of the economic pyramid." He spoke to the people of the Dust Bowl when he talked of the broken farmer of the plains. He gave the people new hope but urged them to be angry about the state of things. After he was elected, Roosevelt focused on helping the farmers and ranchers of the southern plains. He implemented regulations, bought surpluses, and passed legislation to restore the area.

March and April 1933 were the worst months up to that point for the occurrence of dust storms. The dust clouds rained down globs of dirt and silt but did nothing to relieve the drought and the dried out terrain. An unusually fierce storm in May killed four people and left 800 homeless. The Red Cross was unable to keep up with the needs for assistance.

In the drought's third year, government agents come to the High Plains to kill off farm animals. Most of the animals were sick and dying and had nothing to eat since there was no grazing land. The farmers and ranchers were paid for the animals. The surplus meat was given to the poor. A huge dust cloud formed in Montana but instead of sliding down south it traveled east and gave New York and other eastern communities their first taste of a dust storm. People in the plains were inhaling the dust particles which caused dust pneumonia, a new disease, to emerge.

Vocabulary

dilettante, jaunty, glowered, charisma, homily, anemic, emaciated, amnesia, futuristic, ferocity

Chapters 12 - 14

Summary

Chapter 12: The Long Darkness

Charles took Hazel to Clayton, New Mexico, to prepare for the delivery of her baby, as Boise City had no hospital; besides, the air was cleaner in Clayton. When he got word that the baby was coming he drove the 60 miles in his Model-T to be with Hazel. He drove during the day time but could only see a few car lengths ahead of him. He proceeded cautiously. People in the area were used to driving under these risky conditions. But as careful as he was, Charles ran into a drift and was stuck in dust that had coated the road. He tried to shovel the dust away but there was too much. As he shoveled even more dust blew onto the pile.

Charles wanted to get to the hospital so he started walking. Authorities warned people not to travel alone or walk during a duster. Charles found his way to a farm where he asked for help. The farmer drove him back to his car and the two men were able to pull his car out. Charles' car tipped over when he was surprised by a sharp turn. He was bloodied and bruised but was able to crawl out and right the Model-T. He traveled on and made it to the hospital on time. The doctor warned Hazel and Charles against taking their baby girl into the polluted air. He ordered Hazel to stay in the hospital with the baby another ten days. He suggested that they might consider moving out of No Man's Land. But like the Lucas family, Hazel and Charles had their roots in the High Plains and had no plans to leave.

In many ways, 1934 was the worst year. In May, the temperature hit 100 degrees in North Dakota. Nebraska began to get hit with dust storms. Ten million acres of farmland in Nebraska was either not planted at all or not suitable for planting. The year was the driest yet and what little grass that had remained was being smothered by dust. Animals were choking to death on the dust. The government offered contracts to wheat farmers if they agreed not to plant for the next year. The average payment to the farmers was $498, enough money to keep them afloat. In all, the federal government invested almost one million dollars in the farmers of the High Plains. Governor Murray was furious. The federal government was making the people of the Sooner state into a bunch of leaners. Murray was still bitter about his rival becoming president and outdoing him. Unemployment was still high but government jobs had put four million people back to work. Although Murray raged against FDR, the people loved their new president. He was their salvation.

Although Murray had supported FDR's idea of building a dam in the region, FDR was told that the technology was not there yet. There were conflicts in the administration. Some felt that the people in the region should be given incentives to leave the region. It was dangerous and unhealthy and could never again be revived as farmland. FDR favored trying to rehabilitate the land. He suggested transplanting trees from Canada

into Texas, but saplings wouldn't withstand the strong winds. FDR ordered the Forest Service to learn if there were any tree species that could survive the conditions in the region. He asked Hugh Bennett to consider the idea of incentivizing people to leave No Man's Land.

Water was nearly non-existent. The Boise City News ran a front-page photo of a pond that was created by a farmer who pumped water into a basin by using windmill power. But in most cases, people were losing their personal orchards and vegetable gardens. Proactive farmers canned thistle in brine to make it more appealing for human consumption and turned to the yucca plant roots to feed the cows with. Newborn calves were small and sickly. Some farmers killed the calves at birth because it was obvious they couldn't make it. People learned to use every part of a slaughtered animal. People struggled to feed and clothe their children. One inventive fourteen-year-old girl had one pair of black shoes which she painted white for church. Many German immigrants left for the lush land in Washington State and Canada.

The sheriff in Boise City was paid $125 a month which was better than the teachers who were paid nothing. Hazel resigned her position after finding out that the scrip she was given in replace of pay was not honored by the bank. By 1934, 60 percent of landowners were behind in their taxes. The schools could no longer afford to by textbooks. The Cimarron County High School consisted of just two shacks and windows that were covered with three years of dust. Some pastors preached that the people of No Man's Land were being punished by God for their sins.

Hazel discovered a baby in a coffee box on the steps of the church. The infant was nearly blue when she rushed it home. She was able to save the baby which was adopted by a couple in town. Unfortunately, the baby died a short time later from dust pneumonia.

Chapter 13: The Struggle for Air

In the winter of 1935, every member of the Olsteen family had a cough and red eyes. They tried desperately to seal off their dugout from the dust but they had little success. They used masks from the Red Cross which quickly turned black. They rigged up a sponge device to breathe through but the general store ran out of sponges. The tractor that Ike had earned money with was buried in dust. Wading through shoulder-high drifts of dust to use the outhouse was a challenge. A black blizzard in February knocked telephone poles down. Ike attended school when he could. School children were sometimes trapped in the school house because it was too dangerous to walk home. Ambitions and dreams dried up like the grass and wheat. The goal of most people was just to breathe clean air. Ike thought about leaving the area for New Mexico or even California. But his mother wanted him to finish school before he left.

Beginning on the first day of March, there was a dust storm every day of the month. The incidence of dust pneumonia was on the increase. Some people showed early signs of tuberculosis and silicosis. One doctor told his 20-year-old patient that he was literally filled with dirt. The man died the next day. Families pleaded with the government for

help in leaving the region. Their children were being choked to death. The Red Cross declared a medical emergency in the High Plains region in 1935. People who sought health care had to deal with driving through the dust storms and dust piles to get there. The majority of hospital patients suffered from a respiratory disorder. The air was so bad that passengers on a train going through the area complained of the dust. One train derailed when it encountered a pile of dust on the tracks.

Chapter 14: Showdown in Dalhart

The courtroom in Dalhart stayed busy with foreclosures. Dick Coon acquired a pool hall for $612. Banks foreclosed on a variety of property – cattle, tractors, windmills and even light fixtures. The Herzsteins finally had to give up on reviving their clothier. Two black men who stepped off of a train were arrested; they hadn't read the sign that said, "Black man don't let the sun go down on you here." They remained in jail for a week and the judge made them dance at their arraignment, because he'd been told that all they were good for was tap dancing. Apparently, he wasn't impressed with their dancing and sentenced them to two more months in jail.

The judicial system also had to deal with people who were driven insane by the conditions in the region. A young judge, Wilson Cowen, tried a 35-year-old woman who was found wandering the streets talking incoherently to herself. Her husband hand died of dust pneumonia and she had three children who were hungry and coughing. One day she just lost it. "Dust is killing me!" The Judge was a sympathetic man and offered ideas for her to improve her situation. There was a relief house that just opened in town. Doc Dawson was running the soup kitchen after he had failed to make anything from his land investments. All the woman could respond was that dust was killing her and her children. Cowen was hopeful that a new process known as contour plowing could restore the land and then if it rained…. Hugh Bennett was in charge of the pilot program. He would only promise to help the people if they promised in writing to not overuse the soil. The jury found the woman incapable of caring for her children. Cowan signed the paperwork sending her to an insane asylum. The children became wards of the state. Fifty years later the case still haunted him.

Dealing with the wind, lack of sunlight and the dust that permeated their two-room shack almost made Lizzie White snap. She could not adequately feed her children and feared that they'd succumb to dust pneumonia. Young Melt White was in charge of getting water to the garden. The family's only treat in life was slicing open a delicious ripe watermelon. The melons grew surprisingly large and delectable. One day he went to the garden after a storm and found everything in the garden, including the watermelons, dead. Their produce had been severely scorched by the statistic electricity that always accompanied dust storms. The storms brought three killers: the wind, the dust and the static electricity.

One day the children came home from school and found their mother crouched in the corner, sobbing. She couldn't live like this any longer. Bam had only been able to find odd jobs here and there. Several ranches he worked at including the James ranch had failed and were gone. He wanted to be a cowboy but there were no openings. The black

blizzards had obliterated the need for ranch hands. A meeting was held at the Dalhart Courthouse for ranches and former ranches to air their complaints. When Andy James's family first came to the area, it was all grassland. There were no farmers to plow up the soil and he was told there never would be. To him, the ranch and the grassland was paradise. Andy blamed the farmers for tearing up the grassland, ruining it. He ended his remarks by asking that everyone give the government the chance to right things. If the renewal process was successful, grass could return to the grasslands in a few years. Andy James and another rancher were elected to write a letter to Washington to let the government know that they were on board and would cooperate.

