The Worst Hard Time

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIMOTHY EGAN

Timothy Egan is a third-generation Westerner and one of nine children. He was raised in Spokane, Washington. After seven years and a series of odd jobs, he graduated from the University of Washington. In the 1980s he wrote for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and then quit his reporting job to write his first novel. In 1997, he moved to Italy with his family and fell in love with its history and wine culture. The experience laid the foundation for his first novel, published in 2004, *The Winemaker's Daughter*. For the past eighteen years, he has worked as a reporter for *The New York Times*. He began his career with the newspaper as its Pacific Northwest correspondent, and then he became a national enterprise reporter—a journalist who develops original stories for a publication. Currently, he writes a weekly column for *The New York Times* entitled "The Opinionator," in which he writes about politics and current events from a progressive perspective. The column appears every Friday. In 2001, he and several other *Times* reporters won the Pulitzer Prize for the 15-part series, "How Race Is Lived in America," published in 2000. Egan has covered stories specific to the American West, stories on the deterioration of rural America, and a report for which he retraced the path that Lewis and Clark followed during their western expedition. Egan has received honorary doctorates from Willamette University, Whitman College, Lewis and Clark College, and Western Washington University. He currently lives in Seattle with his wife, the journalist Joni Balter. They have two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, initiating the Great Depression. People on the southern Great Plains did not feel the impact as quickly as those in the cities, but by the 1930s, they were more harshly impacted by economic deprivation due to the droughts and subsequent dust storms that made it impossible to farm. By 1933, when inhabitants in the Southern Plains were struggling against violent dust storms, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was beginning his first presidential term. During his first 100 days in office, Roosevelt issued a wave of legislation, much of which was designed to control the prices of farm products, ending former President Herbert Hoover's free market approach to the agricultural industry. President Roosevelt's adjustments to the farm industry were a part of the First New Deal, which also established the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The TVA made the Tennessee River more navigable and helped with flood control. The hydroelectric Wilson Dam was also built as a part of the act. Other aspects of the First New Deal included the establishment of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which protected bank accounts up to a certain amount in the event of a bank failure, and the legalization of beer purchases—the first step toward ending Prohibition.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Egan has published a series of books about American history, with a particular focus on the American West and environmental issues. In 2009, he published *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America*, a book about the nation's worst wildfire and the subsequent creation of the U.S. Forest Service. Like *The Worst Hard Time*, *The Big Burn* was used as source material for a Ken Burns documentary. Though John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is the best-known work on the Dust Bowl, numerous works of fiction and non-fiction, both adult and children's books, have been written about the environmental disaster. One of the first books about the Dust Bowl, Lawrence Svobida's *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-hand Account from Kansas*, is about the author's personal experience of the event. It was published in 1940. In 1979, the historian and professor Donald Worster published *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Ten years later, James N. Gregory, another historian, published *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl and Okie Culture in California*. Egan's account of the event has won both the Ambassador Book Award for American Studies and the National Book Award for Nonfiction.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl
- **When Written:** The 2000s
- **Where Written:** Seattle, Washington; various portions of states in the Southern Plains, including western Kansas, southwestern Nebraska, southeastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, and the Texas panhandle.
- **When Published:** 2006
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Non-fiction Literature
- **Genre:** Non-fiction; Historical Narrative
- **Setting:** The Southern Great Plains
- **Climax:** Black Sunday—the day of the worst storm of the Dust Bowl
- **Antagonist:** Dust Storms and The Great Depression
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Bonnie and Clyde. In the midst of the Dust Bowl, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, a young couple from Texas, both from poor families, spent the early 1930s robbing banks in the Southern Plains. Though they were Public Enemy No. 1, they had admirers in No Man's Land due to robbing the banks that settlers felt had already stolen from so many ordinary citizens. The couple was killed on May 23, 1934 outside of a gang member's home in Louisiana. The Texas ranger who had hunted and captured them took pictures of himself with their bullet-riddled bodies. The couple's story has been retold in songs and films, most notably in the Oscar-winning 1967 film, *Bonnie and Clyde*, starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway.

Movietone. Settlers on the High Plains who went to the movies got news about the bread-lines through Fox Movietone's newsreels, and moviegoers in the cities heard about the Dust Bowl via Movietone. Fox Movietone's newsreels ran from October 1927 to October 1963. They informed the American public on both national and international events, particularly the Second World War, before people settled in to watch a feature film.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Worst Hard Time retells the story of the Dust Bowl through the memories and family histories of some of its surviving witnesses, particularly Isaac "Ike" Osteen, Melt White, and Jeanne Clark. Their stories also reveal the history of the Southern Plains. Ike Osteen's family were among the first nesters in Baca County, Colorado, where Ike has resided for his entire life.

The Southern Plains drew many poor people, some of them outcasts in many places—poor white Southerners and Mexicans, for example—who looked to the Southern Plains as their only chance to own property. Melt White's family came by coincidence. One of his father's horses had died near Dalhart, Texas. They were on their way south to a town near Amarillo, when Bam White walked to take a look at the nearby town. He saw a young but bustling town and decided to be a part of it. He soon found a house to rent and work as a sharecropper. Jeanne Clark's mother, Louise Walton, was a former Broadway dancer who arrived as a "lunger"—one of the many migrants who went to the Southern Plains to take advantage of the clean, dry air. The plains air had indeed cured her respiratory problem. Walton stayed, married a rancher, and gave birth to Jeanne.

Others came to the Southern Plains at the encouragement of railroad companies and local syndicates. Previously, the Southern Plains had been dominated by Southwestern indigenous tribes, notably the Kiowa, the Kiowa-Apache, and the Comanche. The Comanche were a warrior tribe who frequently came into violent conflict with "Anglo" (white) Texans. Anglos had little to no respect for the Comanche. They dismissed the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 and frequently invaded Comanche lands, killing masses of bison—the animal on which the tribe depended for sustenance. After destroying the bison and routing out the Comanche, various ranchers moved in, particularly the cowboys who worked on **the XIT ranch**. Cattle ranchers assumed that their business could never fail on such abundant grazing lands, but cattle proved to be far too fragile for the harshly cold winters, unlike bison, who would withstand temperatures as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit. Those who had invested in cattle ranching, including investors from as far away as Great Britain, needed to turn a profit on the land and were losing great sums due to dying cattle. They decided to divide the XIT ranch into parcels of land that they could sell to potential homesteaders. Railroad companies organized free trains to pick up hundreds of people each month from towns like Kansas City, Missouri, to show them the land they could have in the Southern Plains. Real estate agents were quick and persuasive.

"Uncle" Dick Coon was trying to make a train connection to Houston when an agent persuaded him to remain in Dalhart. He soon ended up owning most of the property in town. Many of the brochures that the realtors designed were written in German to appeal to the many Russo-German immigrants who were entering the area. George Alexander Ehrlich left the Volga River region to find farm land, peace, and freedom from army conscription. When he immigrated to the United States, he carried a packet of turkey red **wheat** in his pocket—a hearty variety of grain.

The syndicates had lured people with demonstrations of dry farming. A windmill based on the Dutch model would pump enough water from underground to keep livestock fat and healthy. As for farming, wheat would grow just fine with only twenty inches of rainfall. The out-of-work cowboys were skeptical, however. The Southern Plains did not typically get twenty inches of rain—it got around sixteen on average. Then, there were the droughts, hailstorms, and the sudden prairie fires, which were key for rejuvenating the grasslands, but disastrous for crops. Still, people bought the land that the syndicate sold. For many, it was their only chance to own their own piece of American soil. The last homestead act in 1909 had given away the last of the good farm land, and the Southern Plains were all that remained of the frontier. People had also conveniently forgotten how the railroad companies lied to nesters in the northern plains about the ease of farming in cold, arid land.

In the 1920s, the Great Plains prospered as much as the rest of the country. The wheat crops grew tall and green, and farmers sold as much as they could at market. Some farmers were so successful that they made the equivalent of six-figure salaries each year in today's American dollars. The plow had made their

work much easier. They borrowed money from banks to buy more farm equipment and more land to plant more wheat, never thinking that they would have trouble paying off their loans in such a boom. Farmers soon completely overtook the grasslands, not leaving a single acre unturned.

In 1929, the stock market crashed, but those on the Southern Plains did not yet feel the impact. They associated the crash with brokers and "city slickers," believing that the financial fallout was distant and less relevant to them. Then, the price of wheat dropped to a point that made it nearly impossible to turn a profit. The market was oversupplied with wheat that people could not buy, and farmers began to worry about paying their mounting debts. Then, in 1932, the drought came. The lack of rain, coupled with the acres of upturned soil, created dust storms. People did what they could to protect their homes and bodies from an invasion of dirt that entered and crept through closed windows and under door cracks. Nesters rubbed the inside of their noses with Vaseline and men avoided shaking hands, for the electric shock this produced could knock both of them backwards. Dust pneumonia, a new ailment, was killing children and the elderly. The storms also brought in more vermin, including tarantulas and centipedes. One storm produced a swarm of grasshoppers. There was also an abundance of rabbits who were both a source of food but also a cause of food loss. John McCarty, editor of the *Dalhart Texan*, encouraged rabbit drives in which citizens would club the animals to death. Melt White watched one of the drives, and later recalled that he could not forget the sound of the rabbits crying as they were being killed.

Though 1934 had been a dreadful year for dust storms and hopeless for growing crops, the worst dust storm arrived on April 14, 1935. It is known as Black Sunday. A giant cloud turned the sky black. While Thomas Jefferson Johnson walked home from the double funeral for Louzima Lucas and Ruth Nell Shaw, he was knocked down. The dust got into his eyes and blinded him permanently.

Something had to be done to prevent future storms. President Roosevelt had already addressed wheat surpluses in his first New Deal package: the government would become the market, providing subsidies to farmers not to plant more than what was needed. The president then enlisted the help of Hugh Hammond Bennett, a soil scientist, who used the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to teach farmers how to regard the soil as part of a larger ecosystem which all farmers were responsible for maintaining.

Still, the combination of the Depression, the drought, and the relentless dust storms made it impossible for some settlers to recover their losses. Some, like John McCarty, simply left. Others, like George "Doc" Dawson, remained, but planted one unsuccessful crop after another. "Uncle" Dick Coon went broke. His properties had been mortgaged and ceased to turn a profit after the Great Depression.

After the Depression, many farmers simply abandoned the land that they had previously exploited, leaving a myriad of acres vulnerable to the wind. Hammond's encouragement of respect for the soil, coupled with President Roosevelt's initiative to plant a line of trees from the Canadian border to Texas, helped to revive the plains. However, with the rise of Big Agra, or industrial-scale farming, the agricultural industry repeated many past mistakes. The trees that Roosevelt had planted were mostly cut down, and farmers have not been careful in their use of limited water resources, particularly the Ogallala Aquifer. There have been exceptionally dry seasons. Some have worried that there will be another Dust Bowl. However, Ike Osteen, who lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918, the Dust Bowl, and the invasion on the beach at Normandy, insists that this is merely talk. No drought has matched what he saw during "the Dirty Thirties."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Isaac "Ike" Osteen – A **wheat** farmer from Baca County, Colorado, he is one of the surviving witnesses to the Dust Bowl. When Egan interviews Osteen in 2002, he is a spry eighty-six-year old who regularly does chores around his household. Osteen spent his entire life in southeastern Colorado and endured the Dust Bowl. He was one of nine children and "grew up in a dugout." His mother was of Irish descent and his father followed the old Santa Fe Trail in 1909, the year in which Congress tried to get the "final frontiers of the public domain" settled by nesters. After his father died, Ike and his brother Oscar earned money for the family by digging up grass for neighbors with the family tractor. Then his mother moved to the city with his two sisters, and Osteen decided to strike out on his own, leaving the old dugout to Oscar. Osteen enlisted in the army at the start of the Second World War and fought in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Egan meets him when he is eighty-six and living in Springfield, Colorado, the seat of Baca County.

Jeanne Clark – A lifelong High Plains resident from Lamar, Colorado and a surviving witness of the Dust Bowl. Clark was the daughter of a rancher and a Broadway dancer, Louise Walton, who relocated to the prairie to treat a bronchial condition. As a child, Clark suffered from dust pneumonia. Clark was an only child who doctors did not think would survive past 1935, due to her diagnosis. She slept most of the day and was awakened only by the sight and smell of her father's cigar smoke. As a little girl, she wore dresses made of old onion sacks, due to her family's poverty as a result of both the Great Depression and the drought.

Melt White – The son of Bam White. The cowboy learned through his extended family that he was of partial Apache and

Cherokee ancestry, which had been a family secret. Due to his dark skin color, White was taunted by his classmates, who called him "Mexican" or "nigger." White was a sensitive child and would get angry at the taunts, as well as upset with people who criticized his father after the release of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. White was proud of Bam for making the film and agreed with his father's belief that misuse of the land had caused the Dust Bowl. After his father died, he moved back to Dalhart and built a home at the edge of town, where he moved with his wife, Juanita. When Egan interviewed him in 2002, White was working as a house painter and a paper hanger, though he never ceased to think of himself as "a cowboy by trade and inclination."

Louise Walton – A former Broadway dancer who moved to the Southern Plains to correct a respiratory problem, at the recommendation of her doctors in New York. Walton's health improved was indeed improved by the dry air of the Southern Plains, and she went on to marry a rancher and give birth to Jeanne Clark.

Bam White – A migrant who became stranded with his family in No Man's Land due to his horses starving during the trip south. They were migrating from Animas, Colorado to Littlefield, Texas—a town near Amarillo, Texas. The Whites arrived in Dalhart, Texas on February 26, 1926 and decided to settle there, becoming nesters. White first worked as a sharecropper. He believed that excessive plowing had caused the incessant dust storms that devastated the plains. In the 1930s, he was featured in the documentary, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*.

John McCarty – The publisher of the local newspaper, the *Dalhart Texan*. McCarty criticized Plains settlers who fretted over the Dust Bowl, believing that the storms were tests of character. He was also opposed to government assistance for suffering farmers. He liked referring to people on the Southern Plains as "Spartans," due to his perception of their toughness. He created the Last Man Club—a written commitment among the most important men in the community that they would spend their entire lives in Dalhart. McCarty, however, left Dalhart in the 1930s for a better work opportunity in Amarillo, Texas. At the end of his life, he took up painting and frequently painted depictions of the storms, which he portrayed as "heroic" and "muscular." McCarty was born in 1900, the same year in which Dalhart became a town, and died in 1974.

