

The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl. By Timothy Egan. 2006. Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA, USA. 340 p. US \$14.95. paper. ISBN-13 978-0-618-77347-3.

Those discussing future rangeland climates would do well to consider the challenges of the past. For Americans, the drought disaster that most haunts our national imagination is the “Dust Bowl,” encompassing over 100 million acres of the American heartland just over 75 years ago. A coinage of a clever newspaper reporter, the Dust Bowl was an unprecedented economic, social, and ecological catastrophe that followed close upon one of the most rapid transformations of resilient native rangeland into intensive dry-land agriculture that shortly sowed the seeds of its own destruction. What had once been a vast shortgrass steppe, teeming with huge herds of migratory buffalo, and, for a short interval following, an “open range” (often overstocked with Texas Longhorn), became, with the arrival of the railroads, open to settlement and the sod-busting plow of determined, land-hungry immigrants.

“Rain follows the plow!” was the clarion call of the day, and for a couple of remarkable decades of “the Great Plow-up,” precipitation was indeed reasonably reliable; the farms took root, and the communities grew and prospered, producing “the biggest wheat crop the world had ever seen” that paradoxically contributed to the market’s collapse. When the inevitable multi-year drought inexorably arrived, much of this dryland domain was bare and exposed without perennial cover; the stage was set for it all to just blow away.

The Worst Hard Time is an eminently readable (a National Book Award winner) narrative history of this classic catastrophe, telling the human stories that are only hinted at by the slumped barns and half collapsed houses of deserted crossroads towns that one breezes through today on crumbling blacktop. In searching out now-aged survivors to hear their painfully remembered stories, the author offers us a chronicle of striving and struggle, sparse triumphs buried by far too many tragedies. Most poignant perhaps is when we hear them unguardedly speaking for themselves, as in the diary of Nebraskan Don Hartley:

Spring’s coming was an important event to me years ago. Spring and summer was when I really lived, especially in May and June when the flowers were in bloom, the fruit trees, the grass getting green along the creeks, the frogs singing in the evening, and there was the possibility of a “big rain” which seldom comes. Fair today, dry dusty NW wind... The whole country is rapidly becoming an area of shifting dust and sand, blowing South one day and North the next. Fences, in some places, are covered with drifting, blowing dirt... I haven’t much ambition anymore, When one sees all he has slipping away, his ambition seems to gradually go along with the rest. (p. 245)

Over a third of the population abandoned their farms and migrated away, and those who doggedly remained struggled on through several years of unrelenting drought, hardship, and the occasional terror of the monstrous “dusters.” *The Worst Hard Time* should be on every range person’s bookshelf, and should be required reading for Range 101. The inclusion of vintage photographs, an index, and an annotated section on “Notes and Sources” further enhances its pedagogic potential. Of particular interest is how the Soil Conservation Service (forerunner of the NRCS) was created and mobilized in response to the crisis. A scientific sequel, assessing the extent of present “recovery” from this massive historic disturbance, could be interesting.

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