The two jailed black men were brought to court again and admitted that they had been hungry when the exited from the train and that they had looked for food and warmth. The judge found them guilty and sentenced them to 120 more days in jail. He didn't let them exit the courtroom until they danced for him again. McCarty was still trying to pitch Dalhart to potential new residents running a photo of the town looking its very best. McCarty's campaign was thwarted by Fox Movietone News that came into the area to film the destruction that the dust storms were causing. The film would be seen by millions in theaters across the nation.

The intensity of the black storms deepened. One storm in the winter hammered a wide region of the plains with particles that were more like gravel than silt. McCarty went over the top when he began a series of columns in which he praised the dust storms as majestic and unique to the High Plains. Some thought he'd gone mad; others welcomed his positive spin. McCarty praised the people who were standing up to the difficult conditions. Other Americans were soft but the people of the High Plains had proven their strength and resiliency. His words propelled people from five counties to organize a "rally to fight dust." Some 700 citizens vowed to make the county blossom again.

In reality, however, McCarty couldn't do anything to stop the dust storms and couldn't do anything to change the reality of the challenge of revitalizing the region. The wind still blew and people still died from the dust. McCarty minimized the dust storms and deaths in Dalhart instead focusing on the plight of other states and regions like Kansas where dust fell in heaps and storms unleashed 4.7 tons of dust per acre in March and April of 1935. McCarty blamed other locations as the sources of the dust that blew into Dalhart.

People were dying and starving while McCarty tried to cheerlead the people into victory over the storms although the method of doing so remained vague and undefined. On some days, two-hundred people lined up at Doc Dawson's soup kitchen which was financed by Dick Coon who had a soft spot for the people's plight. The Red Cross held a drive for shoes, asking people to donate shoes that they didn't use or didn't fit. A cobbler fixed the shoes up and they were given away at the DeSoto Hotel. Shoes were appreciated but what they needed was rain. By March, less than a half of inch of precipitation had fallen.

McCarty kept insisting that the rains would soon be coming but 1935 was drier than 1934. People tried all sorts of rituals to bring on the rain from hanging a dead snakes upside down to concussing the skies. One man flew kites that were loaded down with

dynamite. Nothing worked. A man named Tex Thornton was hired to hit the clouds with a blend of TNT and solidified nitro-glycerin. He claimed he used this method to break the drought in Council Grove, Kansas. The hat was passed around and Tex was paid $500 in advance. Dalhart was hopeful.

Analysis

Charles Snow, Hazel Lucas Snow's husband, took Hazel to Clayton, New Mexico, to have the baby. There were no facilities in Boise City. When the baby was ready to be delivered, Charles took off from Boise City in his Model-T but ran into trouble with the dirt and grit from the dust storms and had to walk part of the way. The doctor warned the couple not to raise their baby girl in the polluted air of Boise City, but the young couple felt their roots were there and decided to tough it out.

Conditions were worsening. Animals were choking to death on the dust and grit the swallowed and breathed in. Unemployment improved thanks to government jobs and farmers were giving subsidies to keep them afloat. The people loved FDR. He was a positive thinker who never had any doubt that the area couldn't be rehabilitated. He felt man could fix anything. Boise City was becoming blighted and in disrepair. People were struggling to feed and clothe their children. Some pastors preached that the people were being punished for their sins.

People were using sponges in breathing devices they rigged up to avoid inhaling the dangerous air. People had to wade through shoulder-high dust drifts just to get to their outhouses. Dust storms were on the increase as were incidences of dust pneumonia. The Red Cross declared a medical emergency in the area.

The Dalhart courtroom was busy with farm foreclosures. Racism was alive and well in the Panhandle. Two black men failed to see the sign that black men weren't welcome and were arrested. The judicial system also had to deal with people who had literally gone insane from their horrid living conditions. The jury found a woman to be incapable of taking care of her children because of her mental state. The judge was forced to take her children away from her. Lizzie White, Bam's wife, was ready to snap. How long could she continue to keep her children fed and alive?

The storms were relentless and brought with the three killers each time they blew in: wind, dust and static electricity. The storms were becoming more fierce – raining down grit instead of silt. McCarty wanted to boost the spirits of the people in Dalhart and called the storms majestic and unique to the high plains. Probably nobody bought that but they appreciated that he praised them for their strength of character. People tried every trick in the book to make it rain – even having an "expert" shoot TNT up into the clouds. Nothing worked.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

incessant, maelstrom, converging, vertigo, subsidy, benevolent, patronage, travails, decrepit, chauvinism, hypothermic, arraignment, incoherent, gothic, panoramic, netherworld, transient, centurion, boosterism, emaciated, howitzer

Chapters 15 - 17

Summary

Chapter 15: Duster's Eve

Ruth Nell, Hazel's baby, began to cough that winter. As many precautions as Hazel took, the dust still found its way to the baby's throat. Ruth Nell was diagnosed with whooping cough. The doctor advised Hazel to take the baby away from the area. Forty miles to the south, Loumiza Lucas had the same cough. Loumiza was the baby's great-grandmother. She was in pain and ate very little. She huddled in her bed with the quilts pull up over her most of the time. She wasn't worried about herself. She was worried about baby Ruth Nell.

Just before Ruth Nell's first birthday, Hazel and Charles decided to move. Staying would risk the baby's life. Hazel made arrangements to stay with her in-laws in Enid, Oklahoma. Just before they were to leave, a tornado touched down in Enid. They didn't know what to do and which place was safer. In the end, it was decided that staying was riskier. The train ride was frequently interrupted when it stopped to let the crew shovel dust off the tracks. Ruth Nell's condition seemed to worsen. New doctors confirmed that the baby had dust pneumonia. Ruth was placed in the dust ward. Her torso was gauzed and taped. She had broken a rib from coughing so hard. Hazel called for Charles to come and join her. The baby was not doing well.

The drive for Charles was treacherous and it was 300 miles long, but he had to get to his wife and daughter and found a way to stay on the road despite the problems he encountered. Half way there, he drove into a dust storm. The static from the storm shorted out his car and he was stranded. When the storm passed, he was able to start the car. He made it to the hospital but Ruth Nell had died about an hour before. A short while later, Loumiza rolled over in her bed and passed away, too. A double funeral was held for them.

Chapter 16: Black Sunday

The second Sunday in April was bright and sunny and the air was clear. There was no wind and the horizon went on in infinity like its former self. People emerged from their shanties and dugouts without goggles or masks. The terrain was still coated with dust, the trees that existed were skeletal and gardens were dead or dying. The community had suffered some forty-nine dusters in the last three months. But on that Sunday in April there was promise in the air that the worst was over.

Windows were unsealed and opened, houses were swept clean and repairs were made both inside and out. The cows would be drinking clear water that day, free of grit. Chickens ran around the yard fluffing their feathers. It was a perfect day for a rabbit drive. God was in a forgiving mood – it was Palm Sunday and it was a wonderful day.

Now all they needed was rain. Ike Olsteen was seventeen now. He was energized by the opportunity to get out and do some outside chores. He hadn't seen a panoramic view of his family's 320 acres in many months. It looks different; he had to familiarize himself with it again. He found buried equipment but didn't stop to dig them out. He wondered what state their top soil had landed in. He dug out the fruit cellar and his brother brought water in so everyone could have a bath. Ike got the Model-A running again. Ike and two school friends drove with the windows down and the warm air hitting their faces. It was surely the best day of the year… of many years.

At the same time up in Bismarck, North Dakota, there was a high-pressure system looming over the Dakotas that was being confronted by a cold front from the Yukon. The air soon turned violent. Winds rushed over the grasslands with dust so heavy that visibility was limited to a hundred yards. It was the biggest dust storm to hit the Dakotas. The sky was dark; some thought it was a tornado. The storm the year before had followed the jet stream and moved to the east coast. This one moved south with the cold front into Nebraska. When the storm passed over Kansas, it was 200 miles wide with winds whipping at tornado speeds. The temperature plummeted in Colorado as the storm blocked the sun. Dodge City went black when the front edge of the storm passed. It appeared to be thousands of feet high. There was no warning. A few minutes before, it was sunny and 81. People fled to shelters. It was the biggest duster ever seen in Kansas.

In the northern reaches of No Man's Land people were poised to begin their rabbit drive. Ike was driving with his friends when they noticed rabbits and birds fleeing to the south. The boys couldn't figure out why – there wasn't even a wind. They looked around and saw what had frightened the birds and animals. It was the mother of all dust storms. The static was shooting through Ike's car. The boys shot out of the car and ran to the Coulters' house nearby. They nearly made it to the house but the storm caught them and slammed them to the ground. They were blinded by the dust and could hardly breathe. The crawled to the house and went inside. It was just as black inside as it was outside. They couldn't see their hands in front of their faces.

The funeral of baby Ruth Nell and her great-grandmother was taking place that day. Hazel was struggling to keep herself together and reconcile the beautiful day with the funeral of her baby and grandmother. The funeral procession consisted of a long line of Model-As and Model-Ts. It was on its way to the cemetery to bury Grandma Lou. The procession stopped to shovel a drift off the road so they could pass. Soon they saw the huge black cloud coming at them. Some thought it was the top of a mountain that had been blown off. Some in the procession wanted to turn around; others wanted to proceed with the burial. But it was too late for debate. The black cloud passed over and let loose with its venom. People hunkered down in their cars or under them shielding themselves as best they could from the storm. The cars were covered with dust and granular bits and it was dark for more than an hour. They had no choice but to turn around and go back to town. Some cars were shorted out by the static electricity. Since it was impossible to see where the road was with the piles of dust, a line of men walked the road in front of the cars to lead the way.