Harvey Foust – The sheriff in Dalhart, Texas. On June 27, 1931, he tried to calm the crowd outside of Dalhart's First National Bank after the bank closed due to insolvency. Sheriff Foust had been a town hero a year before, after killing a pair of bootleggers who had shot at him and shot and killed the sheriff at the time. For his bravery, he was promoted from deputy to sheriff. By 1931, he was drunk on the job by midday.

Hi Barrick – The sheriff of Boise City, Oklahoma. A former "doughboy," or a World War I soldier who served in the American Expeditionary Force on the western front, Barrick returned to Oklahoma after the war to get rich from the **wheat** boom. He took on the job as sheriff after being outraged by the sight of the town's sheriff at the time, who was drunk while on duty. Barrick sold sugar in front of his station, which he had seized from bootleggers.

Quanah "Sweet Smell" Parker – The son of Cynthia Parker and Chief Peta Nocona, a Comanche leader. He led the attack on the trading post "at Adobe Walls, just north of the Canadian River." Egan describes Sweet Smell as "regal-looking and charismatic, with soft features that made him look almost feminine." He later married seven women and founded a religion based on taking hallucinogens and going on "vision quests."

General Philip Sheridan – A U.S. Army general who routed the Comanche out of the Texas Panhandle to make way for cattle-ranchers. He encouraged Anglo-Americans to "kill, skin, and sell" the buffalos on which the natives relied for sustenance, until not a single one was left. Sheridan believed that the cowboys who would eventually overtake the land would be the "[forerunners] of an advanced civilization."

Charles Goodnight – A cattle rancher who "moved a herd of 1,600 cattle down from Colorado to Palo Duro Canyon." His effort led to the creation of **the XIT ranch** and to his reputation as the forefather of the Texas Panhandle. In 1916, he held "the last buffalo hunt" on his ranch in Palo Duro Canyon. Ten thousand people showed up to watch Goodnight, by then an old man, chase an imported buffalo.

Doctor George "Doc" Waller Dawson – The doctor in Dalhart, Texas who operated a hospital out of a two-story sanitarium. Egan describes Dawson as "a tobacco-spitting, black-bearded man of the South" who wore "a dark Stetson" that he took off only when performing surgery. Originally from Kentucky, Dawson went to Texas to alleviate his respiratory problems. He was married to Willie Dawson, who assisted him in the management of his practice.

"Uncle" Dick Coon – A migrant from Galveston, Texas who had lived through the city's devastating hurricane of 1900 and grew up in "corrosive poverty." He carried a lucky $100 bill, or a C-note, with him throughout his life. He did not initially plan on staying in the High Plains, but he eventually became a nester. When he arrived, he was moving through Dalhart, Texas while trying to make a train connection to Houston. He was seduced by the syndicate's real estate agents to stay in Dalhart and buy a piece of the old **XIT ranch**. Later, he became the owner of most of Dalhart's real estate and funded a kitchen in Doc Dawson's sanitarium building, which fed starving nesters in the mid-1930s. However, most of Coon's real estate was mortgaged and no longer brought in any income, and he nearly went bankrupt. Coon eventually made it to Houston, where he moved for his health. He took a room in the Rice Hotel and died

"with little more money than he had when he came into the world."

C.C. Lucas – Carlie Lucas's brother and Hazel Lucas's uncle. With his sister-in-law, Dee, he tried to help maintain the Lucas family's **wheat** crop, to no avail. By 1932, he was struggling to survive. He would rub a bit of axle grease on his cows' udders to get some milk out of them.

Louzima Lucas – Hazel Lucas's grandmother and the matriarch of the Lucas family. She had been a widow for twenty-one years and had nine children, forty grandchildren, and thirty great-grandchildren. She lived in the family home in Texhoma, Oklahoma until her death. She died shortly after her beloved great-granddaughter, Ruth Nell. The old woman and the infant were buried in a double funeral.

"Big Will" Crawford – A bachelor who lived alone in a dugout outside of Boise City, Oklahoma. He had moved there from Missouri and was known for supposedly being the fattest man in three states. He would say that he weighed somewhere between 300 and 700 pounds. Will worked as a farmhand. He later married Sadie White in Wichita, Kansas. Crawford's closest neighbors were the Folkers family.

Sadie White – Will Crawford's wife. White worked at the factory in Wichita, Kansas, where Crawford specially ordered his overalls. Impressed by the size of the garment, White stitched a note into the front pocket of the pair she had sewn for him, saying that she was looking for "a real man." Crawford responded to her and the two soon married.

The Folkers Family – A family that set up a homestead in No Man's Land. The family patriarch, Fred Folker, was determined to plant an orchard, but it failed in 1934. His wife, Katherine Folker, was college-educated and originally from Missouri. During the Great Depression, she wanted to leave No Man's Land and return to her home state, despite things not being any better there. Fred and Katherine had one daughter named Faye, who was Hazel Lucas's brightest student. They also had a son named Gordon.

Andy James – A member of the James family, which was "one of the last big ranching families." Due to bankruptcy, he had been forced to sell off a large section of the family ranch, located south of Dalhart, Texas and extending into both the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles. The family retained one section of the ranch and tried, unsuccessfully, to dig for oil. At the end of World War I, James had 250,000 acres of land for cattle-ranching.

George Alexander Ehrlich – A Russian-German immigrant to Oklahoma. He immigrated to the United States in 1890 to escape conscription into the czar's army. During his voyage, his ship got caught in a typhoon and nearly sank. He arrived in New York Harbor two months after leaving Hamburg, Germany, on New Year's Day, 1891. After arriving in the United States from his homeland near the Volga River, he moved to Kansas to stay with relatives. He then migrated to Oklahoma and found work as a ranch hand. He married a fellow German from the Volga region, Hanna Weis, and had ten children, the youngest of whom died after being hit by a cattle truck.

John Johnson – A banker in Boise City, Oklahoma who seized properties from farmers who foreclosed on bank loans they had taken out in the 1920s. To prevent Johnson from selling off their farms and farming equipment, the farmers all agreed to show up at the auctions and bet only ten cents on seized property so that they could easily buy back what they had lost.

Herbert Hoover – The 31st President of the United States. Hoover was born in a small town in Iowa in 1874 and grew up in Oregon. He later attended Stanford University and studied mining engineering. He served in the cabinets of Presidents Harding and Coolidge and, in 1928, became the Republican presidential nominee. He was elected during a period of prosperity but oversaw the Crash of 1929 and witnessed its devastating repercussions throughout the country. Hoover had once claimed that the United States was finally solving the problem of poverty, but now he watched as millions of people stood in breadlines. In regard to farmers, he refused to intervene when **wheat** prices dropped, believing that it was best to let the free market weed out the "losers." Hoover's *laissez-faire* ("hands-off") approach was perceived as callous, and he was resoundingly defeated in the 1932 election. His most notable achievement is the construction of the Hoover Dam in Nevada. Construction on the Colorado River began in 1931, and it was completed in 1935.

Governor William Henry David Murray – The racist governor of Oklahoma who ran a campaign on what he called the three C's—"Corporations, Carpetbaggers, and Coons." Nicknamed "Alfalfa Bill," he resented Theodore Roosevelt for refusing to admit Oklahoma to the union until Murray removed a white supremacist plank from the state constitution. In 1932, he attempted to run against Franklin Delano Roosevelt for President of the United States. Egan describes Murray as "a mustachioed, haunt-eyed, big-eared man of sixty who could talk for hours without interruption, fueled by caffeine and nicotine." He drank two pots of black coffee each day and frequently chewed on the butt of a cigar. As governor, he often ruled by martial law, sending the National Guard out "twenty-seven times in his first two years in office."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt – The 32nd President of the United States. Roosevelt is responsible for the institution of welfare programs that still persist to date, such as Social Security, and banking protections, such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). These programs were a part of his New Deal, which was intended to rescue the nation from economic ruin. In the High Plains, Roosevelt's assistance to farmers was met with a mixture of relief and reluctance. Self-sufficient nesters did not want what they perceived as handouts from the government. *Dalhart Texan* editor, John McCarty, resented

Washington's interference and insulted farmers who sought federal assistance. However, Roosevelt's willingness to make the government the market—that is, to buy **wheat** and livestock from farmers and to encourage them to let crops go fallow instead of growing it in abundance and selling it, was a successful effort to keep the crop's prices high enough for farmers to profit. Roosevelt also created an agency that addressed soil erosion and conservation, led by the scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett. Additionally, Roosevelt pursued his own ambition of forming a barrier of trees in the prairie. Though the idea was met with initial skepticism, he used workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to plant trees from North Dakota's Canadian border to Texas. The trees were to prevent the flow of dust from the west to the east, as well as to contribute to the health of the nation. Though the nation had credited him with ending the Great Depression, Roosevelt's popularity diminished by the end of his second term. Many people had lost the government jobs that they had under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the economy was in decline. However, the United States would soon enter World War II, which Roosevelt also approached with notable leadership. He served three terms, making his administration the longest-running, and died in office, never seeing the end of the Second World War.

Black Jack Ketchum – A robber who led the gang that robbed Herzstein's general store. Ketchum also killed the co-owner of the store, Levi Herzstein. Ketchum was later hanged for robbing a train. However, in a bizarre accident, the hanging rope decapitated him instead of snapping his spine at the neck, and his head rolled to the feet of the crowd that watched the execution. He was thirty-seven years old. During the Depression, Ketchum's reputation went from that of a scoundrel to a sympathetic figure who stole from the big businesses that exploited common people, such as railroad companies. His body was later exhumed and placed in a cemetery, albeit in an unmarked grave and away from formerly notable citizens.

Levi Herzstein – One of the first Jewish settlers on the High Plains and, with his brother,Morris Herzstein, owner of a general store. Herzstein first settled in Clayton, New Mexico with his brother, where they opened their first store. They intended to expand their business throughout the Southern Plains. After he was robbed by Black Jack Ketchum, Levi organized a posse and "chased Black Jack's gang up among the dormant volcanoes of the Llano Estacado," then near No Man's Land. Black Jack shot him in the stomach and Levi bled to death.

Simon Herzstein – Nephew of Levi and Morris Herzstein. Originally from Philadelphia, like the rest of his family, he arrived in Clayton, New Mexico in April 1901 at the age of nineteen and helped his uncle Morris with his goal of setting up a chain of general stores. In 1935, the city of Dalhart foreclosed on their local store due to $242 in back taxes.

Maude Edwards – Simon Herzstein's wife. Maude grew up in London and Philadelphia. Egan describes her as a "blond, very pretty, small, and well-dressed woman" who spoke with "the crispest English heard in New Mexico Territory" and who had "European manners." She accompanied Simon to Clayton, New Mexico where Black Jack Ketchum was hanged.

Juan Cruz Lujan – A sheep rancher who had the oldest home in Cimarron County, "up north in Carrumpa Valley." Lujan was born in Mexico in 1858 and ran away from home while still a little boy to work as an ox team driver on the Santa Fe Trail and Cimarron Cutoff. Juan married Virginia Valdez, a member of the wealthy Baca family, which managed sheep all over New Mexico. The couple built a chapel on their ranch in No Man's Land, which became a meeting place for Catholics and Mexicans in Cimarron County. They had nine children, though five of them died after they were born or when they were in their infancy.

Joe Garza – At the height of the Dust Bowl, Garza was a thirty-five-year-old rancher who had been born on the Lujan ranch on the banks of Carrumpa Creek, "in a tiny shed." Garza "grew up loving horses and running sheep, [as well as] bucking broncs." The Lujan family treated him like a son.

Hugh Hammond Bennett – A scientist who studied the soil. Bennett first worked at the Department of Agriculture. He then became the director of a new agency within the Department of the Interior, which was "set up to stabilize the soil" after the onset of the Dust Bowl. Contrary to most scientists at the time, Bennett insisted that the dust storms were the result of human activity. He was particularly outraged at the arrogance of the American government, who did not respect soil as a finite resource and continued to encourage farmers to plow the land, removing more layers of much needed topsoil. Bennett created soil conservation districts, for which he got farmers to enter contracts agreeing to farm the land "as a single ecological unit." This is the only New Deal grassroots operation that still exists today. Bennett is buried in the Arlington National Cemetery.

Caroline Henderson – A Mount Holyoke graduate who lived in the northeast corner of No Man's Land just north of Boise City, Oklahoma. She married a farmer after college and moved west. Caroline and her husband suffered from their inability to plant crops, and they stopped altogether in 1934 due to persistent drought. She later contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly*'s "Letters from the Dust Bowl" feature.

Harold Ickes – The Interior Secretary of the United States. Ickes did not believe that the High Plains would ever be productive again. Instead of building a dam in No Man's Land and providing government jobs, Ickes thought it would be best to put the Southern Plains back into the public domain and move its half a million nesters out of the region.

The Lowery Family – Homesteaders Ezra and Goldie Lowery had been in No Man's Land since 1906. The Lowerys came up with the idea of canning thistles and putting them in brine. They believed that thistles were nutritious—high in chlorophyll and iron. They also planted flowering yucca for animal feed and their personal nourishment. These measures helped both the Lowerys and their livestock to survive. During the dust blizzards, their daughter, Odalee, came down with mumps, then the measles, and finally scarlet fever. She later graduated from her high school as class valedictorian.

Tex Thornton – A rainmaker hired by the citizens of Dalhart, Texas for five hundred dollars "to squeeze the clouds" with "a combination of TNT and nitro-glycerin." He sent explosives into the sky to try and make it rain—and it did indeed snow afterwards, but it also snowed in other places that didn't use his method.

Thomas Jefferson Johnson – A homesteader who had migrated from the Ozarks in a covered wagon. Egan describes him as "tall and tough." Johnson lived in a dugout on a quarter-section of land. While leaving the Lucas double funeral, he was overwhelmed by a blizzard of dust on the notorious Black Sunday—the day of the Dust Bowl's worst storm—and ended up permanently blinded by the dirt that got into his eyes.

Don Hartwell – A farmer from Inavale, Nebraska, a town on the Kansas-Nebraska border. His family moved to Nebraska in 1880. He was married to Vera Hartwell, who earned income by selling dresses. Don earned additional income as a piano player, playing at dances and in local lodges. He left behind a diary which he started on New Years' Day, 1936, and his entries chronicled the Dust Bowl. When they could no longer farm, his wife moved to Denver, Colorado to work as a doctor's maid. Unable to find work in Denver, Don went back to Inavale, where he found part-time work on a government road crew. The couple, who had been married for 26 years and never spent time apart before the Dust Bowl, soon saw each other just every few years on holidays.