In the northern section of No Man's Land, Joe Garza and a pal took advantage of the good weather to look for stray cattle. After rounding up some cattle, they took a break, made a camp and were lying under a tree when they saw flocks of birds flying frantically over the camp. Their horses were acting up. Then they saw the leading edge of the storm approaching. They hurried to take shelter in a nearby cabin but the dirt rained down on them. The dust and dirt took over the space not leaving enough oxygen for them to breathe and stay alive. Joe heard a screaming voice. He couldn't tell if it was an animal or person. He went outside in the black and groped around, searching for the source of the voice with his hands like a blind person. He found a young boy who had been herding sheep. His friend talked him and the young boy back to the cabin. There was more oxygen in the cabin now but they still couldn't see each other.

Just when the rabbit hunters were ready to pounce on their prey, the huge duster hit. People dropped their clubs and ran for their cars. Some ran to the schoolhouse for safety. Chickens on the Folkers' homestead began roosting when the sky turned black. Katherine Folkers had just clean three years of dirt of their house that day only to have it fill right back up again. AP reporters and photographers traveled over the Oklahoma state line in time to capture photos of the beastly duster. In Boise City, people were seeking safety in the Crystal Hotel. They also wanted news. When would the storm end and where had it come from?

One man was caught unawares and was flattened by the duster. He groped his way on his hands and knees to find shelter. His eyes were filled with dirt. He rubbed them which only drove the grit in deeper. The man lost his vision that day and never recovered it. Willie Ehrlich and his sister were walking their land on the clear sunny day when they spotted what they thought was a huge rain cloud. Looking closer, Willie saw that it was actually a huge duster. The cloud knocked them over and, like the others, they couldn't see an inch in front of their faces. He had to feel his way to the barn.

The White family had cleaned their house and their clothes and shoes. For the first time in years, everything was clean. Lizzie had wanted to move out of Dalhart for a long time, but it had been impossible. Her son, Melt, was outside when he saw the dust cloud heading their way. Bam took a look and hollered for his family to get inside and shut the windows. Within seconds, everything was filthier than it had ever been. They couldn't see an inch in front of their faces. A train conductor stopped on the tracks unwilling to continue in the blackness. Cars died on Main Street in Dalhart. John McCarty was reading a book when the page and the room went black. He found a window and looked into more black. He would not be writing an article praising the glory and beauty of nature this time. His headline was, "Summer Day Turned into Nightmare." Folksinger Woody Guthrie had been sitting around with friends when the duster hit. Guthrie started humming the first line of, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Ya."

The duster that had begun its trek in the Dakotas was finally beginning to dissipate after passing through its final U.S. destination, Amarillo.

Chapter 17: A Call to Arms

The AP photos and stories about the duster that wiped out the sun stunned America. The earlier dust storms had been all but ignored by the nation. The AP reporter coined the phrase, “Dust Bowl” and it stuck. People tried to explain the gigantic dust storm. It was typical for old air over Canada to push down over the plains. What made the result different in 1935, however, was that the land was barren. Had there been grass or wheat growing, the soil would not have become part of the storm. The grass would have anchored the earth down. As the behemoth traveled south, it grew as it lifted up more dirt with every inch it traveled.

Hugh Bennett argued before Congress that he needed enough resources to make a permanent change in the High Plains. He wanted to eliminate wipeouts and restore the grassland. Others testified that the region was dead man’s land. The only hope was a miracle and rain. Bennett stressed that not fixing the problem would be allowing the total collapse of mid-America. One-hundred million acres had been stripped of its top soil. It could not be farmed in its current state. Roosevelt was getting conflicting information. One geologist told him that a shift in nature was taking place. The Agriculture Department called it a severe though temporary drought. Roosevelt still liked the idea of planting drought-resistant trees in the area. Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, believed that the drought had just reinforced the fact that the land was in ruins. But with all the efforts of the Roosevelt administration thus far, the farm system in the mid-section of the country was still broken.

Hugh Bennett tried a different approach. He suggested a system of community farming which would require shared conservatism and a vow not to over-use the land. Although Bennett was given relief funds of $5 million, he tried to convince the administration that the disaster in the High Plains was not a natural one. Out of ignorance and arrogance, it had been caused by man. Bennett needed resources to hold the ground down for generations to come. It wasn’t just another public works project. The farmers were tough, independent people but they were on their knees now begging for help. Still, Congress felt there were more urgent needs. Unemployment remained the most pressing issue of the nation. There were shattered lives and dreams from sea to shining sea. Why should the Dust Bowl get so much attention?

When Bennett appeared before Congress using Black Sunday to make his case, as if on cue a huge dust cloud blotted out the sun over the capitol. According to the Weather Bureau the black cloud had originated in No Man’s Land. Bennett told them to look out the window. “There goes Oklahoma,” he told them. Bennett got his money. His agency’s mission was to “restore and sustain the health of the soil.” Congress passed the Soil Conservation Act. Employees were immediately reassigned from the Forest Service to work on the restoration. To back up Bennett’s efforts, Roosevelt also signed the Resettlement Administration which loaned money to people in the region to restart their lives.

Roosevelt also had a slight reversal of policy when he issued an executive order that granted the federal government to buy back the homesteads. McCarty was outraged – no one was going to kick the people of Dalhart out! He established the Last Man Club and named himself president. Club members had to vow to remain in Dalhart no matter

what. At a speech that gained national attention, McCarty declared that they were going to stay “till hell freezes over.” Judge Cowan was a member of the club but he was practical. He knew many citizens could not stay in Dalhart. He saw to it that a filling station gave departing families ten gallons of gas and a secondhand tire. Those who left were considered deserters by the Last Man Club.

Club members still hoped for a technological breakthrough. Tex Thornton was a rainmaker with a supply of explosives to bomb the sky with. In May Tex fired off his rain-making bombs a few miles outside of town. There was something that resembled thunder but no rain – only dust and wind. Tex tried again and again but with the same results. On the fourth night, Tex had done some reconfiguring and was ready to bomb the skies again. The temperatures fell and low clouds moved in. The next day it snowed and sleeted. McCarty was delighted and Tex took credit for it.

In Boise City, Hazel was suffering from a deep depression and guilt for not moving her baby out of danger. The terrain was even more depressing – brown with not a sign of green anywhere. By late 1935, twenty percent of the population had pulled up stakes and left Cimarron County. Hazel received letters from friends who had fled for California. It was no better than Cimarron County, they wrote. They were called “Okie” which meant they were throwaway people. A sign in California’s Central Valley read, “Okies and Dogs Not Allowed Inside.” Things were dire in Boise City. The Cimarron County commissioners sent a letter to the White House stating that 80 percent of the residents of the county were starving and needed help.

Analysis

Hazel and Charles deeply regretted their decision to stay in Boise City. Their one-year-old daughter succumbed to dust pneumonia. On the same day, 40 miles to the south, Hazel’s grandmother died of the same disease. A double-funeral was planned for them.

The second Sunday in April was surprisingly bright and clear. People emerged from their rundown homes and looked around at the sunny sky that didn’t have a sign of a coming dust storm. But a ferocious storm, the worst of all the years of the Dust Bowl, was forming up north and colliding with a cold front that sent it crashing down on the unsuspected people of the south plains. The day became known as Black Sunday. People had upset nature and it was payback time. The Mexicans, Indians and Hugh Bennett were right – the white man had upset the natural ecology of the region.

The AP ran photos of the destruction caused by the whopper dust storm on Black Sunday. The rest of the country was shocked by what they saw. Hugh Bennett pleaded for funds to help the area. Not fixing the problem would result in the collapse of middle America. Eventually, he got funding for a new agency under the Soil Conservation Act. Roosevelt believed the region could be restored but he also gave the people an out by putting an offer on the table to buy back the homesteads. McCarty reacted with anger and established the Last Man Club. Members of this club had to vow to stay in Dalhart no matter what happened.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

bluestem, jalopies, alabaster, reconnaissance, anecdotes, luminous, incongruously, cajole, paean, itinerate, lexicon, irrevocable, utopian, hubris, yeoman, triage, detritus

Chapters 18 - 20

Summary

Chapter 18: Goings

In May the temperature rose to 105, the highest ever recorded in Baca County. Ike and his brother tried to cool their dugout with buckets of water. The family members tried not to touch each other because of the shocks from the static electricity. Ike's mother was thinking of moving the girls to town. The area was in decline. Ike had gone to school in Richards but it was now just a post office. The region was one of the hardest hit in the entire Dust Bowl. Most residents would have starved without the relief supplied by the government. May 5th was named a day of prayer for rain by local churches. Rain disappeared as quickly as it had come and had no effect on the bone-dry earth.

In the summer of 1935, FDR signed the Social Security Act, launched the Works Progress Administration and supported the National Labor Relations Act. Farm economy was improving; crop prices were up. Oscar still believed in the land and worked at rehabbing his property. Ike didn't see any future for him in the Dust Bowl, but he loved the land and part of him wanted to stay. Just as his mother had wanted, Ike graduated from high school. He was the class salutatorian and gave a little speech at the graduation ceremony. After the ceremony, he gave his diploma to his mother because he wasn't as smart as she was. Later in the year, she moved the girls to town and told the boys to split up the land. They could sell it or stay – it was up to them. Ike gave his share to Oscar who wanted to stay. Ike packed up to leave and said his goodbyes to Oscar. Ike didn't know where he was heading. He just started walking.

Chapter 19: Witnesses

Don and Verna Hartwell withstood four years of drought and debt but Black Sunday had almost destroyed any chance to make their farm work. The devastating black storm had been followed a short while later by a flash flood that pushed his house off its foundation. The flood was followed by another series of dusters that destroyed the few crops he'd been able to raise. Don decided to write his own history and not leave it to someone who hadn't been through it. He began his diary on New Year's Day 1936. His story would be that of a farmer on the Kansas-Nebraska border when homesteads became graveyards. He kept his diary a secret even from Verna.

Don told the story of his parents and his childhood in Nebraska. His father died in 1934, one of the worst years during the drought. His father had raised livestock on a farm near Inavale, Nebraska. The town had once thrived but declined when farm prices crashed. The Depression and drought were two more death blows. Don's father lost what money he had when the bank closed. Don and Verna lived on the edge of the Dust Bowl on a small farm. He picked up extra money playing piano at dances. Verna made money making dresses for women in town.

Don's entries indicated his declining spirit and the rough times he and his wife were experiencing. He tried to hold onto the farm by selling one of his horses. He wrote that he heard on the radio that Spring had come. Spring and summer had been Don's favorite seasons but now it was just dusty, windy and mean outside. The air was filled with dust making it at times impossible to see. In late April he wrote of getting the piano that used to be at the pool hall. He didn't know how long he could keep it. What was once a sea of alfalfa and corn had turned into a desert wasteland that could never be reclaimed. Many are leaving the area. The ground surface was 142 degrees on June 27th. On July 15th, Don had never seen a worse year – the corn was all dead and the pastures looked like January instead of July. In September he wondered what he'd being doing the next September. In October he listed to the World Series on the radio and in December he sold a pig for $9. Christmas was the warmest December in his memory.

Roy Emerson Stryker was hired by the Roosevelt administration to record the history of the Dust Bowl with cameras. He sent his photographers to the devastated area to capture the faces of the disaster area. Arthur Rothstein was just twenty-one when he was sent out to shoot the Dust Bowl. He captured some exquisite photos that captured the plight of the people. In one photo, a car was racing down a road just ahead of a black cloud that dwarfed it. In another, father and son were fleeing from a dust storm into a rickety outbuilding. It looked like they were literally being swallowed up by the earth.

Pare Lorentz made a documentary about what brought the Great Plains to ruination. It had no backers in Hollywood but Stryker had set up a documentary division and was very interested in the film. The film industry that had rejected the film did everything they could do to stop its release. It wasn't the government's role to make films. It would surely be seen as propaganda. After much debate, the film was released and became one of the most influential and compelling documentaries ever made. Lorentz wanted an old cowpoke to be the image of the story and none other than Bam White was elected. Bam had the haggard face and a couple of tired-looking horses that pulled his wagon. Bam White's image against the backdrop of the blowing dust was the lasting image from the film which was entitled, "The Plow that Broke the Plains." Bam took his family to see the film. It was the first movie that Melt had ever seen. Bam was moved to tears. The president watched the film and FDR was able to stare into the face that symbolized the Dust Bowl.

Chapter 20: The Saddest Land

Hazel was five-months pregnant at the start of 1936. Whether she would have her baby in No Man's Land was a big question. Government agents had determined that 850 million tons of topsoil had blown off the southern plains in just the last year alone. The losses were staggering throughout the region. Unless there was a turn-around, the plains would become as dry as the Arabian Desert. The schools, churches and homes were eroding away just like the grass had. The debate continued within the federal government whether there should be a campaign to rehabilitate the region or if it should be let go which would eventually force everyone to leave. Roosevelt understood the

stakes involved, but he fundamentally believed that man could fix anything. He favored restoration.

Bennett found the best grass to reseed the Dust Bowl with, but the problem was how to keep the seeds in place until they could take root. Yet, the government was still paying people to abandon their farms. An idea to give the land back to the Indians floated around. The government would be exchanging cowboys for Indians.

The Dust Bowl was getting a lot of attention. Journalist Ernie Pyle, an influential writer of the day, toured the plains in the summer of 1936. He referred to the area as “this withering land of misery.” He saw only bare earth and abandoned farmhouses. He wrote that it was the “saddest land” he’d ever seen. The Atlantic Monthly magazine had a column, “Letters from the Dust Bowl,” written by Holyoke graduate and farmer’s wife, Caroline Henderson. She described the horrid existence of the women of the Dust Bowl. She loved the farm but, like standing by a dying spouse, it broke her heart.

Hazel had a baby boy in northern Kansas. He was strong and healthy. The family had to figure out where to live. Summer temperatures were reaching 118 degrees in No Man’s Land and 120 degrees in Shattuck and no rain to speak of. By the end of the year Hazel, Charles and the baby moved to Vici, Oklahoma in the center of the state.

Although many of the German settlers were considering abandoning their property, George Ehrlich believed he would survive it. However, the drought was in its fifth year and was wearing him down. The doctor diagnosed the Borth children with dust pneumonia and strongly urged the family to move. Gustav Borth concluded that it was hopeless. He moved the children to southern Texas. He missed the Old World and lived with a sense of failure. McCarty was livid about the documentary saying that it was just propaganda. Filmmaker Lorentz was not the only one to point blame at the farmers for spoiling the earth. Ranchers and soil scientists such as Hugh Bennett had made the same case. New York Times reporter Harlan Miller wrote that the farmers had “plowed recklessly during the World War and since.”

The government kept Dalhart alive. Bennett came to town with the biggest soil conservation plan in the plains. It was called “Operation Dust Bowl.” It was based on Bennett’s concept of contour plowing and community farming meaning that all farmers had to buy into the pledge to not overuse the soil. FDR wanted a report from Bennett by the end of the summer on what the causes of the disaster was. McCarty kept up a good front to Bennett stressing that the citizens of Dalhart were fighters and deserved a break. Right when McCarty was beginning a speech, a cloud went over dropping some rain but mostly red mud.

Analysis

In the summer of 1935, FDR signed into law the Social Security Act, launched the Works Program Administration and gave his support to the National Labor Relations Act. Ike Olsteen didn’t see his future there in the Dust Bowl, but his widowed mother

wanted to see him graduate from high school. Therefore, Ike stuck it out, but after the graduation ceremony, he gave his diploma to his mother telling her that she was smarter than he was. Ike then packed up and left, not knowing where it was heading.

Don Hartwell kept a secret diary of the years he struggled through the Depression and Dust Bowl. In the diary he expressed his sadness and lack of hope for a way out. The drought had broken him and he didn't see any way to make the land work for him. Word was finally getting out to the rest of the country about the dire conditions in the southern plains. The Roosevelt administration hired a photography team to record the destruction of the region. Later a documentarian made a film about the disaster area. He used Bam White with his frail slumped body and craggy, crack face as a symbol of the Dust Bowl.

Government agents learned that 850 million tons of topsoil had blown off the southern plains. If conditions didn't improve, America would have a desert in its midsection. Some in the government thought the region was ruined and uninhabitable and that the people should abandon it, but Roosevelt had a positive attitude. He was for restoration and supported Hugh Bennett in his efforts. Hazel Snow had a baby boy and the family made a wise decision by moving out of the area.

Vocabulary

salutatorian, documentarian, propaganda, assuage, peripatetic, iconic, idiom, enormity, epitome

Chapters 21 - 23

Summary

Chapter 21: Verdict

Bennett reported back to FDR that he thought the Great Plains could be saved, but there was no quick solution, no miracle that would instantly turn it around. Bennett believed that the answer was for the farms to treat the prairie soil with respect, save what soil could be saved through contour plowing, crop rotation and conservation. Roosevelt wanted an honest verdict on why the top soil had blown away. Had homesteading the region been a mistake? Bennett submitted his findings in a report on August 17, 1936. The report found that the climate had not changed and that droughts were part of the normal cycle of the region. It was wrong-headed public policies that were responsible for the decline of the area, most specifically the homesteading policy which led to over-grazing and over-cropping.

The fundamental cause of the region's demise was the attempt to force a system of agriculture that was not a natural fit for the High Plains. The land had been stripped of grass which is what had for centuries kept the soil in place. The turf had been successful for thousands of years. The cattle boom and the wheat bubble destroyed the fruit of all those years in just a few years. Bennett didn't place the blame at the feet of the farmers. They were naïve and ignorant of the nature of the land. They had been led astray. The Homestead Act of 1862 which limited holdings per individual to 160 acres guaranteed poverty. There were other elements to blame – technological advances, wartime demands. Eighty percent of the Great Plains was now in some stage of erosion. And 10,000 people a month were leaving the plains.