Verna Hartwell – A dressmaker and the wife of the failed farmer Don Hartwell. She and Hartwell owned a farm in Inavale, Nebraska, which they purchased in 1909 but had to give up in the mid-1930s due to the drought. Verna found work in Denver as a doctor's maid, but her husband returned to Inavale after being unable to find work in the city. She returned to Nebraska to visit him on holidays. After he died, she found his diary and attempted to burn it, but a neighbor stopped her. The diary was given to the Nebraska Historical Society in Lincoln after she died, and has become an important record of the Dust Bowl.

Arthur Rothstein – A photographer hired by Roy Stryker to take photos of No Man's Land in the aftermath of Black Sunday and other subsequent Dust Bowl storms. Originally from New York City, Rothstein was hired in the spring of 1936 at the age of 21. He had just graduated from college. He was sent to Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma to take photos.

Pare Lorentz – An amateur filmmaker who had the idea of filming a movie about "how and why the Great Plains had been settled and then brought to ruination." Lorentz had never made a film before, and Hollywood was not interested in hiring him. Roy Stryker hired him in 1935 to make a documentary, which would be funded by the U.S. government. Lorentz wanted to show how people had created the problem in the Great Plains. His film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, became one of the most influential documentaries ever made. The film was the only peacetime film produced by the U.S. government and "intended for broad commercial release." The former cowboy Bam White is featured in the film.

Alexandre Hogue – An artist who had grown up on a relative's ranch near Dalhart, Texas. *Life* magazine called him "the artist of the Dust Bowl." His most famous painting was *Drouth Survivors*. It was "a portrait of an agrarian nightmare" influenced by the Surrealist movement, showing two dead cows face down in a sand drift, a leafless tree covered in dust, a tractor nearly covered by sand, and a fence carried away by the wind. John McCarty planned to buy the painting from an exposition in Dallas for fifty dollars and return it to Dalhart, where he and the Last Man Club would burn it. However, the organizers wanted at least two thousand dollars for the painting. The artwork was later purchased by the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris and destroyed in a fire.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lizzie White – Bam White's wife and Melt's mother. She arrived in No Man's Land after becoming stranded with her husband in the winter of 1926. After her husband died, she moved out of Dalhart with Melt and his siblings.

Inez Barrick – Hi Barrick's wife. Inez and Hi had three children. She ran a business in which she sewed suits for lawyers.

Cynthia Parker – A white woman who was kidnapped from her family by the Comanche. She later became the wife of Chief Peta Nocona and the mother of Quanah Parker. The Texas Rangers kidnapped her back from the Comanche, though she begged to remain with the tribe.

Chief Peta Nocona – Cynthia Parker's husband and Quanah Parker's father. He was killed by Texas Rangers when they kidnapped Cynthia Parker back from the Comanche tribe.

Willie Catherine Dawson – The wife of George "Doc" Dawson. She helped him with his medical practice by managing the X-ray machine, bookkeeping, and serving as anesthesiologist. She was also voted the "finest-looking woman" in the Texas Panhandle.

John Dawson – Doc and Willie Dawson's youngest son. John left Dalhart in 1929 to become a lawyer in Houston. He returned home in the mid-1930s to a devastated Panhandle.

John, like Hugh Bennett and Pare Lorentz, believed that the nesters had destroyed the land.

Hazel Lucas Shaw – A teacher who settled with her husband, Charles Shaw, on a far edge of the Oklahoma Panhandle, where they were among the first homesteaders. They opened a business in Boise City, Oklahoma.

William Carlyle "Carlie" Lucas – Hazel Lucas's father. He built a dugout for the family in 1915 and began "plowing the grass on his half-section." He chose to move to No Man's Land because the land was free of charge.

Dee Lucas – Carlie Lucas's wife and Hazel Lucas's mother. She had five children and, after her husband died, managed the family's **wheat** farm with help from her husband's brother, C.C.

Charles Shaw – Hazel Lucas's husband, Shaw was also a teacher. He and his wife relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio in the spring of 1929, where he studied mortuary science.

Ruth Nell Shaw – Hazel Lucas and Charles Shaw's daughter. She was diagnosed with whooping cough during her infancy. She was born during the worst of the Dust Bowl on April 7, 1934 and died of dust pneumonia in 1935.

Charles Shaw, Jr. – Hazel and Charles Shaw's son. Hazel went north to Elkhart, Kansas to give birth to him. For Hazel, Charles, Jr. was the result of her commitment "to bring a new life into the world to replace the one taken from her by dusters." He was born strong and healthy.

Hanna Weis – George Alexander Ehrlich's wife and the mother of their ten children. She, too, was a German from the Volga River region.

Georgie Ehrlich – The youngest of the Ehrlich children. He was killed after being run over by a cattle truck.

Judge T.R. Alexander – The judge who acquitted George Alexander Ehrlich of a false treason charge during World War I.

Morris Herzstein – The surviving brother of Levi Herzstein, he was the co-owner of their general store and one of the first Jewish settlers in the High Plains. With the help of his nephew, Simon, Morris set up a chain of stores, starting with a new store in Clayton, New Mexico.

C.W. Post – The cereal magnate who funded efforts to bring rain back into the High Plains.

Bob Geiger – A reporter for the Associated Press who provided dispatches during the dust blizzards in the Southern Plains. He coined the phrase "the Dust Bowl."

Roy Emerson Stryker – A government official, economist, and photographer originally from Kansas who headed the Farm Security Administration. He came up with the idea of creating a visual record of the Dust Bowl for his administration. He hired numerous photographers for the project.

Gustav Borth – A Russo-German immigrant from the Volga who had immigrated to the High Plains during a hurricane in 1890. His children later suffered from dust pneumonia and his farm failed, resulting in the bank taking his combine.

TERMS

Nesters – Also called, "homesteaders," they were the people who had settled on the southern High Plains in the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles, southern Nebraska, southeastern Colorado, and northeastern New Mexico.

Exodusters – A name for the farmers who left the Southern Plains during the 1930s. John Steinbeck is credited with popularizing their narrative. By 1934, there was a "small but steady" exodus of people who left No Man's Land to escape the dust storms. Generally, exodusters were tenant farmers from Eastern Oklahoma who were more negatively impacted by the Great Depression than by the Dust Bowl. Most of the prairie inhabitants who lived in areas that were hardest hit by the dust blizzards never left their homes.

No Man's Land – A long strip of land "in the far western end of the Oklahoma Panhandle" on the border with Texas. Egan describes the land as windy, dry, and neglected.

Manifest Destiny – The idea that the United States was fated to extend its borders from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts and beyond. The term was first used in an editorial that was published in the July-August 1845 issue of the *Democratic Review*, a periodical published by John O'Sullivan, an editor who supported the annexations of Texas and of the Oregon Territory. The idea of Manifest Destiny also inspired the United States' later acquisition of islands in both the Caribbean and the Pacific.

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 – An agreement which promised the Comanche, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, and other Southwestern indigenous tribes "hunting rights to much of the Great American Desert, or the area south of the Arkansas River." The agreement was signed by U.S. President Andrew Johnson and ratified by Congress. The land allocated to the natives was mostly arid grassland in the west where the tribes could hunt for bison—the animal on which they relied for food and shelter.

Dugout – An underground house *dug out* of the earth on the prairie. The floor was dirt and the walls were plank boards "with no insulation on the inside and tarpaper on the outside." Cow chips burned in an old stove provided heat. The toilet was outside in a hole dug out of the ground, while families hauled in water obtained from a deeper hole in the ground. Those who lived in dugouts tried to avoid snakes and tarantulas crawling around on the dirt floor, and they burned off centipedes living behind the plank boards on the walls. The pest problem increased due to the severe dust storms, but the underground homes protected families from the harsh prairie winds. Unlike aboveground houses, they could not be carried away during

wind storms and tornadoes, which were frequent in the plains.

Sod House – A house on the prairie which was an alternative to a dugout. It was made of prairie grass, which was "stacked like ice blocks of an igloo." The houses tended to leak.

The Red River War of 1874-1875 – A conflict between several Native American tribes and the U.S. Army. The war began with an uprising of several Southwestern tribes, particularly the Comanche, in response to Texans' violation of the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867. The tribes already resented being confined to reservations and became more outraged by "Anglos" who killed their bison to sell the hides and horns back East. In retaliation, the Comanche "went after Anglo stock herds." In 1874, tribal warriors launched an attack that killed 60 Anglos. In the fall of the same year, General William Tecumseh Sherman led 3,000 federal troops and cavalry in an attack on natives who lived in the Red River valley. The war's most decisive battle, The Battle of Palo Duro Canyon, resulted in the Comanche's permanent dispossession of the Southern Plains. Six files of soldiers invaded a Comanche encampment. The natives fled the attack and the army killed 1,048 of their horses. The displaced Comanche ended up wandering the prairie on foot and were starving. Eventually, most were rounded up and sent to various prison camps in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma, while some of their leaders were shipped to prisons in Florida.

The Battle of Palo Duro Canyon – The decisive battle of the Red River War of 1874-1875, in which the U.S. Army permanently removed the Comanche tribe from the Texas Panhandle. The battle, which occurred on September 28, 1874, resulted in relatively little loss of life on both sides. It is significant due to its being the Southwestern tribes' last demonstration of resistance against invasion and displacement.

Silicosis – A disease caused by the build up of prairie dust, which is high in silica content (a compound in mineral quartz and sand), in the lungs. The coarse dust tears at "the honeycombed web of air sacs" in the lungs, thereby weakening the body's resistance to infection.

Dust Pneumonia – A common ailment in the 1930s, with symptoms including coughing fits and body aches, usually chest pains, "and shortness of breath." The disease was common among children, infants, and the elderly. Some of those who were infected died several days after their diagnosis.

The Concussion Theory – The superstitious notion that rainstorms tended to follow war battles. The theory was unsuccessfully tested by the cereal magnate C.W. Post in West Texas, where he sent dynamite into the clouds to spark rain—but none came.

CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) – A public work relief program that operated from 1933 to 1942. It was designed to keep young men working during the Great Depression and to perform public works projects. The corps worked to build dams and bridges. They also restored forests, made trails in mountain ranges, and paved roads on the prairie. It also worked on a soil conservation project north of Dalhart in the mid-1930s.

Okie – A migrant from the Great Plains who went to California, often arriving on foot, to look for work. Many farmers left the Great Plains during the Great Depression. "Okie," a pejorative which was intended to refer to people from the Southern Plains, particularly those from Oklahoma, was a bit of a misnomer. Most of the people who went to California were not from the Southern Plains. In fact, most nesters in the Southern Plains remained home, even during the worst of the Dust Bowl. Still, Okies had a poor reputation, aided by stereotypes about people from the Southern Plains. Those who made it to California's Central Valley were met with signs that said, "Okies and Dogs Not Allowed Inside."

The Last Man Club – A group of four men in Dalhart, Texas, including George "Doc" Dawson, "Uncle" Dick Coon, and John McCarty, who were long-time residents and regarded as pillars of the community. The club was based on an agreement to remain in Dalhart until they died—an expression of their dedication to the town they loved. John McCarty left to take a better-paying job in Amarillo, Texas. Dick Coon left to go to Houston to help relieve a respiratory ailment, and he died there in a hotel. Doc Dawson was the only one who remained, though he had been contemplating a move before dying at home of a brain hemorrhage.

Snuster – A portmanteau, or a combination of the phrase "snow duster." A snow duster referred to a storm or shower which combined snow and dust.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WESTWARD EXPANSION AND THE SETTLEMENT OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

Historians often use the 1890 census to mark the end of westward expansion—the year in which the dream of Manifest Destiny was fulfilled, and the United States ceded no additional land to homesteaders. However, in *The Worst Hard Time*, Timothy Egan notes that historians often forget about the settlement of the southern Great Plains—the region comprised of what are now the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles, western Kansas, southwestern Nebraska, southeastern Colorado, and northeastern New Mexico. For the first thirty years of the twentieth-century, "Southern families, field hands, Scots-Irish

and Welsh," as well as Russo-Germans, arrived in the southern Great Plains looking to take advantage of the U.S. government's invitations to settle and farm the land. Unlike the northern Great Plains, where temperatures could reach forty degrees below zero Fahrenheit, the Southern Plains were warmer, though arid. It was a last frontier, largely settled by those who had been driven out of their homes by war, unemployment, or regime change. Overall, Egan illustrates how westward expansion and the southern Great Plains were, for many settlers, synonymous with new beginnings.

The largest group of new settlers in the Southern Plains were ethnic Germans from a region in Russia, near the Volga River. During their westward migration, the Russo-Germans passed through Kansas, staying with relatives who had already acquired farmland, and then settled permanently in the Cherokee Outlet of Oklahoma. The Russo-Germans were experienced farmers fleeing persecution and looking for a place where they could live and be left alone. However, Oklahoma, like Russia, was not always peaceful. Egan portrays the Russo-German migrants as a people who had the blessing of creating successful farm settlements wherever they went, but also the curse of always being outsiders.

Previously, the Russo-Germans had left their original homelands in southern Germany to settle near the Volga around 1763, after the German-born empress Catherine the Great issued a manifesto offering them "homestead land, tax breaks, cultural autonomy, and no military conscription." The promise was broken 110 years later by Czar Alexander II, prompting many Russo-Germans to leave their adopted home in Russia to escape conscription into the czar's army, as well as increased taxes and the revocation of "exclusive licenses to brew beer." The Germans had also incurred the resentment of ethnic Russians who regarded their "snug villages" and "big harvests" with envy. In the Southern Plains of the United States, where indigenous tribes had been killed or displaced, the newcomers saw an opportunity to start over, create communities, and dwell undisturbed. Reconnaissance groups of Germans had explored the Indian Territory of Oklahoma and returned to the Volga with stories about a land that "was treeless, windswept, and free," like the land which they had settled in Russia. It was, for them, "The Promised Land—all over again."

By the 1920s, 303,000 Germans populated the Great Plains. They had arrived in Oklahoma by train, and there observed a territory burned black by angry indigenous people, who had been betrayed by the U.S. government yet again. The Germans, however, sprang into action, reviving the land with seeds of turkey red— "a hard winter **wheat**"—that they had carried with them, "sewn into the pockets of their vests." Egan portrays the German immigrants as hearty, practical people who had carefully prepared for their migration to Oklahoma, expecting to bend stubborn soil to their will.

Other Southern Plains settlers were less well-equipped than the Russo-German settlers. They included Scots-Irish migrants who had lost their small farms in Appalachia after the Civil War and Oklahomans who had lost jobs after oil prices dropped. They decided to try their hands at farming. Others had abandoned farms in the Northern Plains due to "the long winters and ruinous cycles of drought and freeze"—for them, and other members of the underclass, the Southern Plains were a last-ditch attempt to grab onto something they could call their own.