Bennett stressed that there was no easy solution. Even a wet season that would give hope was not a lasting remedy. The success of the farms of the High Plains in important to every citizen of the United Stated, Bennett wrote. He began working on the particulars of his renewal plan. The challenge of creating an entire ecosystem was daunting. The rehab plan started in 107 acres in Kansas across from No Man's Land. Weeds were planted to hold down the earth and a variety of grasses including bluestem, buffalo grass and African grass. Roosevelt was still fond of his tree-planting idea. Trees would break up the wind, stop erosion and the labor necessary to plant them would employ thousands. Sapling trees were planted in rows like crops in an east-west direction to serve as a wind barrier. By the end of the project some two hundred million trees were planted throughout the plains.

Chapter 22: Cornhusker II

By the end of the year, Don Hartwell wrote in his diary that he was worried about his health, his debt and the land. He held onto the land because he had no other options.

His dreams were slipping away from him. He feared being a total failure. Don still sang for extra money, often ending his set with the song, “Stormy Weather.”

In January, he wrote that the flu was taking hundreds in the large cities and lamented about the decreasing number of animals he still had. A man in Chicago offered to give away his baby if he could keep his car. In March, he sounded doubtful that he could keep going. In April, it was partly cloudy and dusty. All the alfalfa and corn he planted was destroyed. In May and June he wrote about planting corn and then replanting it. A short time later he wrote that the drought was starting to damage the corn. July was not surprisingly hot. He wrote that bad luck seem to follow him.

Chapter 23: The Last Men

Bam White was shunned by his neighbors for appearing in the documentary. He was a traitor for taking part in a film that blamed the farmers for the decline of the region. The ranchers agreed with the premise of the film. The huge dunes that accumulated on the James ranch were piles of other people’s dirt. Unemployed farm hands helped government workers level off the huge dunes that had formed from the dust storms including the one on the James ranch. The workers seeded the ranch with a mixture of grasses. There were no guarantees though. The grass might take root and grow and it might not. If the grass grew back in the Texas panhandle, it could work in any region in the Dust Bowl.

Bam planted alfalfa and corn. The ground was so hard that instead of a hoe to break it up, he had to use an axe. There was hope because a few periods of rain followed the planting. Bam planted grass and corn always following the governmental guidelines. The ranchers in the Panhandle agreed to the conservation standards as well and set up sanctions for those who failed to follow them.

In 1937, the there were 134 dusters, more than any other year of the drought. Action was being taken but the High Plains still looked dead especially to those who’d been away for a while. Alexandre Hogue who’d been raised on a relative’s ranch in the area had left the plains and become a painter. He returned in 1937 and was shocked at what he saw. He painted starving animals and towering drifts of dirt. He was dubbed the “artist of the Dust Bowl.” The painting that gained the most attention was “Drouth Survivors” which depicted the reality of the region. There were dead cows, leafless trees, and a buried tractor in the painting. The painting outraged Dalhart cheerleader McCarty who devised a plan to buy the painting and burn it at a meeting of the Last Man Club. One of the club members traveled to Dallas with $50 to buy the painting. It didn’t work out since the price of the painting was at least $2,000.

In early summer there were several good storms with rain that fell softly and steadily. The rain had some good results. There were shoots of green grass sprouting up here and there. Corn was growing tall. People gave equal credit to God and Franklin Roosevelt. Most of the land was still barren but in the test areas there were positive results. Bennett warned the people to not be overly confident. In July the oppressive heat returned and burned the barren ground. Still some of the new growth survived.

Melt White spotted a strange-looking dark cloud in the sky. Bam looked closely at the slowly moving cloud and realized it wasn't a duster it was a swarm of grasshoppers. They descended and attacked Bam's grass and fledgling garden. They ate it all. The grasshoppers chewed up Doc Dawson's corn stalks and his grass. They attacked all the new growth in the region. It was estimated that there were 23,000 grasshoppers per acre and 14 million per square mile. The balance that had been disturbed by the overuse of the soil had allowed the inordinate number of grasshoppers to flourish. The National Guard was called out to battle the insects. The soldiers sprayed a mixture of arsenic and bran was sprayed in the air to kill them. Roads literally became slick with dead grasshoppers. Dusters started up again and crops were lost. The southern plains were no better than they were at the start of the drought.

John McCarty announced that he was leaving Dalhart and moving to Amarillo. The man who vowed to never leave Dalhart turned his back on the town for a better job offer. Children were dying from dust pneumonia at a rate of one every ten days. Dick Coon organized a reunion of the XIT cowboys. Dick paid for the barbecue that was held in the first week of October. The cowboys had a great time, eating drinking and dancing and recalling old times before the influx of the farmers. A young cowboy had come with his family to the reunion hoping to find work but there was no work available. Dick Coon handed the young man a hundred dollar bill and wished him luck. The cowboy broke down in tears. Only his closest friends new that Coon was broke. His properties were heavily mortgaged and were bringing in no revenue. Coon was also sick. Dawson urged him to leave for his health's sake. Finally Coon moved to a hotel in Houston and died a short time later. He had little more money than he had when he was born.

Lizzie White feared starvation after the grasshoppers ate all their new crops. The family was forced to go on relief. Bam seemed to have lost his spirit. All he wanted to do was play his fiddle. In February 1938, Bam couldn't get out of bed. He was experiencing severe pain in his stomach and running a high fever. He died a few days later. The resettlement agency sold everything Bam had and told Lizzie she still owed the government $2,300. She had nothing to give them. She moved the family into a part of Texas that had not been impacted by the dusters and drought. Melt only stayed a short time then returned to Dalhart to look for work. He felt he belonged there despite the declining conditions.

Doc Dawson was ready to call it quits. He'd failed at being a farmer and he grew too weak to keep up his duties at the soup kitchen. He still saw a handful of patients but none of them could pay him. The dusters seemed to get more severe and longer lasting. When he found his small office filled with dust he decided it was time for him to move on. A short while later, Dawson succumbed to a massive brain hemorrhage.

Analysis

Bennett advised FDR that the region could be saved but that there was no quick fix. Over-grazing, over-cropping and the homesteading policy had been responsible for the erosion of the top soil. Roosevelt felt that planting trees that could withstand the climate

would be a boon for the area. Bennett began overseeing the planting of weeds to hold the soil down and a variety of grass seeds. He also had a team plant Roosevelt's trees. By the end of the project, two hundred million trees were planted throughout the plains.

Bam White was shunned by his neighbors for appearing in the documentary. But he didn't care. In his minds, the farmers were to blame for the disaster. Despite the good work of the federal government, there were 134 dusters in 1937, the most of any year of the Dust Bowl. An artist made a series of paintings depicting the region – dying animals, dead trees and towering drifts of dirt. McCarty was enraged about the paints and wanted to buy the most famous of his painting, "Drouth Survivors" so he could burn it. But he offered only $50 for the painting that was selling for at least $2,000.

In a surprising turnaround, McCarty announced that he was leaving Dalhart and moving to Amarillo. He had established the Last Man Club but was violating his oath to stay no matter what. Everyone, even the town's biggest cheerleader, had his breaking point.

Vocabulary

incentive, bountiful, obligatory, indomitable, tenacity, agronomics, norther, fend, desiccated, tamarisk, loam, hillocks, surreal, agrarian, emissary, voracious, benefactor, hemorrhage

Chapters 24 - 25 and Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 24: Cornhusker III

Don Hartwell was still debating about staying or leaving. He concluded that it just didn't rain in Inavale. He had lost more animals and he and his wife weren't making enough money to keep them afloat. In August, Don wrote that his wife had an offer from a friend in Colorado to come there and open a restaurant with her. Don wrote that they'd have to do something fairly soon. In September he wrote the he wasn't feeling well but attributed it to stress. In November he cut down a dying tree that he had planted more than 20 years ago. They had lost all their hogs and cattle. They had no place to go.

The communities all around Don were failing and collapsing. Don wrote that conditions were causing people to become remote, violent and to steal. One man threw a stone through a store window so he could go to jail and eat. Don and Verna had reached the end of the line in Nebraska. He had hung on to the farm by begging the bank to let him keep it even though he hadn't made a payment in months. He sold some of his equipment and possessions but couldn't bring himself to sell the piano.

In April, Don wrote that Verna was making some money with her sewing but that he was doing nothing. They only had two horses left, unpaid mortgage payments and taxes and no money. A friend loaned Don some seed with the agreement that he'd pay him back in corn or money. He planted corn and grass. But when the corn came up the grasshoppers attacked. Don had lost all hope that he would have success or that the region would ever revive even far into the future. He lost his final two horses. Don and Verna left for Denver to find work.

Verna got a job as a maid at a doctor's house. Don didn't find work and couldn't stay with Verna at the doctor's house. He returned alone to Inavale. It was the first time in their twenty-six year marriage that they were apart. Don had no work. He spent his time moping about, playing music and crying. They spent Thanksgiving apart but Verna came home for Christmas.

Verna returned to her job in Denver while Don tried to hold onto the farm in Inavale. She made $40 a month and sent him $10. He used some of the money to travel to Kansas to see a burlesque show. He was feeling more desperate every day. He wrote that he was feeling lost and didn't know where to turn or what to do. In February, he got a letter from the bank that the farm was being foreclosed on. He planted corn in May but it was destroyed by July's blazing sun. By that winter, he wrote that he didn't expect anything. He was just living.

The bank took the farm that the Hartwells had owned since 1909. He was allowed to stay in the house and pay rent. He found work with a government crew. Verna still worked in Denver, returning for Christmas again.

Chapter 25: Rain

A huge flag was made in preparation for the visit of President Roosevelt to Amarillo on July 11, 1938. He was visiting the High Plains and had designated Amarillo as the headquarters for Operation Dust Bowl. More than 100,000 people were on hand for the event. Right when FDR's train pulled into the station, officials looked at the dark sky and feared that a duster would swoop down. People had risked their lives on the dangerous dust-coated highways to get there. FDR was not one of them, but he had made a promise and had not forsaken them. The soil conditions had not yet turned around but there was a marked improvement. There were still dusters but nothing approaching the ferocity of Black Sunday.

Amarillo had been the recipient of some of the 40 million saplings that had been planted on the President's order. Bennett's program of renewal was still on-going. He hoped for new grass to sprout up in the Panhandle in the coming years. People were inspired and were keeping the faith even though other parts of the country were suffering from unemployment woes again. The exodus from the region had slowed. Those who remained were there for good.

Melt White returned to the area and bought a horse with his savings so he could scout out a place for himself. Things were changing. People were drilling deep for water from the underground reservoir. There were plans for farming and planting again. Melt was leery. Hadn't they learned anything? The grassland wasn't meant for farming.

The land all around Roosevelt's parade would be difficult for anyone to explain. Children died from playing outside too much. Rabbits were hunted and clubbed to death and black dirt fell from the skies. There was a downpour after FDR's arrival but not a duster. Like a trooper, the president rode in a convertible waving and smiling at the crowd as rain splashed down on his face. In Ellwood Park, FDR was helped to the grandstand. He stood, locking his braces in place, and addressed the audience. The crowd roared with delight – he was their savior. He told those gathered that the shower was a good omen. More cheers. He told the crowd that people from all over America should visit the High Plains to see that it wasn't abandoned and that the people weren't dead. The region would once again be a safe place that a large number of Americans would call home.

Privately, Roosevelt believed that the Dust Bowl could have been prevented. Weather wasn't the culprit. It was human failure.

Epilogue

The southern High Plains never fully recovered from the brutality and destruction of the Dust Bowl years. The government bought back 11.3 million acres of farm land with hopes of returning it to grassland. Some wild animals returned to the region while some

had become extinct. The large area to be restored is Comanche National Grassland. There are plans to reintroduce bison into the prairie. No Indians returned to the land despite offers to do so. Most of the Roosevelt trees either died or were uprooted by farmers for crop planting. Although the country was founded as a nation of farmers, only one percent of all jobs are farming jobs. The farm population in the plains has decreased by 80 percent. The subsidy system established during the 1930s remains but most of the subsidies go to big wealthy farmers or corporations. Dusters returned during a drought in the 1950s, but the planting of the weeds and grass by Bennett's workers held fairly well and kept the top soil from eroding or blowing away. Dalhart still remains but it is a ghost of its former self. Only 3,000 live in Boise City. Inavale, where the Hartwells lived, is a ghost town. Ike Olsteen is 90 and still lives in the area. He loves it there.

Analysis

Don Hartwell was at the end of his rope. He had lost everything. His animals were all dead and he cut down a dead tree that he had planted 20 years before. The couple separated out of economic necessity. His wife, Verna, found work as a maid in Denver. Don stayed behind in hopes of a turnaround that would allow him to earn money from his land. Eventually, Don's farm fell under foreclosure and he lost all hope.

When FDR visited Amarillo in July 1938, the city officials feared that there would be a dust storm to rain grit down on the president's parade. Surprisingly, there wasn't a dust could - there was actually rain. It rained on the president as he spoke to the large crowd that greeted him. He took it as a good omen. The people loved their president. They gave equal thanks to FDR and God for the rain. Although he lauded the people and the strength and resiliency, he silently believed that the Dust Bowl could have been prevented. It was a human failure.

Vocabulary

stopgap, superlative, sorghum, frayed, destitute

Important People

Bam White

Bam White was a cowpoke and didn't aspire to be anything else. He came as a young family man to the Texas Panhandle with the goal of working as a ranch hand on one of the huge celebrated cattle ranches located there. Unfortunately, Bam's timing was off. It was the early thirties and the black clouds that would ultimately lead to real human tragedy were beginning to gain strength, and the need for ranch hands was on the decline. But Bam never let go of his goal. He wasn't a farmer… he was a cowboy. He stayed true to his values throughout the debilitating dusters and refused to give up his identity. He may not have been successful but he won the battle to stay until the bitter end.

Pare Lorentz, a filmmaker and documentarian, decided to make a film about the Dust Bowl and its farmers and cowboys. The documentary focused on the misuse and overuse of grassland that led to the disaster. The film was entitled "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and Pare needed a symbol of the tragic failure of man against a nature that was angry that its grassland had been kidnapped and distorted.

When Pare spotted the hunched over, Bam White and his sun-dried craggy face he knew he had the perfect person that represented the Dust Bowl. Bam took a lot of criticism from most of his neighbors. The filmmaker blamed the farmers for the environment that led to the Dust Bowl. They thought he was a traitor for appearing in the film. But Bam didn't care. He was a cowboy and agreed with the filmmaker. He blamed the farmers, too.

Bam never made much money in the High Plains. He got just enough odd jobs to keep his family afloat. He was a cowboy and there were no jobs for cowboys. Bam stayed in the High Plains until his death. He took it as a victory. The black clouds wanted to chase him away but they never did.

John McCarty

John L. McCarty relocated to Dalhart in 1929. He bought the Dalhart Texan and became its editor and publisher. He wanted his paper to inspire the people and the town to greatness. Although the Panhandle continued to be plowed over for wheat growing, McCarty called the area the best country "God's sun ever shone upon."

But the area took a nose dive with the onset of the dust storms, the Depression and the dropping prices of wheat and cattle. McCarty vowed to report only good news. He would see the sunny side of every story. While McCarty was pitching Dalhart to potential new residents by running a photo of the town looking its very best in his newspaper, his plans were sabotaged. Fox Movietone News produced a newsreel clip about the destruction of the area that was seen by millions in theaters across the nation.

McCarty went over the top when he began a series of columns in which he praised the dust storms as majestic and unique to the High Plains. Some thought he'd gone mad; others welcomed his positive spin. McCarty praised the people who were standing up to the difficult conditions. To McCarty, the people of the High Plains had strength, character and resiliency. His words propelled people from five counties to organize a "rally to fight dust." Some 700 citizens vowed to make the county blossom again.

In his newspaper reports, McCarty minimized the dust storms and deaths in Dalhart instead focusing on the plight of other states and regions and blamed other locations for the dust that blew into Dalhart. People were dying and starving while McCarty tried to cheerlead the people into believing that they could defeat the storms although he didn't define exactly how that would be done.

When he learned that the government would give incentives to farmers to leave the area, McCarty was outraged. In retaliation he established the Last Man Club and named himself president. Club members had to vow to remain in Dalhart no matter what. But with the constant onslaught of the storms and the seeming impossible challenge of reversing the fortunes of Dalhart, McCarty sought a way out. He announced that he was leaving Dalhart and moving to Amarillo. The man who vowed to never leave Dalhart turned his back on the town for a better job offer.

Hugh Bennett

Hugh Bennett was a scientist and soil expert. He was adamant that the Dust Bowl region could be rehabilitated. He attributed the blame for the Dust Bowl disaster to the farmers who over used the land. He convinced FDR that the region could be saved and rejuvenated. He was named to head Operation Dust Bowl under the Soil Conservation Act signed into law by the president.

Hazel Lucas Snow

As a young girl, Hazel arrived with her family in No Man's Land in 1914. The land captured her heart with its natural beauty. It became home to her. When the dust storms started in the 1930s, Hazel was married to Charles Snow. The couple had a baby girl, Ruth Nell, who developed dust pneumonia and died when she was just a year old.

Doc Dawson

Doc Dawson and his beautiful wife, Willie, lived in Dalhart. He ran a sanitarium there that wasn't a true hospital but he did have a clientele he treated. He always wanted to be a farmer and bought property near town. However, the dusters began to plague the area and he was never able to have any success as a farmer.

Uncle Dick Coon

Dick Coon owned most of Dalhart before the region began its decline. He owned the hotel and many of the shops in town. He held poker games at his hotel and always had a C-note in his pocket that he would never spend. In the end he lost everything and finally gave his C-note to a young cowpoke who couldn't find a job.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Franklin Delano Roosevelt succeeded Herbert Hoover into the office of the presidency. FDR immediately took action to help the people of the High Plains. He had a positive attitude and strongly believed that the area could be saved. The people of the Dust Bowl had equal thanks to God and to FDR for the help they received.