Potential nesters had been lured to the territory where it rained less than "twenty inches a year" with experimental farms that practiced wind farming. Syndicates working with the Department of Agriculture showed new settlers how to put in a windmill so that water would come up for "hogs, chickens, and [the] garden." They encouraged the immigrants and migrants to plant dryland wheat, which would not need irrigation. Agents and speculators advertised a land that offered riches in its soil, despite its spare appearance. The advertising promised that "[a]ny three-toed fool" could farm the land, suggesting that, with a little hard work and dedication, anyone could turn the flatlands into profitable farm-land. The publicity was especially appealing to poor settlers who lacked education, money for farming tools, and, in some cases, experience in farming.

Some of those who arrived at the flatlands had no better options than what the speculators offered. Dick Coon, for example, had grown up in "corrosive poverty," then lost everything in the Galveston hurricane of 1900. He passed through Dalhart, Texas looking to get a train to Houston, but stayed in Dalhart, lured by one of "the syndicate's real estate agents" to buy his own piece of the old **XIT ranch**. Others, such as Bam White, were marooned with their families, but looked at the growing town on the Southern Plains and saw potential. For all of them, it was "the last best chance to do something right, to get a small piece of the world and make it work." Thus, the Southern Plains offered safe harbor and hope to those who, it seemed, had consistently run into bad luck.

The population on the Southern Plains consisted of a motley crew of ethnic German refugees, unemployed workers in the oil industry, and Scots-Irish who remained displaced by the Civil War. What they all had in common was that they had nowhere else to go but westward, hoping to make homes and livings in a place where those possibilities had seemed least feasible to others before them. Egan's portraits of these migrants illustrate how they all embodied a vision of the frontier that was less about a particular landscape and more about an idea that one could always start over. They believed that the soil would always be bountiful.

ANGLO CULTURE AND RACISM

As a boy, Melt White was treated as though he did not belong. Children teased him for his dark skin, "which seemed too full of the sun." When he finally learned about his Cherokee and Apache heritage, his aunt warned him to keep it a secret. Melt was a "cowboy" who was also "an Indian." His internal strife was symbolic of the historical discord between Anglo Texans (that is, white Texans) and the tribes they displaced. Melt and his father, Bam White, attributed the Dust Bowl to misuse of the land, believing that God had not created it "to be plowed up." It was, instead, "for Indians and buffalo." "Anglos," who had sought to exploit the land beyond what it could give to reap maximum profit, had not only destroyed the lives of the people who had first inhabited Texas, but had also nearly caused their own demise. Egan writes about how the values of Anglo culture were not only callous toward indigenous people and driven by profit, but also how those values were incompatible with the land and its natural capabilities.

The promise of Manifest Destiny drew scores of Anglos to the Great Plains, but many did not arrive with an attitude of respect and cooperation. Instead, they sought to impose their own values of commerce, racial separation, and agricultural exploitation—all of which, in combination, devastated both the land and its inhabitants. The Anglos who settled Texas came into conflict with the Comanche, themselves a migratory people who had originally come from eastern Wyoming. In the local newspaper, the *Dalhart Texan*, the new settlers had been hailed as "the highest type of Anglo Saxon ancestry," though they were actually refugees. Others were European immigrants and Southerners whom speculators courted at ports of entry. Whatever their precise origins, all of the white Texan settlers were uniformly hated by the Comanche due to their united effort to drive its original people off of the land.

First, the Anglos killed the bison. Anglo hunters disregarded the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, which had promised "hunting rights to much of the Great American Desert, the area south of the Arkansas River." The land was mostly arid grasslands in the west where the tribes could hunt bison. Seeing a market in hides and horns in the East, the Anglo hunters "invaded the treaty land" and "killed bison by the millions." It took ten years to eliminate them completely. The Comanche, Kiowa-Apache, and Kiowa tribes depended on bison for food and clothing and used their dried turds for heating fuel. With the bison gone, the Comanche were left to wander the prairie until they died. The Anglos had succeeded in seizing the land—but they then had to decide what to do with it.

With the Comanche gone, land sellers advertised it as virgin territory—a "wasteland" that, if plowed properly, "could be England or Missouri." They offered 500,000 acres "for sale as farm homes" with "the land selling for thirteen dollars an acre." Agents went to Kansas City twice a month, rounded up people to put on a train at no charge, and sent them to the Texas Panhandle to see what the land offered. What it offered was a dream of prosperity, fostered largely by imaginative advertising. The land would never be as lush as that in England or Missouri, but that did not matter. What mattered was that some of the day-trippers from Missouri believed that it *could* yield such potential.

Not everyone was welcome in the southern Great Plains, however. Aside from the indigenous people, who were regarded as an inconvenience to be eradicated quickly from the territory, black people were also unwanted in parts of the Southern Plains. In Dalhart, a sign at the edge of town—"Black Man Don't Let the Sun Go Down on You Here"—served as a warning to black men who made the mistake of thinking that the offer of cheap land also extended to them. On the contrary, the Anglo settlers intended to maintain white supremacy in landownership and to ensure the dominance of the white Anglo culture that had overtaken the old Comanche territory.

Cowboys on the **XIT ranch** enjoyed good lives, "earning about thirty dollars a month fixing fences, riding herd, [and] eating chow at sunset." Only one "black cow puncher" was employed on the ranch, a man whom "everybody called Nigger Jim Perry"—everybody, presumably, being the white men who usually worked the ranch and made a point of reminding Jim that they did not think he belonged.

Jim was relatively lucky to find work, though he knew that, if it were not for his being black, he would have been promoted to foreman. Still, most black men who arrived in the Texas Panhandle looking for an opportunity barely made it off the train before they were arrested for "vagrancy" and put to work for the state on a chain gang.

In Oklahoma, Governor William David "Alfalfa" Murray ran a campaign that "railed against what he called 'The Three C's—Corporations, Carpetbaggers, and Coons'" and "won by a huge margin." He firmly believed in segregation, and thought that its maintenance was key in making Oklahoma a great state. He insisted that the only proper jobs for black people were "in the fields or factories." According to Murray, black people were supposed to be virtually invisible in social life, and should make themselves as discreet as possible when talking to white people. Further, though Murray accepted that black people had "some virtues," he universally detested Jewish people and disliked "the handful of Italians who had come to the High Plains," believing that they were among the "low grade races" of Southern Europe. Murray's overwhelming support in Oklahoma was largely due to a pre-Civil War political platform which reestablished notions of social and racial hierarchy.

The new civilization that Anglos formed, particularly in the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles, did not differ much from that which they had formed back East. Many of the new settlers were former Southerners who had been run out of their old homes by Reconstruction after the Civil War. They envisioned

the Southern Plains as a territory where they could start over and reestablish a culture of white supremacy. The callous displacement of the Comanche was the first step in clearing the land for settlement by whites. As an influx of European immigrants arrived by train, the Anglo settlers went about determining who was "white" and who was not—that is, who would prosper in the new territory and be enfranchised. Black people and Native American tribes were completely excluded from consideration. Thus, Egan shows that the Southern Plains were not truly a land where *anyone* could start over—they were instead a place where white Americans reasserted the values of racial dominance and greed that had long existed in the Union.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND LESSONS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

On October 29, 1929, the American stock market crashed. The banks had gone on "speculative binges" with money from people's savings accounts, believing that "stocks were only going skyward." Like the prairie farmers who believed that the soil was a resource that would produce endless bounty, stock brokers and speculators were lulled by the economic boom of the 1920s into thinking that money would never run out. In the High Plains, however, the crash was a distant noise. The Panhandle remained prosperous through 1929. In Boise City, there were record harvests, a new railroad had been built, and there was even talk of erecting a skyscraper. Then, a surplus in the market sent prices down. At the beginning of 1930, "**wheat** sold for one-eighth of the high price from ten years earlier." Grain was now 40 cents a bushel, which did not cover the cost of harvesting, let alone turn a profit. Most Americans were devastated by the economic collapse, but farmers in the Southern Plains, solely reliant on the purchase of wheat, are shown in *The Worst Hard Time* to have been uniquely cornered by the crisis.

Though in 1929 there continued to be plenty of productivity in the Plains, no one could afford to buy what the farms produced. At the movie theatres, farmers watched newsreels showing well-dressed businessmen standing in breadlines or selling apples on street corners for a nickel each. The Depression seemed like a distant phenomenon, but these images were signs of how the farmers, too, would come to suffer.

In 1929, the U.S. government estimated that one out of every four Americans worked on a farm that supplied grain for either bread or alcohol. With people in the cities unable to afford bread and a glut in the wheat market, crops did not sell easily—not even for the production of grain alcohol, which was in high demand during Prohibition. Crops that did not sell simply rotted. The sight of decaying bushels of wheat were a sign that the farmers, who had vainly believed that the grasslands would always be a source of profit, were also vulnerable to the financial collapse.

Grain was not the only crop to drop in price. The price of corn fell to three cents a bushel. The average farmer now earned three hundred dollars per year—"an 80 percent drop in income from a decade earlier." Like the apple vendors in the cities, wheat farmers were selling their product at bottom dollar just to survive. Whereas just several years before farmers were so economically secure that they bought new farm equipment and started building houses above ground, they now found their way of life becoming increasingly unsustainable. Some had their property foreclosed on by their local banks, and in Boise City, the town's banker, John Johnson, began to auction off the shiny new equipment that farmers had purchased with money from the wheat boom.

While Herbert Hoover had believed in allowing the free market to regulate the agricultural economy, President Franklin Roosevelt insisted on making the government the market—that is, the government would become the farmers' main buyer of crops (a decision that the Supreme Court would later rule unconstitutional). With the government now shaping "the price and flow of food," farmers would never again produce more than what was needed in the interest of capitalizing off of a good market, and they would never again suffer from the vagaries of a free market system.

First, the government had to buy the surplus products. Roosevelt arranged for excess "corn, beans, and flour" to be purchased from farmers and distributed among the needy. In regard to livestock, six million pigs were bought and slaughtered to supply relief organizations with meat. The following year, the government asked "cattlemen and wheat growers" to reduce their supply in exchange for money. It was thus not only important to relieve farmers of what they could not sell, but to break them out of the habit of producing more than what was needed by providing an economic incentive.

Next, Roosevelt signed a bill into law which provided farmers with two hundred million dollars in aid to keep their properties out of foreclosure. Whereas local banks and speculators had profited off of farmers' financial insolvency by holding property auctions, Roosevelt kept to his campaign promise of looking out for the interests of common farmers by supplying them with the funds to help them maintain their way of life.

Though the entire nation learned harsh lessons from the Great Depression—lessons about what could happen when people got too greedy—the farmers suffered from both a loss of funds and a loss of the land. Both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl were man-made phenomena, the results of indulgence and human excesses. For the farmers, it offered a particularly poignant lesson on the limitations of free markets. While all farmers hoped to prosper—and many did—it became counterproductive to try to get rich off of the land. Through his depiction of the farmers' economic hardships during the Depression, Egan diverts from President Roosevelt's narrative that they were simple, decent people caught in an evil system,

instead suggesting that the simple farmer was as vulnerable to greed as any Wall Street broker—and needed to learn similar lessons about moderation in the pursuit of profit.

THE CITY VS. THE COUNTRY

When news of the stock market crash of 1929 arrived in the Southern Plains, people did not think much of it. Stock trading was an activity far removed the simpler, rural life of the High Plains. People associated the workings of Wall Street with "city slickers." When the rural folks went to the movies, they saw newsreels of the breadlines in major cities and images of apple vendors on every street corner. They may have sympathized with those images, but they could not identify with them—not just yet. The plains people subsisted off of the land and trusted it to provide them with all that they needed. Even "in the first year of the epic drought," they were sure that the land would replenish itself shortly. Most never considered leaving to go to the city or to California, as such a move would be "a journey into the unknown." Furthermore, the businesses that ruled cities—banks and railroad companies—were widely regarded by rural-dwellers as enemies, particularly after the onset of the Great Depression. Those who survived the Dust Bowl lived in another world—one with a set of customs and rituals that tied them deeply to a land they later felt had betrayed them. Meanwhile, life in the cities was no better. The decade offered people the choice between waiting for food in breadlines or waiting for infertile land to yield a crop. In *The Worst Hard Time*, Egan uses the opposition between city and country—and the impossibility of making a choice between the two—to underscore the absolute hopelessness of the decade.

The division between rural folks and city dwellers was very apparent in the 1932 election, which unseated the Republican Party from the White House and resulted in Herbert Hoover's unfavorable legacy. Hoover's response to the Great Depression seemed to favor the factory and business owners who, many believed, had helped to cause the economic collapse. Supplying the wealthy with more money to do more of the same was unacceptable to the majority of the electorate. Hoover seemed to represent the moneyed interests of those in the cities—urbanites who were presumably out of step with the majority of the country—while Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke to the "common" voter in small towns and on farms.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a member of one of the United States' oldest and wealthiest families. His fifth cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, had also been a president. However, during his campaign, Roosevelt championed the farmers who made up half of the population and, despite his own wealth, empathized with their loss of purchasing power. Roosevelt's message to the "forgotten man" helped him overcome his reputation as a "dilettante" and "a man without heft." He easily carried Oklahoma in the election, despite the popularity of its governor, Alfalfa Bill Murray—a man as exemplary of the High Plains as Roosevelt was of moneyed New York.

Roosevelt's harrowing experience of being "felled by double pneumonia in 1918, which nearly killed him," and his contraction of "polio in 1921, which left him partially paralyzed" for the rest of his life, helped him understand devastation. He understood the farmer's agony over the cruelties of nature and knew how easily good fortune could turn. Governor Murray's persistent message of white supremacy, though still supported by many white Oklahomans, seemed less immediately relevant and less personal than what they heard from Roosevelt.

By 1934, most big cities were no cleaner or clearer than the arid, dusty tracks of land in the southern plains. People's lungs were full of air pollution from car exhausts, as well as the emissions from "thousands of small shops, factories, bakeries, and apartments." The skies were also now darkened by gusts of dust from the former grasslands—"a monstrous visitor." The nation's vastness had tricked people on the East Coast into thinking that the "blowing homesteads" they saw in weekly newsreels were "a world away." The environmental disaster that was the Dust Bowl proved that the city was not so distant from the country, and that the heartland's problems could also impact the Eastern seaboard. People were not as distant from each other as they had thought.