Harold Ickes

Harold Ickes was the Secretary of the Interior in the Roosevelt administration during the Dust Bowl disaster in the 1930s. Ickes was a practical man who felt that the area could not be rehabilitated and felt that the government should give the farmers and cowboys of the region incentive to abandon their property.

Don Hartwell

Don Hartwell was a small farmer on the Kansas-Nebraska border during the droughts and Dust Bowl years of the 1930s. He and his wife, Verna, owned their small farm since 1908. He struggled to keep afloat, but eventually the farm was foreclosed upon. He kept a secret diary through the years in which the pain, uncertainty and anguish that he experienced during the ordeal comes through the pages. His was a unique story, of course, but his misery was representative of thousands of other citizens of the High Plains.

William Murray

At the beginning of the problems in the High Plains, William Murray was elected as the new governor of Oklahoma. He declared he couldn't do anything about the weather but he vowed to fix the broken land. Murray relied on the National Guard who he called out twenty-seven times during his first two years. Later he ran to be the Democratic candidate for president. But his competition was the Governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and he was crushed by FDR's momentum. Murray remained bitter about his loss and was an outspoken adversary of FDR.

Objects/Places

The XIT Ranch

The XIT ranch in the Texas Panhandle was legendary. A Chicago syndicate took the government up on an offer of free land to build the statehouse. It stocked the land with cattle, built windmills to pump water and erected fences. The XIT ranch became the biggest ranch in the world. Towns sprung up around the ranch and there were plenty of jobs for cowboys. Later, when the dust storms came, the syndicate sold the land to farmers promising them that they could turn the grassland into farmland. The farming of this farmland was one of the leading causes of the development of the Dust Bowl.

The Dust Bowl

The vast area of the southern High Plains that was severely impacted by a drought in the 1930s became known as the Dust Bowl. The top soil had been blown away in a majority of the region. After the top soil disappeared, the wind lifted up silt, grit and loose dirt and created black clouds and dust storms.

The Last Man Club

Newspaper editor John McCarty established the Last Man Club and named himself president. Club members had to vow to remain in Dalhart no matter what. At a speech that gained national attention, McCarty declared that they were going to stay [in the High Plains] “till hell freezes over.”

“The Plow that Broke the Plains”

Pare Lorentz made a documentary about the Dust Bowl. It was entitled “The Plow that Broke the Plains” and it depicted over-farming as the main reason for the decline of the area. It was not very popular amount the people of the Dust Bowl. Bam White was one exception. He was featured as the craggy, broken cowboy who was the face of the desolate region.

“Drouth Survivors”

“Drough Survivors” was a painting by a former resident of the region, Alexandre Hogue. It gained the most attention of the series of his paintings of the Dust Bowl. The painting featured dead cows, skeletal trees and buried tractors. John McCarty the editor of the Texan was outraged by the painting. He sent a courier to Dallas with $50 to buy the painting so he could burn it. No sale because the lowest price for the painting was set at $2,000.

Dalhart

Dalhart, Texas, was one of the little rail towns that sprouted up around the big ranches of the Panhandle. It was established in 1901 at the intersection of two rail lines – one going north to Denver and the other east to Liberal Kansas. Dalhart became a robust town and grew in population and business until the 1930s when the severe drought and dust storms began. Some of the citizens of the Dalhart vowed to remain in the town until the bitter end.

No Man's Land

Part of the vast Dust Bowl region was known as No Man's Land. It was a desolate area that was located in the Oklahoma Panhandle and was referred to as a "long strip of geographic afterthought in the far western end of the Oklahoma Panhandle, just a sneeze from Texas."

Soil Conservation Act

Hugh Bennett was granted Congressional money to head a permanent agency with a mission to restore and sustain the health of the soil of the High Plains. The agency was formed under the Soil Conservation Act which was the first environmental agency ever to be created under the federal government.

Boise City

Boise City, Oklahoma, was where Hazel and Charles Snow lived and where their one-year-old daughter, Ruth Nell, died of dust pneumonia. The city had been founded on a lie. Those promoting the city to potential new residents told them it was a tree-lined city. But there wasn't a single tree in Boise and it was basically a phantom town in No Man's Land in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Black Sunday

April 14, 1935, began as a surprisingly bright, clear day in the south High Plains. People felt their prayers had been answered at last. But the mother of all dust storms was brewing in the northern plains and when it met with a cold front from Canada it formed the biggest dust storm of the entire Dust Bowl disaster. People learned quickly that their respite from the dust storms was just a brief one. Nature was toying with them.

Themes

Survival

One of the main themes that emerges from “The Worst Hard Time” is one of survival. The story of the Dust Bowl when viewed from the distance of time and history is a series of government reports, statistics, and conclusions about the causation of the tragedy. But the real story of the black blizzards that made such an indelible black mark in American history is that of the people who fought the forces of nature and stood up to a challenge they didn’t want and deep down feared they couldn’t meet.

But there was so much more to the story of the Dust Bowl than how many storms there were and how deep the dirt, silt and grit was and how many tons it weighed. The untold story if that of the Americans who found themselves in a black abyss that seemed to be all powerful, difficult to escape, and impossible to defeat.

The story of the real people of the Dust Bowl is a testament to the strength of character of the people of No Man’s Land and their tenacity and ability to hold onto a scrap of hope and refuse to let their dreams slip from their fingers. The people of the region didn’t have many resources, they only had hopes and dreams. Some of the people were farmers and some were cowboys. But no matter what their goal was, they refused to leave the land that they had grown to love and that they believed would one day return to its original beauty and utility.

The challenge was more than anyone expected. Through the years of the drought that covered most of 1934 through 1940, the people clung to their little pieces of land and put up with inhumane conditions so that they could return the earth to what it was and that they could attain their simple, harmless goals of earning honest livings and keeping their families fed and safe.

Dedication

Despite the challenges and impossible odds that faced the people of the High Plains during the Dust Bowl years, there was an inexplicable and unbreakable dedication and loyalty that many farmers and cowboys had for the region. The dedication of those who moved to the area was undoubtedly linked to the hopes and dreams they had for their future in the area. Many had been promised successful lives as farmers. Their dreams were to work the land and provide for their families. None of the transplants aspired to wealth or power and they weren’t afraid of hard work. But when the area began to decline and when farming became difficult if not impossible and wheat and corn prices spiraled downward, the farmers weren’t ready to let go of their hopes for a bright future. They weren’t going to give up on the land, so they hung on believing that their dreams would eventually be realized.

There were basically two factions within the Dust Bowl who had completely opposite explanations for the decline of the southern High Plains. The farmers blamed the drought conditions and dust storms on cyclic weather and nature. However, the cowboys in the region who came there to work as ranch hands on the celebrated and vast cattle ranches did not agree. They blamed farming for the deterioration of the region.

Much of the southern High Plains had been lush grassland that was ideal for the bison that grazed there and for the Indians who hunted them for their survival. Later, when the white man took over the area, they established highly successful cattle ranches that depended on the dense grassland to nourish their large grazing herds. When the farmers came in by droves, they plowed up the grassland which had never been done in the centuries since it had been established. The land wasn't meant for farming the cowboys asserted. Bam White came to the Texas Panhandle to work on one of the ranches but his timing, like many other cowpoke transplants, was off.

Bam arrived at the beginning of the decline of the area. It had been his dream to work with his hands building fences and tending to the animals, riding his horse over the great expanses and being at one with nature in the grasslands. When he arrived, however, his dreams were put on hold; there were no ranch hand jobs to be had. The cattle farms were collapsing along with the market price of cattle and the onset of the dust storms. Still, Bam held on. He loved the land and wasn't going to desert it. He would never be a farmer – the farmers had destroyed the grasslands. He toughed it out and remained dedicated to the region until there was a turnaround and he could be a working cowboy again. Despite his loyalty, Bam did not live long enough to see the rehabilitation of the area. Overall, he never lost his love for the land to which he had dedicated himself.

Exploitation

When there is something worth exploiting there will be those who are ready, willing and able to exploit it. A wealthy Chicago syndicate smelled money when they looked southward toward the Texas Panhandle. It was a rich grassland that was capable of supporting thousands of heads of cattle. They invested in the region and created what would come to be the largest cattle ranch in the world – the celebrated XIT ranch. As long as their money-maker was making money, the syndicate was happy. But when the Depression hit and cattle prices began to spiral downward on the market and strange dust storms began to plague the area, the syndicate figured it was time to get out – but get out with a profit and definitely without a loss.

There was a dilemma facing the syndicate, however. Since cattle prices were on the decline, it would be impossible to sell the ranch for a profit or even for what they first paid for it. To insure that their investors would not experience a loss, they came up with a brilliant solution. They would sell of the land off in parcels, but the parcels would be too small for raising cattle. Besides, because of current economic conditions, there weren't any ranchers in the market for cattle land at the time. As a result, the syndicate

decided to sell the parcels of grassland to farmers. They would incentivize them to come to the area – give them and the family a free trip down to look around. They'd offer them deals that they couldn't refuse.

The syndicate was highly successful in bringing in the farmers and selling their land at a profit. An unintended consequence of their campaign was that it started a trend – farmers began to move into the Dust Bowl region at an amazing rate. What resulted was an overuse of the land in many of the regions, and in the Panhandle the utilization of grasslands was not conducive to farming – it was ideal for grazing but completely wrong for farming. Ultimately, it destroyed the land and at least in part led to the Dust Bowl conditions.

The syndicate's mission was to invest money to make money. When that turned south in the Panhandle, they parceled up land to make a profit. They exploited the land that wasn't right for farming and they exploited the vulnerable farmers who were convinced to farm in the Panhandle so they could make a good living and provide for their families.

Styles

Structure

“The Worst Hard Time – The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl,” by Timothy Eagan is separated into three main sections: “I. Promise, The Great Plowup 1901-1930,” “II. Betrayal, 1931-1933,” and “III. Blowup, 1934-1939.” An introduction precedes the first section and provides a summary of the devastating years of the Dust Bowl and its impact on the High Plains.

The chapters in the first section, “Promise,” tell how people were lured into the southern High Plains with promises of jobs for cowboys and fertile land for farmers. For the thousands who moved to the region to start anew, there was the hope of a good life for their families. The second section, “Betrayal” describes how the area began to deteriorate along with the hopes and dreams of the transplanted farmers and cowboys. “Blowup” relates how the people tried to hang onto their pieces of land in the direst time of the Dust Bowl years. Most of the people refused to abandon their land and not give up. Some saw the ordeal through while others succumbed and were not able to stand up to the impossible challenge that nature had place before them.

Before the first section is a map of the Dust Bowl region that was hardest hit. There are photographs throughout the book that shows in dramatic fashion the horrid conditions that the people were forced to deal with.

Perspective

“The Worst Hard Time – The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl,” was written by Timothy Eagan. It is a non-fiction work and the point of view is that of the author who interpreted and reported the material he uncovered during what was obviously intense and thorough research. The author won a National Book Award for “The Worst Hard Time” as well as a “New York Times Editors’ Choice.” Eagan is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and the author of seven books.

The reporter’s penchant for detail is apparent in this work. It is obvious that Eagan dug deep for details that were both historic and anecdotal. He did not fly at 10,000 feet to write this report. He got down in the dust with the Okies and No Man Landers and looked directly in their parched and cracked faces. By taking this up close and personal approach, Eagan cleverly was able to tell the story of the Dust Bowl from the perspective of the people who struggled and died during the ordeal and of those who survived it.

Egan’s other books include “The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America,” which was a New York Times bestseller and recipient of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award. He is also a contributor to the New York Times penning the “Opinionator” column each week.

Tone

The overall tone in “The Worst Hard Time” by Timothy Egan is appropriately serious. The account is presented in mainly a journalistic style which is not surprising since Egan is a reporter. There is a contemplative element to the presentation; a manner that reproaches mankind’s misuse of land and disrespect for Mother Earth. There was no need to add drama to the story of the Dust Bowl, there was plenty of drama in the actual events and the stories of the people who suffered so severely and lost everything including finally their dreams and all hope.

The stories of the pain and suffering on an individual basis were anecdotal but the human suffering found in each incident could be applied to the broad population in the region. It is not a leap of faith to accept the reality that when people inhale dirt, are blocked from the sun, and are denied the opportunity to make a living there is widespread suffering.

This account doesn’t merely tell the story of the people of the Dust Bowl. It is a warning to all future generations about the consequences of overusing and misusing our resources. They do run out and when they are exploited it takes a long time for them to return to their natural state.

Quotes

It scares them because of the forced intimacy with a place that gives nothing back to a stranger, a place where the land and its weather – probably the most violent and extreme on earth – demand only one thing: humility.
-- Narrator (Introduction)

Importance: This quote captures the terrain where the dust bowl developed.

I was born upon the prairie where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun… I want to die there, and not within walls… The white man has taken the country we loved and we only wish to wander on the prairie until we die.
-- Ten Bears (Chapter 1)

Importance: The Comanche chief put into words the simple life that his tribe desired and that their land had been taken from them by the white man.

Americans are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of the land.
-- Herbert Hoover (Chapter 3)

Importance: These were the words of Herbert Hoover in 1929 when he had just taken office. The stock market crash and Great Depression made him either a liar or exposed him as being very naïve or very misinformed.

I'm afraid I'm going to end up with nine kinds, three homes, and no dough.
-- Joseph P. Kennedy (Chapter 5)

Importance: After the stock market crash, even millionaires like Joseph Kennedy were uncertain and frightened about the future.

Life was on hold, suspended until the rains returned. To see land that you had brought to life turn to nothing was as sad as watching a friend die of a long illness. And then to fallow that land, because hope itself was gone, was harder still.
-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: This quotation describes the hopeless life of the farmer during the great drought in the High Plains in the early 1930s.

I enjoy a storm. I like to see old gnarled and scarred trees silhouetted against the sky, defiant of the winds, ready for any storm that may come. I like to see men and women, scarred with the battles of life, proven on its toughest testing ground and ready for all that comes their way.
-- John McCarty (Chapter 14)

Importance: John McCarty, the editor of the Dalhart newspaper, "The Texan" tried to

put a positive spin on the dust storms that he called majestic in order to spur the people onto positive action.

By the time Charles made it to St. Mary's Hospital, he was covered in dirt, his face black. He went to the dust ward. Hazel was crying. Ruth Nell had died an hour earlier.
-- Narrator (Chapter 15)

Importance: This captures what hundreds of parents went through during the years of the Dust Bowl. There were many tragic deaths connected to a new disease that had emerged during that time – dust pneumonia.

When the big roller crossed into Kansas, it was reported to be two hundred miles wide, with high winds like a tornado turned on its side. In Denver, temperatures dropped twenty-five degrees in an hour, and then the city fell into a haze. The sun was blocked.
-- Narrator (Chapter 16)

Importance: This is a description of the largest and most vicious dust storm of the Dust Bowl years. The day started out surprisingly bright and clear but then this monster rolled onto the scene. The day was known as Black Sunday.

I haven't much ambition anymore. When one sees all he has slipping away, his ambition seems to gradually go along with the rest.
-- Don Hartwell (Chapter 19)

Importance: Don Hartwell kept a secret diary over several years of the disaster. This quotation captures the hopeless than Don and many others felt when they were trying to survive something that wasn't survivable.

Unless something is done… the western Plains will be as arid as the Arabian desert.' But short of veiling the sun, cuffing the winds, or creating rain from thin air, what could be done.
-- Forest Service (Chapter 20)

Importance: The Forest Service was warning of the dire impact of the Dust Bowl disaster unless something was done to halt it. As the paragraph goes on, however, the futility of the dilemma was apparent.

I saw not a solitary thing but bare earth and a few lonely, empty farmhouses… There was not a tree or a blade of grass, or a dog or a cow or a human being – nothing whatsoever, nothing at all but gray raw earth and a few farmhouses and barns, sticking up from the dark gray sea like white cattle skeletons on the desert… [It was] the saddest land I have ever seen.
-- Ernie Pyle (Chapter 20)

Importance: This was the celebrated writer's reaction to the Dust Bowl region when he drove through it in 1936.

The crowd roared; everyone on their feet. He [Roosevelt] was their savior, and he did not betray their trust in him. ‘I think this little shower we have had is a mighty good omen.
-- FDR (Chapter 25)

Importance: The people of the Dust Bowl believed that FDR had literally saved their lives. They were ever-grateful. It happened to rain when FDR visited Amarillo. He took the rain shower as a good omen of better things to come. He brought them great comfort with his visit.

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What were the contributing factors that led to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s? What did various factions blame the disaster on? Take both sides of the debate and make an argument for each.

Topic 2

What type of work was Bam White looking for when he and his family traveled to the Texas Panhandle? Why were his hopes for a good job dashed, and what did he attribute it to? How did his son feel about the region many years after the family first arrived?

Topic 3

What was the XIT Ranch and what role did a Chicago syndicate have in its creation? What was the fate of the ranch, and what part did the syndicate have in the decline of the region?

Topic 4

Why did Hazel take no pay for her teaching job in Boise City? What did her baby die of, and why was she conflicted about leaving Boise City after she had another child?

Topic 5

What was John McCarty's stance on the debate over the blame for the decline of the High Plains? What did he do to push his view onto the people of the area? What was the name of the club he established and what impact did it require of its members?

Topic 6

What was Hugh Bennett's area of expertise and what opinion did he have on the cause of the conditions leading to the Dust Bowl? What position did he hold with the government and what was his plan for renewal of the land?

Topic 7

Contrast the difference between the approaches that Hoover and Roosevelt each had toward the crisis in the High Plains. What was Roosevelt's fundamental belief about

man and the challenges of nature? What specific idea did Roosevelt have for helping to fix the High Plains, and how was it implemented?

Topic 8

What was the most devastating dust storm to hit the plains, and when did it hit? Describe its origin and its trajectory, the damage and misery left in its wake, and how it was different than other dust storms.

Topic 9

What was the importance of Don Hartwell's diary? What larger meaning did they have than just the words of one man? Reading between the lines, go through his entries and describe the deeper meaning they held.

Topic 10

What was the importance of the documentary made by Pare Lorentz, and how was it received by the people of the Dust Bowl? What impact did it have the rest of the country? Why McCarty was angry over the documentary and the paintings about the region and what steps did he take to diminish their impact?