Typically, dust measurements in the New York air came in at "227 particles per square millimeter." On May 11, it "measured 619 particles per square millimeter." At NBC radio studios, custodians had to change air filters hourly. A professor at New York University "calculated that on the seventeenth floor of the Flatiron Building on Fifth Avenue, the thickness of the dust was about forty tons per cubic mile," which would have meant that the entire city was "under the weight of 1,320 tons" of dust. Though the dust storms did not cause the same level of inconvenience to New Yorkers that it caused Texans and Oklahomans, it gave Manhattanites a literal taste of the dirt that had infiltrated every aspect of prairie life.

New York was not the only city to be overcome by dust. The storm also visited Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, DC. It dumped a film of dust onto the National Mall and some "seeped into the White House, where President Roosevelt was discussing plans for drought relief." The experience of being overwhelmed by dust did not make all city dwellers sympathetic. Some even seemed to blame prairie folk for the problem, and used their annoyance as an excuse to put down those who lived differently. They wondered why those in the plains "could not do something to hold their soil down." One commenter "suggested laying asphalt on the prairie," while another suggested shipping "junked cars to the southern plains, where they would be used as weights to hold the ground in place."

Suggestions from urbanites on what to do about the Dust Bowl ranged from senseless to outrageous, revealing that people in

the cities knew little about how those in the prairies lived. Many seemed to forget that, if the grasslands were too dry to produce crops, the entire nation would starve. Though the Great Depression had made food scarce and the dust storms threatened to make the matter worse, some people saw little connection between their lives and what occurred on the prairie. However, witnessing the dust for themselves forced people as far away as New York to recognize that something had to be done about the problem in the Texas Panhandle, though no one knew what, if anything, *could* be done. Egan's anecdotes of coastal naivete do not only expose ignorance, they also reveal the futility of the situation. People on the plains were as powerless in the face of the storms (or the economic collapse of the cities) as those on the coasts were. The Dust Bowl ended up being a great equalizer, demonstrating that no one—neither in the city nor in the country—had conquered their environment. We were all vulnerable to the power of the natural world.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION AND THE DUST BOWL

The Southern Plains were fertile, but **wheat** farmers had been overzealous. Some, particularly former cowboys and the few indigenous people who remained, thought that the land was designed only for grazing and small subsistence farming—what the indigenous tribes had practiced. The plow had allowed farmers to plant countless acres of wheat, but it also led to soil erosion. By the time the dust storms arrived, which the prairie people interpreted as the land's revenge for their excesses, no one could grow anything, and the livestock could no longer survive due to the absence of grass and dust-free water supplies. Though some scientists at the time were skeptical, Egan treats the Dust Bowl as the man-made environmental disaster it was—an event that turned a difficult decade into a nearly unbearable one.

In addition to being unable to farm wheat, grass also disappeared in the storm of the Dust Bowl, which made it much more difficult for families to keep their cows alive. The cattle who relied on what had once been seemingly endless acres of grass now survived on "chewing salted tumbleweeds and swallowing mud." First, the dust diminished the crops, then it killed the livestock. People on the prairie feared that they would starve.

The government tried to assuage the problem of farmers deciding between watching their cattle starve or shooting them in the head and tossing them into nearby ditches. Officials offered up to sixteen dollars per head for live cows that could "still walk" and had "a pinch of flesh between their bones and saggy skin." Those cows would go "to a butchering plant in Amarillo," and the meat would go to the many hungry people who now populated the country. The offer was fair, but it did not remedy the problem of no longer having a source of milk. Those who still attempted to milk cows squeezed from an udder and released a liquid that resembled "chocolate milk." Farms were also losing their chickens. Ninety percent died. Though Bam White still managed to coax eggs from his hens, this was impossible on other farms. Most chickens suffocated to death. Their lungs became so filled with dirt that they were strangled by the air.

Ironically, some of the people who had moved into the High Plains, such as Louise Walton, had migrated there from major cities to take advantage of the better air conditions. The fresh air in the grasslands was supposed to be a cure for those with bronchial problems—but by 1933, the air in the plains was the explicit *cause* of bronchial problems. The Southern Plains had not only become uninhabitable for crops and livestock, but people could no longer maintain good health there.

Dr. John H. Blue of Guymon, Oklahoma "treated fifty-six patients for dust pneumonia, and all of them showed signs of silicosis." Prairie dust is high in silica content and, when it builds up in the lungs, it tears at the "web of air sacs" and weakens the body's resistance, producing an effect similar to that of coal dust on a miner. Other common illnesses on the Southern Plains included sinusitis, laryngitis, bronchitis, and "early symptoms of tuberculosis." No one was immune, and children, infants, and the elderly suffered particularly from "coughing jags and body aches, particularly chest pains." It was a medical crisis, exacerbated by the harsh content of the soil.

Hugh Hammond Bennett, a scientist who studied soil, became the director of a new agency within the Department of the Interior which was "set up to help stabilize the soil." Before his appointment, he worked for the Department of Agriculture, and warned the department about the consequences of farmers working against the soil. Still, the government insisted that soil was the one "resource that [could] not be exhausted." For Bennett, such an attitude was a display of "arrogance on a grand scale." While their short-sightedness was frustrating to him, it would be devastating to those who lived in the prairie.

Though run-off from the Rockies supplied the prairie with rich loam held in place by the grass, eighty million acres of topsoil had been stripped from the Southern Plains. Topsoil that had taken "several thousand years to develop…was disappearing day by day" due to the excesses of the agricultural industry. In Oklahoma, 440 million tons of topsoil disappeared. Bennett's suggestion was to avoid plowing, but it was difficult to break farmers out of their habits, particularly when they had proven to be so beneficial just two years earlier. Whereas the Texas Panhandle had produced six million bushels of wheat a few years earlier, the entire region now only yielded "a few truckloads."

Aside from American arrogance, Bennett attributed part of the prairie's suffering to a general lack of understanding about ecology. Many scientists did not take him seriously, insisting that "the withering of the Great Plains" was simply a weather

phenomenon. They did not believe that humanity was at all responsible for what occurred in nature, an entity which they tended to associate more with "scenic wonders," such as mountains and rivers, not the mundane business of soil. Aldo Leopold, a game biologist from Wisconsin, had published a paper in 1933 arguing that "man was part of a big organic whole and should treat his place with special care"—but it would be many years before the essay influenced public policy.

No one who lived in the prairie imagined that a land that had once produced six million bushels of grain would only produce a few "spindles of dwarfed wheat and corn" just two years later. Bennett's accusation of American arrogance was not unfounded—indeed, those who lived on the prairie always expected the land to provide. Some knew that they had plowed too much and demanded too much, which is why they characterized the dust storms as angry or vengeful. On the other hand, they had nothing but the land on which they could depend. Too distant from the factories in the cities, the soil was their only means to make a living and to feed themselves. Due to both a lack of ecological knowledge and a continual belief in the false promises of speculators who advertised a land that could be transformed into England or Missouri, the farmers made mistakes that nearly cost them the land and their lives. Through telling the story of the environmental devastation of the Southern Plains, Egan reveals how a seemingly hearty environment—one that managed to sustain life for centuries despite its violent weather—can become fragile, particularly when people privilege short-term gain over long-term sustainability.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

XIT RANCH

The XIT ranch was the fulfillment of General Philip Sheridan's vision of a land where the cowboy would dominate as an exemplar of an advanced civilization. However, the cowboy of Sheridan's dreams would also be displaced and left to roam on the prairie, like the Comanche who initially held the ranch lands in the aftermath of the **wheat** boom, wondering what had happened to the land they once knew. The XIT ranch is thus a symbol of both socioeconomic change and the defeat of humanity in the face of nature. It is a land that, at various points in history, provided bison for Southwestern tribes, cattle-grazing lands for cowboys, and parcels of land to ambitious wheat farmers. No one was able to bend the land completely to their will, though each group that possessed it sought to determine the ranch land's "natural" use. The ranch endured several phases of civilization, none of which endured.

WHEAT

Wheat was the crop that dominated the agricultural industry in the Great Plains, and the crop on which nesters in the Southern Plains relied to generate income. In a land where people had always believed nothing could grow, suddenly there was wheat—golden and plentiful. In *The Worst Hard Time*, wheat is a symbol of prosperity and hope against great odds—but also the fragility of such prosperity. When George Alexander Ehrlich traversed the Atlantic Ocean during a hurricane, he brought with him a hearty variety of wheat—turkey red—that he intended to plant when he arrived in Oklahoma. His ability to stake a section of land in the Oklahoma Panhandle and plant his crop led to the settlement of a small Russo-German community that had previously migrated around Europe for nearly 200 years. Wheat allowed immigrants like Ehrlich, with nowhere else to go, a chance to create a permanent home. It also allowed for people who had always been poor to own their own piece of land and to generate income from it. During the 1920s, wheat made some farmers rich. Income from the sale of wheat funded the construction of towns and inspired the dream that the High Plains could soon build skyscrapers, indicating that there was a hope to make the High Plains as sophisticated and appealing as any coastal city. However, when the price of wheat fell after the stock market crash and, a few years later, the ground dried up, making it impossible to farm, the boundless hope that the nearly miraculous crop had inspired quickly evaporated in the Southern Plains.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the First Mariner edition of *The Worst Hard Time* published in 2006.

Introduction Quotes

❝ On those days when the wind stops blowing across the face of the southern plains, the land falls into a silence that scares people in the way that a big house can haunt after the lights go out and no one else is there. It scares them because the land is too much, too empty, claustrophobic in its immensity. It scares them because they feel lost, with nothing to cling to, disoriented. Not a tree, anywhere. Not a slice of shade. Not a river dancing away, life in its blood [….] It scared Coronado, looking for cities of gold in 1541. It scared the Anglo traders who cut a trail from Independence to Santa Fe […] It even scared some of the Comanche as they chased bison over the grass. It scared the Germans from Russia and the Scots-Irish from Alabama—the Last Chancers, exiled twice over […]

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Egan opens the introduction with a description of the High Plains that is contextualized within its physical geography and its history. The land is empty and overwhelmed by the sun, the expanse of grassland unbroken by bodies of water. Egan personifies the land by giving it a "face" that can become silent. However, there is also something supernatural about the land, like a haunted house. It is a place of contradiction—both "too much" and "too empty," both "claustrophobic" and immense. Egan's characterization is compatible with the settlers' wish to turn the Southern Plains into a home, as well as the fact that the land soon renders the settlers homeless. His view is also compatible with the land's brief fertility, as well as its unwillingness to yield or maintain anything at all.

Still, the High Plains is a place that has always attracted those who sought to exploit land—conquistadores seeking mineral wealth, Comanche people who sought the best grazing land, German-Russians who had nowhere else to go but found a place where they could build prosperous farms and be left alone, and poor Southerners who saw their only chance at being property owners and becoming the equals of those who looked down upon them.

A Sunday in mid-April 1935 dawned quiet, windless, and bright. In the afternoon, the sky went purple—as if it were sick—and the temperature plunged. People looked northwest and saw a ragged-topped formation on the move, covering the horizon. The air crackled with electricity. *Snap*. *Snap*. *Snap*. Birds screeched and dashed for cover. As the black wall approached, car radios clicked off, overwhelmed by the static. Ignitions shorted out. Waves of sand, like ocean water rising over a ship's prow, swept over roads. Cars went into ditches. A trained derailed.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Egan describes the climate and the look of the land on Black Sunday—the day of the worst dust storm to hit the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Ironically, the day started off as calm and pleasant, revealing the unpredictability of the storms. Again, in this passage Egan gives the land anthropomorphic, or human-like, qualities: the sky's purplish hue made it seem "sick." However, the storm also had the monstrous qualities of natural disaster. It prompted the animals to run for shelter and sent waves of electricity through the air. Egan's description reinforces the storm's sensory effects. It appeared as a "black wall," which shut out the sun, giving the impression of a dark force overcoming the plains. Egan's depiction of a cloud that grabbed "waves of sand, like ocean water" uses the contrast of land and water to demonstrate that the land took on a foreign character, rising out of the ground in the same way that water would rise out of the sea. Its destructive power was like a tsunami of dirt. The settlers in the Dust Bowl were like the passengers of a ship, vulnerable to the forces of nature and stranded in a sea of dirt.

The other kids teased him about his skin, which seemed too full of the sun, even in winter. One Sunday, Melt asked visiting relatives how the family came to be. You shush, boy, he was told. Melt kept at it. Finally, an aunt told about the Apache and Cherokee in him. She said he should never tell anybody—keep it inside the family. "It's a disgrace to be part Indian," he says. "That's what she said."

Related Characters: Melt White

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Melt White had indigenous ancestry on both sides of his family, which his family did not tell him about, due to their internalization of the belief that Native Americans did not belong in the High Plains and represented an era of savagery in the region's history. Still, White learned who he was through being ostracized at school for clearly not looking white. His skin "which seemed to full of the sun" throughout the year was both a marker of his being an outsider in Anglo culture, characterized by its wish to exclude any non-whites to maintain supremacy, while also being a sign of his connection to a land from which his people had been displaced. The sense of "disgrace" about which his aunt spoke was not only borne from the family's wish to fit into the civilization that had overtaken the previous one, but also, perhaps, their desire to forget about how their people had been defeated. The aunt's silence is an expression of a wish to forget history, while Melt's persistence in asking questions is a prompt to remember.

He learns who he is, unfortunately, through a lens of shame, but his willingness to tell Egan his family's story indicates that he no longer partakes in that feeling of shame.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The C-note was Uncle Dick's heater, his blanket. As a child, Dick Coon's family was often broke. The corrosive poverty hurt so much it defined the rest of his life. As long as Uncle Dick could touch his C-note, he had no fear in life. And he had certainly known fear. Dick Coon was fortunate to live through the Galveston hurricane of 1900, the worst single natural disaster in American history. He lost everything in Galveston but was never bitter. His life had been spared, while six thousand people lost theirs. Dick Coon didn't plan on getting rich in Dalhart; didn't even plan on staying in the High Plains. In 1902, he had been passing through Dalhart, making a train connection to Houston, when he fell under the spell of one of the syndicate's real estate agents. He heard enough to buy his own piece of the old XIT […] but the real money was in town building.

Related Characters: "Uncle" Dick Coon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

"Uncle" Dick Coon, the wealthiest man in Dalhart, Texas and the owner of nearly every building in town, began his life in poverty in Galveston, Texas. He haphazardly stopped in Dalhart during the time that real estate agents were attempting to sell off tracts on the former XIT ranch, in an effort to recover their losses from losing cattle during winter freezes. The most valuable thing that Coon took with him on his intended trip to Houston—the town in which he later died—was a lucky one-hundred-dollar bill, or a "C-note." The money, which had a lot of value in Coon's time, was his assurance that he could succeed, despite his lowly origins and his experience with the devastation that could be wrought by a natural disaster.

The ease with which Coon stopped in Dalhart, a place to which he had no connection, and set up a life there, as well as numerous business enterprises, reveals the relative ease with which white Americans were able to start new lives in the Southern Plains after the indigenous people had been eradicated. Furthermore, it was the goal of both the syndicate and the United States government to get the area settled by whites who could not afford property elsewhere. This effort would help the syndicate recoup its losses, in addition to keeping the land out of the public domain.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ "The soil is the one indestructible, immutable asset that the nation possesses," the Federal Bureau of Soils proclaimed as the grasslands were transformed. "It is the one resource that cannot be exhausted, that cannot be used up."

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

The Southern Plains were quickly becoming populated by prospective farmers who had been convinced by the syndicate's demonstrations of dry farming. The U.S. government fervently supported the effort to settle the land, which had formerly been described as a desert akin to the Sahara, and particularly to settle it with citizens who would make the soil productive. To aid in this effort, the government dispensed its own propaganda to convince the new settlers that they could always depend on the plains' limitless expanse of soil to survive. The bureau's characterization of the land as "indestructible" and "immutable" would be undone by the dust storms, which proved that the land *could* be destroyed, and could also literally be picked up by violent winds. The bureau's message reinforced the nation's concept of land as property that could be held and controlled—a belief that was upended by the Dust Bowl.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Of the roughly two hundred million acres homesteaded on the Great Plains between 1880 and 1925, nearly half was considered marginal for farming[...] people who had descended from a beaten-down part of the world, people whose daddy had been a serf, a sharecropper, a tenant, and even slaves, castaways, rejects, white trash, and Mexicans could own a piece of earth. "Every man a landlord" meant something. Historians had been herded into thinking the American frontier was closed after the 1890 census, that western movement had effectively ended just before the close of the last century, that settlement had been tried and failed in the Great American Desert. But they overlooked the southern plains, the pass-through country. In the first thirty years of the twentieth century, it got a second look.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Egan describes the settlement of the Southern Plains, which occurred after the final homestead act of 1909 allotted the last desirable tracts of land to farmers in the West. He describes a land that had traditionally been populated by outcasts and social misfits. They were people who came from oppression—political, racial, and economic. All of them, however, sought to acquire some of the power that their oppressors possessed—hence, their desire to become landlords. Egan emphasizes these aspects of the migrants' backgrounds to show how westward migration to the plains coincided with a desire to escape. People who could never gain a foothold in the social and economic hierarchies of the East and the Midwest got a second chance on the plains. The broad expanse of the land gave them the sense that anything was possible, for so much land was available for anyone to take. The Southern Plains may have been especially desirable due to the tendency to overlook the land for settlement; it never overcame the reputation it was given in the early-nineteenth century.

"Americans are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of the land," said the new president, Herbert Hoover, who took office in 1929. He had won in a landslide, breaking the Democratic hold on the solid South, taking the prairie states with him. The tractors rolled on, the grass yanked up, a million acres a year, turned and pulverized; in just five years, 1925 to 1930, another 5.2 million acres of native sod went under the plow in the southern plains—an area the size of two Yellowstone National Parks.

Related Characters: Herbert Hoover (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Republican Herbert Hoover was elected in 1928, during an era in which the United States was benefiting from a postwar boom. However, the price of wheat had dropped due to an overly abundant supply, causing farmers to see a dip in their revenue. Hoover, with his belief in free market competition, validated the farmers' desire to turn the soil non-stop. Due to general ignorance about ecosystems and environmental conservation, it occurred to no one that this practice could cause long-term harm.

Egan compares the amount of land plowed in the Southern Plains to Yellowstone to give the reader a sense of the scale of the land that was overrun by farmers. However, the comparison to Yellowstone also contrasts the era's unfettered environmental exploitation with its growing tendency to cherish the nation's precious natural resources. Yellowstone was the nation's first national park, established between 1871 and 1872. However, people saw no relation between their appreciation for the park's impressive mountains and thundering waterfalls and the need to show equal appreciation for the Southern Plains' less scenic but equally precious natural resources.

Chapter 4 Quotes

In the German settlements on the High Plains, there was no more defiant celebration of group survival than a wedding. The rest of the year, the Anglos could make fun of their clothes, the sheriff could call them in for questioning, the merchants could refuse them entry into stores, the children could mock their accents, the farmers could laugh at their planting methods, and other immigrants could deride them as "Rooshians." But the wedding day on this Sunday in September 1929 belonged to the Germans from Russia. Through an improbable journey of 166 years, they had bounced from southern Germany to the Volga River region of Russia to the Cherokee Outlet of Oklahoma. The *Russlanddeutschen* were not Russian nor were they fully German. Hardened by long exile, state cruelty, and official ridicule, they wanted only to be left alone. The treeless expanse of the southern plains was one of the few places in the United States that looked like home.

Related Characters: Gustav Borth , George Alexander Ehrlich

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

George Alexander Ehrlich, one of the first Russo-German immigrants to settle in the Southern Plains, is attending a relative's wedding, sitting at the banquet table with several generations of his family. The wedding party is an expression of the family's bond and its commitment to the High Plains. The Russo-Germans had endured discrimination in their adopted home since they arrived—they were refused service for speaking German or for having German accents, and they were suspected of treason during the world wars. Egan's description of the Russo-Germans' isolation in the High Plains, in addition to their muddled origins, contributes to the sense that they were an isolated people who remained tightly-knit due to the inability to connect with those who did not share their origins and unique experiences. The "treeless expanse of the southern plains," which had been burned by angry and betrayed indigenous people when foreigners arrived, was a place where, it seemed, they could inscribe their own history and culture. Whatever had existed before them had been destroyed, allowing room for regeneration.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Some people said Jews were to blame for the bad times—that they did not belong in this country, a place where the *Texan* had boasted that its citizens were "of the highest type of Anglo-Saxon ancestry." In Nebraska, four thousand people gathered on the capitol steps, blaming the "Jewish system of banking" for the implosion of the economy. They held banners with rattlesnakes, labeled as Jews, coiled around the American farmer.

Related Characters: Morris Herzstein , Levi Herzstein

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The Great Depression had finally come to the Southern Plains. Initially, many of the nesters did not understand how the economic collapse would impact them. They also did not recognize their own role in fostering a market that went into a tail-spin. They erroneously believed that the stock market was the purview of "city-slickers." Moreover, the wheat economy was still doing well. When the depression reached the plains, they were overcome by the notion that it was the result of bad deeds performed in distant cities. This view, supported by their awareness that cities tended to be places where diverse ethnic types lived, including Jewish people, contributed to the settlers' confused beliefs. Their connection of Jewish people to bad banking practices was derived from old European stereotypes about unethical Jewish moneylenders. Out of fear for their livelihoods and confusion over whom to blame, the farmers, who believed that the Jews were not like them and, therefore, should have no stake in the land, sought an identifiable villain.

❝ The land hardened. Rivers that had been full in spring trickled down to a string line of water and then disappeared. That September was the warmest yet in the still-young century. Bam White scanned the sky for a "sun dog," his term for a halo that foretold of rain; he saw nothing through the heat of July, August, and September. He noticed how the horses were lethargic, trying to conserve energy. Usually, when the animals bucked or stirred, it meant a storm on the way. They had been passive for some time now, in a summer when the rains left and did not come back for nearly eight years.

Related Characters: Bam White

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Bam White looks up at the sky on the eve of the dust storms, which entered the Southern Plains and transformed the land's physical geography permanently. The drought that created the storms began in 1932, while the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression.

Egan describes a landscape that had suddenly changed. Though the Southern Plains had always had a reputation for being rather arid, they were suddenly completely devoid of water, even in the spring. The sight of "hardened" land signaled a landscape that might become impossible to farm, even with the aid of windmills. The climate and the weather patterns were changing in unpredictable ways. Without the benefit of a weather service, Bam and the other settlers

relied on signs within nature to tell them when to expect rain. What he recognized, instead, were bad omens, such as the lethargy of the horses.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ When the native sod of the Great Plains was in place, it did not matter if people looked twice at a piece of ground. Wind blew twenty, thirty, forty miles an hour, as always. Droughts came and went. Prairie fires, many of them started deliberately by Indians or cowboys trying to scare nesters off, took a great gulp of grass in a few days. Hailstorms pounded the land. Blue northers froze it so hard it was like broken glass to walk on. Through all of the seasonal tempests, man was inconsequential. As long as the weave of grass was stitched to the land, the prairie would flourish […] The grass could look brown and dead, but beneath the surface, the roots held the soil in place; it was alive and dormant […] When a farmer tore out the sod and walked away […] It could not revert to grass, because the roots were gone. It was empty, dead, and transient.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

Egan explains how the plains succumbed to drought. Farmers like the diarist Lawrence Svobida arrived in the Southern Plains, enjoyed the easy success of the wheat boom, and came to believe that the land would never fail them. What the farmers did not take into consideration was the way they were failing the land by tilling it beyond its capacity. The "native sod" of the plains was built to endure violence, for the weather in the region demanded its toughness. Egan describes brutal winds, hailstorms, and prairie fires, which were hard for the nesters to bear. The land, on the other hand, endured. The soil could handle the brutality of nature, but it could not survive the brutality of the farmers. The settlers did not understand the land they tilled and, worse, were neglectful, abandoning the land after tearing up its grass. In this way, the farmers were pillagers, similar to the conquistadores who had gone to the plains looking for silver. Instead of mining for minerals, they were exploiting the soil, recklessly digging it up for their own ends. Ironically, the farmers sought to put life into the soil, but instead were quickly destroying the land's capacity to grow anything at all.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Most scientists did not take [Hugh Hammond] Bennett seriously. Some called him a crank. They blamed the withering of the Great Plains on weather, not on farming methods. Basic soil science was one thing but talking about the fragile web of life and slapping the face of nature—this kind of early ecology had yet to find a wide audience. Sure, Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir had made conservation an American value at the dawn of the new century, but it was usually applied to brawny, scenic wonders: mountains, rivers, megaflora. And in 1933, a game biologist in Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold, had published an essay that said man was part of the big organic whole and should treat his place with special care. But that essay, "The Conservation Ethic," had yet to influence public policy. Raging dirt on a flat, ugly surface was not the focus of a poet's praise or a politician's call for restoration.

Related Characters: Franklin Delano Roosevelt , Hugh Hammond Bennett

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Hugh Hammond Bennett, a soil scientist, was appointed by President Franklin Roosevelt to manage a new agency that would deal directly with helping farmers learn to manage the soil. Bennett used workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps to help him restore the health of the soil.

Bennett was a man ahead of his time, aware of the impact that humans could have on the climate. He knew that conservation could help maintain the sustainability of resources. He blamed not only farmers, but also the U.S. government for encouraging the belief that the soil was an infinite resource. In the 1930s, Americans appreciated natural beauty, but ignored the soil that was fundamental to the maintenance of the megaflora (like trees) they admired. The resistance with which the public and even other scientists greeted Bennett's ideas did not only belie ignorance about ecology, but also a stubborn unwillingness to change or to adopt ideas that might have interfered with short-term profitability. However, it did not always take a learned person to understand what was wrong in the Southern Plains. Bam White agreed with Bennett's assessment that the farmers had destroyed the land by tearing out the grass and turning the soil the wrong side up.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ The sign at the edge of Dalhart— "Black Man Don't Let the Sun Go Down on You Here"—was strictly enforced […] "Two Negroes Arrested": the *Dalhart Texan* reported how the men, aged nineteen and twenty-three, had sniffed around the train station looking for food. They were cuffed, locked up in the county jail, and after a week brought out for arraignment before a justice of the peace, Hugh Edwards. The judge ordered the men to dance. The men hesitated; this was supposed to be a bond hearing. The railroad agent said these men were good for nothing but Negro toe-tapping […] The men started to dance, forced silly grins on their faces, reluctant. After the tap dance, the judge banged his gavel and ordered the men back to jail for another two months.

Related Characters: John McCarty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176-177

Explanation and Analysis

The two men described here were among the many drifters who moved west, hoping for opportunity in the plains. However, Dalhart maintained a strictly racist policy that reflected their unwillingness to allow black people to settle in the Panhandle. Texas, a former slave state, held on to the premise that only whites should be landowners. The few Mexicans who had tracts of land either lived in the area when Texas was still in the possession of Mexico, such as the Lujan family, or they had arrived when the Panhandle was transforming from a safe harbor for outcasts and criminals into a permanent settlement for farmers. Most of the destitute migrants who came to the Panhandle were sent back on the train on which they had arrived. However, black people (and from Egan's account, it seemed that only black *men* made the journey) were arrested and tried for vagrancy. They were then forced to work on a chain gang, joining an unjust penal system that, once again, forced free labor out of black people.

The language that John McCarty used to report the story, which Egan paraphrases, makes the two young men sound like stray dogs—potentially dangerous pests who were to be brought under immediate control. The judge's demand that the men dance was an effort to humiliate them, but also coincided with the common view that black people who were not performing labor existed only for the purpose of entertainment. In the 1930s, black people were most visible to whites as either servants or entertainers.

❝ Keeping the dust out was impossible. Even fresh-cleaned clothes, hanging outside to dry on the line, were at risk […] Lizzie swept five, six times a day. She had her boys shovel dust in the morning, after it piled up outside the door. Sometimes a big dune blocked the door, and the boys had to crawl out the window to get to it. The dust arrived in mysterious ways. It could penetrate like a spirit, cascading down the walls or slithering along the ceiling until it found an opening.

Related Characters: Melt White, Lizzie White

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Egan describes the conditions in the White household during the dust storms. Lizzie White was burdened with the never-ending task of trying to keep her dugout—ironically, a home dug out of the soil—free from an invasion of soil. The family, like others in the Dust Bowl, was nearly smothered by dirt. The effort to keep dust out or to avoid it took up much of the family's time. Egan describes the dust as though it were phantom-like, with a mysterious life of its own. Indeed, it must have seemed supernatural, given its ability to move quickly into a space and inundate it. Egan describes the dust's movement in relation to the movement of other elements in the natural world. The dust was "cascading" like water and "slithering" like a snake "along the ceiling until it found an opening," as though the dust, like a serpent, sought hiding places. Egan's description reinforces the sense that the settlers had no control over the soil which they so desperately sought to control after the onset of the dusters. They could no longer hold the land in place to farm it, nor could they keep it from infesting their homes.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ At the end of the year, she said goodbye to No Man's Land. Hazel put on her white gloves and brushed back tears but said tomorrow would bring good things to the young family, so it was not worth a long cry. She planned to leave with her dignity intact, like a lady. In 1914, at the age of ten, she had first seen the grassland, rising on her toes on the driver's seat of her daddy's covered wagon to get a look at this country. She would hold to the good memories […] There would be a place, always, in Hazel's memory of the blackest days No Man's Land. But it would shrink, because Hazel would force it down to size to allow her live.

Related Characters: William Carlyle "Carlie" Lucas, Hazel

Lucas Shaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

Here Hazel is leaving her childhood home, as well as the place where she had met her husband, Charles Shaw. She left No Man's Land, rather appropriately, at the end of the year, as though she were using the marker to draw a chapter of her life to a close. She and her family were moving to Vici, a town further inland in Oklahoma, where her in-laws lived.

The Shaws and the Lucases had endured the persistent failure of wheat crops, the deaths of loved ones, including Hazel's small daughter, Ruth Nell, and the terror of Black Sunday—the day of the worst dust blizzard to hit the plains. Hazel's stubborn persistence in looking forward and refusing to dwell on the pain of her devastating losses is a sign of the optimism that she and other settlers maintained, for they had lived through the storms after all. Her act of putting on white gloves is a subtle act of defiance—a demonstration of the fact that the storms have not changed her habits or sullied her spirit. Though she had no control over the soil or over the lives around her that were taken, she did have control over her outlook, which would embrace life as it was.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ A few days later, Uncle Dick was leaning against a rail in front of the DeSoto when he spotted a young cowboy and his family drifting through town. For five years now, Dick had watched a steady parade of jalopies and wagons float through Dalhart, the people staying only a night or two, and then moving on to some place where there might be work or stable land [....] The cowboy had wandered into town with the XIT reunion [....] Uncle Dick reached into his pocket and pulled out his hundred-dollar bill. He handed the money to the cowboy, told him to take it—it was his. The young man was stunned [....] Later, when the cowboy asked around about his benefactor, people told him it was Dick Coon, the richest man in town. He owned everything. But they were surprised to see him give up the C-note [....] Only Coon's closest friends knew the truth: Uncle Dick was broke.

Related Characters: "Uncle" Dick Coon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 277-278

Explanation and Analysis

By the mid-1930s, Dalhart's biggest booster, John McCarty, had departed for a better job opportunity in Amarillo, Texas, Herzstein's General Merchandise Store had been foreclosed upon by the city of Dalhart for unpaid back taxes, and the film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and Alexander Hogue's painting *Drouth Survivors* made Dalhart the face of the Dust Bowl. Since the beginning of the Great Depression, Dick Coon's properties, all of which were mortgaged, had ceased to generate any profits. Worse, he had fallen ill and would soon leave town for Houston, where he would die alone and nearly broke in the Rice Hotel.

Dalhart, once one of the most prosperous towns in the Panhandle, had become a place of literal transience—the soil on which ranchers and farmers had depended could no longer even hold itself in the ground. Coon's gift of his lucky one-hundred-dollar bill is not only an attempt to help a young man down on his luck, but also a wish to revive Dalhart's former glory and to retain some of the hope that previous migrants carried with them during their westward movement. There is a resemblance between the young cowboy, who had arrived with his family, and the earlier arrival of Bam White with his family. Like White, Egan characterizes the nameless cowboy's movement as wandering. The passage thus highlights the instability of life in the 1930s. No industry lasted long enough for people to generate and retain income, the soil was not as stable and dependable as people had assumed, and a man who once had everything very quickly lost it, reverting back to the poverty of his youth. Coon's reversion to poverty, as well as the land's return to grasslands for ranching, also suggests a cyclical pattern to the region's history.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ The flatland was not green or fertile, yet it seemed as if the beast had been tamed. The year had been dry, just like the six that preceded it, and exceptionally windy, but the land was not peeling off like it had before, was not darkening the sky. There were dusters, half a dozen or more in each of April and May, but nothing like Black Sunday, nothing so Biblical. Maybe, as some farmers suggested, Bennett's army had calmed the raging dust seas, or maybe so much soil had ripped away that there was very little left to roll.

Related Characters: Franklin Delano Roosevelt , Hugh Hammond Bennett

Related Themes:

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

Bennett's conservation efforts seemed to help. At the very least, the dust storms were less ferocious, which may have been a sign of some progress. Farmers were uncertain, however, if the land would ever again be conducive to farming. It was the eve of President Roosevelt's visit to Amarillo, Texas, and the plains, like much of the rest of the country, had reached a period of uncertainty. The glory days of the wheat boom seemed to be long behind them, but they were also no longer coping with the monumental task of keeping dust out of their bodies and their homes.

Egan's language contrasts the storms, which he describes as "Biblical" and "raging," with the farmer's hopes for a "green" and "fertile" prairie. Nature, which had once been bountiful, had shown the farmers its angry, wrathful face. For those of faith, it may have seemed as though God had destroyed the farmers' Edenic paradise in an effort to check their vanity and wastefulness.

Elsewhere in 1938, the recovery and the energy of the New Deal had run out of steam. More than four million people lost their jobs in the wake of government cutbacks, and the stock market fell sharply again. Some of the gloom that enveloped the country at midterm in President Hoover's reign was back. In the Dust Bowl, the fuzz of a forced forest and the re-tilling of tousled dirt did not stop the wind or bring more rain, but it was a plan in motion—something—and that was enough to inspire people to keep the faith. As Will Rogers said, "If Roosevelt burned down the Capital we would cheer and say, 'Well, we at least got a fire started anyhow.'" The High Plains had been culled of thousands of inhabitants [...] But as the dirty decade neared its end, the big exodus was winding down. The only way that folks who stayed behind would leave now, they said, was horizontal, in a pine box.

Related Characters: Franklin Delano Roosevelt , Herbert Hoover

Related Themes:

Page Number: 304-305

Explanation and Analysis

Roosevelt's grassroots programs were effective at not only keeping settlers in the Southern Plains but also at committing them to become lifelong citizens of the region. The president's New Deal programs were less effective at creating long-term employment outside of the Dust Bowl, however. Roosevelt traveled to Amarillo to visit the region that he had rescued from its own excesses, which had resulted from the wheat boom. It was a land that he had worked to restore, literally, from the ground up, through conservation projects. Ironically, the task of improving the ecosystem on the High Plains seemed easier than managing the man-made economic system, which was now beyond Roosevelt's control. It is possible that the people of the plains—the common man whom Roosevelt had connected to during his first campaign—were easier to please than those in the cities. The prairie folk had seen death, which made everything else seem surmountable. Therefore, it was easier for them to remain hopeful, as long as a plan was in place to provide some path out of the darkness that descended after the dust storms.

People were drilling deep and tapping into the main vein of that ancient, underground reservoir of the Ogallala Aquifer, as big as the grassland itself, they said. These new boomers, a handful of men in town, wanted no part of Bennett's soil-conservation districts. They wanted money to pump up a river of water from the Ogallala, pass it through a tangle of pipes, and spit it out over the sandpapered land. They would grow wheat and corn and sorghum, and they would make a pile, using all the water they wanted, you just wait and see. They talked as if it were the dawn of the wheat boom, twenty years earlier. Melt thought they had not learned a thing from the last decade. The High Plains belonged to Indians and grass, but few people in Dalhart shared his feelings.

Related Characters: Melt White, Hugh Hammond Bennett

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

By the end of the 1930s, a new group of farmers had moved into town, seeking to exploit the grasslands once more. The new farms would be nourished, they posited, by the Ogallala Aquifer, another finite resource. Egan describes the attitude

of the new farmers, who would introduce the industrial agriculture that we know today, as though they were motivated by a combination of willful ignorance and blind ambition. Their attitude echoes Bennett's earlier warning about American arrogance and the false belief that a land rich in resources was also one with *infinite* resources. Egan's language, which depicts both the insensitivity and carelessness of these newcomers, conveys something both powerful and dangerous about the American frontier spirit: it succeeds due to its willingness to let go of the past and push forward, but its forcefulness is also key to its detriment. Melt White still vainly hoped that the land would be left alone to return to its original state, and then would be given back to the indigenous people—the only humans, it seemed, who knew how to actually look after the grasslands.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ The High Plains never fully recovered from the Dust Bowl […] After more than sixty-five years, some of the land is still sterile and drifting. But in the heart of the old Dust Bowl now are three national grasslands run by the Forest Service. The land is green in the spring and burns in the summer, as it did in the past, and antelope come through and graze, wandering among replanted buffalo grass and the old footings of farmsteads long abandoned. Some things are missing or fast disappearing: the prairie chicken, a bird that kept many a sodbuster alive in the dark days, is in decline […] The biggest of the restored areas is Comanche National Grassland, named for the Lords of the Plains […] The Indians never returned, despite New Deal attempts to buy rangeland for natives […] The Comanche live on a small reservation near Lawton, Oklahoma. They still consider the old bison hunting grounds between the Arkansas River and Rio Grande […] to be theirs by treaty.

Related Characters: Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

Egan concludes with an overview of what the High Plains looks like now. It is a land that remains scarred by the mistakes of its first white settlers. However, it has been protected somewhat by New Deal conservation efforts. Though it is the home of a now-endangered species, the prairie chicken, the grassland shows some signs of returning to its original state. The land is green again in the spring and it rejuvenates itself with prairie fires in the summer. However, the indigenous people remain displaced from the land that they still consider theirs. It is ironic that the grassland is named for the Comanche—a tribe that lives near the restored area on a reservation, but which has no oversight over the grounds of the restored area. It is a small example of how indigenous people remain disenfranchised and are still regarded as separate and distinct from a land that was originally theirs.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: LIVE THROUGH THIS

The silence that falls across the Southern Plains still scares people, Egan says. The land, vast and empty, feels like too much. It scared everyone, from Spanish settlers like Coronado, who came in search of gold, to Anglo traders, Germans from Russia, Scots-Irish from Alabama, and even some of the Comanche who "chased bison over the grass." It also scares the people who drive over the prairie today in their Expedition and Outlander trucks. It has scared them all due to its weather—"the most violent and extreme on earth"—which demands "humility," yet promises nothing in return.

Egan evokes a land characterized by absence—the absence of sound and other signs of life. However, it is also a land that has harbored a myriad of people from various cultures, none of whom have survived for long. It is a place that seems to offer both unlimited possibility and unlimited cruelty. Despite the conveniences of modern life, no one who crosses the prairie feels in control of it.

When one travels through the Great Plains, one sees "more nothing than something." In some places, there are "scraps of life," such as shacks, skeletal trees, and a former schoolhouse "with just the chimney and two walls still standing." Fence posts, which may have once enclosed great ranches, are "nubs sticking out of sterile brown earth." These "scraps of life" tell the story of the Great Plains—a place that was ravaged by a blizzard of black dust storms.

The "scraps of life" are examples of the ways nature can overtake civilization. Signs of former prosperity—"great ranches"—are reduced to nothing. Land that was settled for its fertility has, ironically, become "sterile brown earth," an indication of the dust storms' degenerative power.

One can drive past the fence tops, which lead to "small farms." Beyond those are towns, such as Springfield, the county seat of Baca County in southeastern Colorado. There are fewer than two people per square mile in Springfield. A hundred years ago, it would have been called "frontier" country. It is less populous now than it was in the 1930s.

A "frontier" is a land of potential, with resources yet to be exploited. The reverse is the near ghost town that Springfield has become due to the mass exodus caused by the dust storms. The "small farms" are modest remnants of agriculture's former dominance in the region.

Egan, who narrates, goes to a house a few blocks off of Main Street. It is made of "sturdy stone." A "small, brittle woman" answers and directs Egan to Isaac "Ike Osteen, who is on the ladder out back, fixing the roof. Osteen is eighty-six years old, but still "springy," and he agrees to talk about the drought, which he pronounces "drouth."

The house could be a metaphor for Osteen, who has remained in the community despite its losses. Egan's mention of Osteen's dialect reminds the reader that this region is a part of the U.S., but also slightly apart from it, with its own character and traditions.

It is only a few years into the new century, and the Southern Plains are enduring another drought. People in the area worry about a second Dust Bowl. However, Ike Osteen says that no one "who lived through the Dirty Thirties believes that."

The concerns created by climate change convince people that history can repeat itself, but to people who lived through it, the Dust Bowl was a unique phenomenon, worsened by ignorance and a lack of infrastructure.

Ike Osteen was one of nine children who grew up in a dugout. His father arrived in Baca County via the old Santa Fe Trail in 1909, when Congress was encouraging the settlement of the Southern Plains, which still remained in the public domain. The government instituted a homestead act, "promoted by railroad companies and prairie state senators," which offered prospective settlers up to 320 acres. The first Osteen settlers arrived, believing that a dam was being built in No Man's Land on the Cimarron River. When they arrived, there were no jobs, but people told them about the availability of land. The Osteens dug into the earth and were impressed with the sod, which went "down deep." They agreed to become homesteaders.

Railroad companies, wanting to increase their number of stations, pressured lawmakers to encourage potential white settlers to move into the High Plains, with the promise that the land would be good for farming. This complicity reveals the lobbying power of railroads, which had no interest in people surviving in unsettled land but only in their willingness to populate it. The false pretense of believing that a dam was being built parallels the later realization that the soil was not, in fact, as "deep" as people assumed, and would not always provide.

Ike's father died when he was only forty-six. The family still had their 320 acres and a windmill, "which pumped water 140 feet up from the Ogallala Aquifer." The water was then "piped into small storage tanks" from which the cattle drank. The easy availability of water and grass kept their cows fat. The cows produced plenty of milk and thick cream. The Osteens traded their cream in town in exchange for "flour, coffee, sugar, [and] a jar of [liquor]." They also had hens that regularly laid eggs.

The Osteens, like many nesters, subsisted on very little, but they were dependent on natural resources to maintain their farm as well as their participation in local commerce. The example of the Osteens reveals how westward expansion restored some people's relationship with the land, and how the end of that relationship resulted in a feeling of betrayal.

In 1929, the year that the stock market crashed and the Great Depression began, the prices of **wheat** had crashed, then the land dried up and no rain came for years. The land had been overturned and there was no longer any sod to hold it in place, so "the soil calcified and started to blow." The dust clouds were "ten thousand feet or more in the sky" and seemed like "moving mountains," penetrating everything. Darkness covered the prairie, and then it moved to the East. The livestock went mad, then suffocated. Children died of dust pneumonia and people avoided hugs because the electric shock could knock a person down. During the Dust Bowl, Egan says, taking a breath could kill you.

The land on which people had depended for sustenance suddenly turned deadly. Worse, the drought coincided with the nation's worst economic collapse—and as Egan ultimately shows, both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl were the results of human excess. Egan also presents a reversal in the relationship between the land and the settlers. Initially, the settlers were mobile, while the land was passive. Then, the dust, which was once held in place, was "moving" while the settlers were stationary and vulnerable to the land's whims.

Jeanne Clark, who lives just up the road from Ike Osteen, is another witness to the Dust Bowl. Her lungs remain scarred from dust pneumonia. Her mother, Louise Walton, a former Broadway dancer, had moved to the plains due to a respiratory problem. The doctors in New York told her to go west, recommending the dry air of the Southern Plains as a remedy. The Western Plains have had a reputation among "lungers," or "pilgrims with respiratory ailments," since the late nineteenth century. There was a time when Colorado City was called "Little London" due to being full of people with English accents who were "fleeing the foul industrial air of urban Britain." Louise's health improved. She then married a rancher and had Jeanne. Then, the dust storms came.

Initially, the Southern Plains had a reputation as an oasis for those seeking to escape from the harsh air of major cities. The nicknaming of those who moved to the plains as "pilgrims" places them within a tradition of people who colonized the United States in an effort to find relief from problems that ailed them at home. This time, it was not religious freedom which they sought, but freedom from the perils of illness. Though many of them did not intend to stay permanently, the cleaner air and emptier landscape may have made some people feel that they could start new lives.

By 1934, it was dangerous to go outside. The sky was filled with soil and the dust felt "like a nail file" on the skin. People wore respiratory masks if they had to go out, and rubbed the inside of their noses with Vaseline to help filter out dust. They covered their windows with wet sheets and stuffed wet towels under their doors. Children were quickly sent home from school before an oncoming storm.

Egan emphasizes how the dust gave the formerly clean, fresh air an abrasive texture. A land that once attracted "lungers" then, ironically, became a place in which the air was dangerous. Settlers had to actively defend themselves against nature.

April 14, 1935 is known as Black Sunday. A day that had started out as "quiet, windless, and bright" was, by afternoon, sending "waves of sand" over the prairie. The dust appeared like a "black wall." Jeanne Clark recalls feeling as though she were "caught in a whirlpool." It was the worst duster of all the storms, carrying "twice as much dirt as was dug out of the earth to create the Panama Canal." Afterward, Jeanne became sick with dust pneumonia, and a doctor said that she might not live for very much longer.

Witnesses' recollections of a bright, sunny day that soon turned into a day of darkness and menace reveals the unpredictability of the storms and how the wheat farmers' excesses had disrupted the orderliness of the environment, making it both fickle and lethal. There was cruel irony in Jeanne contracting dust pneumonia, given that her mother moved to the plains for the cleaner air.

Melt White lives south, in Dalhart, Texas. Though nearly everyone he grew up with is now dead, he remembers how the people of Dalhart had fought against nature—herding rabbits and then smashing their skulls to prevent the animals from eating their few crops, the plagues of grasshoppers, and how people spread arsenic over the land to kill the insects. White insists that the land was never meant to be plowed. He believes it was designed for indigenous people and their buffalo.

Perhaps out of respect for his indigenous heritage, which was routinely disrespected by the nesters, White is nostalgic for a time when the land was pristine and undisturbed. Due to an inability to understand and appreciate nature, the nesters battled against it, destroying more life and poisoning the soil.

Growing up, Melt White was teased about the color of his skin, "which seemed too full of the sun, even in winter." He later learned the family secret: he was of partial Apache and Cherokee ancestry.

The White family's shame about its indigenous heritage indicates how Anglo culture legitimized its supremacy by delegitimizing the natives.

The Dust Bowl "covered one hundred million acres," and the Southern Plains were the "epicenter." A quarter-million people left the Plains to escape the dust storms. However, a majority of those who left were poor tenant farmers "ruined by the collapse of the economy." Most of those who lived in the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl stayed in their homes and endured it.

The nesters were hardy and willing to confront the erratic whims of nature, but they were less willing to endure poverty. Some were probably buoyed by the hope that more money could be made elsewhere—the same hope that convinced them to move to the plains initially: the promise of it being better somewhere else.

The U.S. government has long treated the Southern Plains like "throwaway land." Later, it was the place where Japanese-Americans lived in internment camps during the Second World War, and where German POWs were imprisoned. The only "growth industries" in the plains today are pig farms and prisons. Though it is still a site for harsh weather, nothing has matched the Dust Bowl storms, which scientists call "the nation's worst prolonged environmental disaster."

The Southern Plains was largely neglected during westward expansion. Its aridity and lack of vegetation gave it the look of a wasteland, which may explain the tendency to harbor undesirable people there—real or imagined enemies of the state as well as criminals.

After the Dust Bowl, the farmers learned to treat the land with more respect. They restored some of the grass and formed soil conservation districts. Then, "barely a generation" later, the Great Plains entered the era of global farm commodities and, once again, farmers demanded too much from the land.

Profit drove farmers during the postwar era, just as it influenced the behavior of their forebears. The desire to build immediate wealth overrode the wish to preserve the long-term profitability of the land.


CHAPTER 1: THE WANDERER

In the winter of 1926, the Whites "were moving from the high desert chill of Las Animas, Colorado to Littlefield, Texas, south of Amarillo." Bam White was a ranch hand who went to Texas to find work, either managing cattle or picking cotton. However, the family got stuck in No Man's Land due to his horses starving from a lack of rations. His wife, Lizzie, hated the chill of the land, which made it impossible to stay warm. Bam considered selling their organ, their most prized possession, but it would not cover the cost of another horse. They seldom saw a tree, and there was barely any grass on the land.

The White family's settlement of the Southern Plains was haphazard—the combined result of bad luck and bad weather. Like many of the homesteaders, they were poor. However, they were attached to the organ, which gave them pleasure and connected them to their creativity. Perhaps they regarded the barren land similarly—as a space in which they could eke out a living and hold on to something of their own.

The High Plains has been home to many different explorers and settlers. Archaeologists have uncovered settlements of indigenous tribes that existed 700 years ago. The Spanish, including the conquistador and explorer Francisco de Vasquez de Coronado, pursued precious metals and introduced horses into the region. Some indigenous tribes, including the Querechos, ancestors of the Apache, showed up on foot, following the bison herds. For most of the 1700s, the Comanche dominated the Panhandle, having originally migrated out of eastern Wyoming. The horses aided them in their migration to the south, and facilitated their ability to hunt and trade throughout the Southern Plains. In the 1800s, they traded the horses and mules they had raised.

The High Plains has a history of migrants coming to the land to seek their fortunes. Each group of settlers has left their own mark on the territory, introducing aspects of their own cultures. Before Anglos settled the Panhandle, the Comanche were its most permanent settlers, relying on livestock both for nourishment and for trade. Unlike the European settlers, the Comanche people were not interested in building wealth, but rather in maintaining sustainability.

The Comanche also spent the 1800s fighting Texans, whom they loathed. Around 1840, the Texas Rangers went after the Comanche. The warriors were expert horsemen and equally effective in fighting and defending themselves. They enjoyed killing Texans out of revenge for the sorrow that the Anglo newcomers had brought into their camps. When Texans attacked their bison, they found the offenders and scalped them. When the white women cried, Comanche women laughed.

Though Egan's description may give the impression that the Comanche were brutal, their war efforts were attempts at self-preservation. When Texans killed bison, they killed the only means through which the tribe could feed, shelter, and clothe itself. Killing bison meant slowly killing Comanche people through the eradication of their way of life.


Bison were the source of everything the Comanche needed, including clothing, shelter, tools, and "a protein source that could be dried, smoked, and stewed." Tepees were made from twenty bison skins and weighed 250 pounds when stitched together—light enough to be portable. They also dried the stomachs and used them as food containers. The tendons were turned into bowstrings. In addition to bison, they ate "wild plums, grapes, and currants, as well as antelope, sage grouse, wild turkeys, and prairie chickens, though some Comanche thought that it was unclean to eat a bird."

The Comanche lived off of the land, but they were not indiscriminate about what they ate. Theirs was a culture, it seems, that did not permit waste, for even animal entrails and muscles had everyday use. To move with the bison on which they depended, they built homes—tepees—that were portable.

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 was a promise from the U.S. government to the Comanche, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, and other tribes, guaranteeing them hunting rights to "much of the Great American Desert, the area south of the Arkansas River." The land was on soil that no one wanted—"the arid grasslands in the west." Comanchero traders called the center of this area "el Llano Estacado," or "the Staked Plains." It was called this because it was flat and treeless, and people drove stakes into the ground to aid in navigation—otherwise one "could get lost in the eternity of flat."

The treaty was instituted on the premise that no white settler would wish to live on the High Plains which, the government assumed, was too arid for farming and too flat and treeless to appeal to potential homesteaders. The land retained the name given to it by the explorer Zebulon Pike, who had scouted the area shortly after it was acquired in the Louisiana Purchase.

When the Medicine Lodge Treaty was signed, Comanche Chief Ten Bears talked about why his people loved the High Plains. He was born there and described a prairie "where the wind blew free, and there was nothing to break the light of the sun" and there were "no enclosures." He asserted that he wanted to die on the High Plains "and not within walls." He lamented the fact that white people had "taken the country [the Comanche] loved," though he and his people only wished "to wander on the prairie" until they died.

The Comanche's view of the High Plains was in direct contrast to that of the white settlers, who initially found the land undesirable due to their belief that they were unable to amend the soil to their needs. The Comanche saw openness where the Anglos saw a barren treeless expanse, and they felt a place where the "wind was free," whereas the whites felt an unfriendly chill.

A few years after signing the treaty with the Comanche, Anglo hunters invaded indigenous territory. They killed millions of bison and stockpiled the hides and horns "for a lucrative trade back east." Between 1872-1873, a government agent estimated that twenty-five million bison had been killed, and "seven million bison tongues were shipped out of Dodge City, Kansas." Bison bones were bleached and piled up at railroad terminals, where they were to be shipped and sold for as much as ten dollars a ton among farmers who used them as fertilizer.

The Anglo hunters' desire to profit off of bison led to the ravenous murder of the animals and the disregard of their treaty agreements. Ironically, the white hunters were also keen on using bison parts for various purposes, but they were less interested in preserving the animals for long-term use, preferring short-term profits to sustainability.

Texans did not care at all about the treaty, insisting that Texas belonged only to them. When the bison herds diminished, the Comanche "went after Anglo stock herds." Quanah Parker and other Comanche leaders led the tribe in an attack on the trading post at Adobe Walls.

Texans regarded themselves as superior to the natives, which likely explains their disregard of the treaty. Parker's attack was an attempt to undermine the Anglo trade in bison and to re-establish the Comanche way of life.

The Red River War of 1874-1875 was decisive in permanently displacing the Comanche from the southern plains, particularly the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon. Six rows of infantrymen launched a surprise attack on an encampment, causing the natives to flee. Meanwhile, the U.S. Army killed 1,048 horses, leaving the Comanche with no means to defend themselves or to fight. The attacked Comanche wandered for a while, starving, then were rounded up and "sent to various camps in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma," while "some of their leaders were imprisoned in Florida." The last bison were killed five years after the Comanche had been removed. Their destruction ensured that "no Indian would ever wander the Texas Panhandle" again.

The Comanche's impressive battle skills were no match for the U.S. military's superior resources, particularly their weaponry. The goal of the battle was to render the Comanche immobile, to displace natives who were forced to remain in Texas, then to destroy the remaining bison, thereby making it impossible for the Comanche ever to return. The army's vicious massacre of horses and bison resulted in the Comanche, once a migrant people, losing their longest-term home.

In 1875, General Philip Sheridan told the Texas Legislature that white people should "kill, skin, and sell" bison until they are completely exterminated. He envisioned a prairie "covered with speckled cattle and the festive cowboy," who would be the "forerunner of an advanced civilization." The new settlers, or nesters, used the dried turds that the bison left behind as sources of heat in their dugouts and sod houses. Once the bison and the natives had been eliminated, the American government remained unsure of what to do with the abandoned land.

Sheridan was blatant in his belief that, for the United States to fulfill its "manifest destiny," or urge to push its borders toward the Pacific, the indigenous people had to be driven off of the land and replaced with "forerunners" of Western civilization. The cowboy was a figure who did not live off of the land so much as he conquered and controlled it.

The White family arrived at **the XIT ranch**—a place that Bam White had heard stories about all his life. It was part of the vast grassland that covered 21 percent of the United States and Canada, and that covered two-thirds of Texas. Nearly all twenty million acres of the Panhandle was grass.

The XIT ranch was a place of legend—a dream of infinite grazing land, where the cowboy could reign free and be prosperous. For Bam, who was poor and desperate for work, it was the realm of his dreams.

Profits from **the XIT ranch** had built the state capitol—"the biggest statehouse in the union, a palace of polished red granite." After the Comanche were removed, Charles Goodnight moved cattle down from Colorado. Investors, some as far away as Great Britain, became involved in the cattle market, which thrived on an abundance of grass. In 1882, a company out of Chicago, the Capitol Syndicate, managed the land's three million acres.

Cattle ranching, contrary to legend, was neither the unique business of cowboys nor was it limited to a particular region. It was, instead, an early conglomerate involving investors from distant major cities and even some from Europe. This indicates that multiple economies were complicit in the removal of the Comanche.

Most of **the XIT ranch** was located in the middle of the Llano Estacado. The syndicate filled the prairie with cattle, put up windmills to pump water for the animals to drink, and fenced off the land that was theirs. Shortly after barbed wire was invented in 1874, ranchers used it to close off free grass. By 1887, "there were 150,000 head of cattle" and "781 miles of fence," making the XIT "the biggest ranch in the world."

The ranchers, though they had a particular love for the prairie, did not appreciate its limitless expanse in the way the Comanche did. Their insistence on fencing it off and closing it off demonstrates that, unlike the Comanche, their freedom was still determined by ownership and control of the land.

Cattle ranchers formed vigilante posses to chase off "people who encroached on the ranch or stole cattle." They also spread poison to kill wolves and other animals who might have eaten the calves. When a railroad track was run through a shipping point, it soon became a town. Cowboys made good livings "fixing fences" or "riding herd." Things were more difficult for black or Mexican cowboys, who were seldom hired and kept in lowly positions despite their capabilities.

Though the cattle ranchers loved the grasslands, that love was proportional to the land's profitability. Disruptions from nature, such as wolves, were eliminated. There was little respect for an ecosystem that was incompatible with the business of ranching.

No gambling, drinking, or shooting without permission was allowed on **the XIT ranch**. Outside of the ranch's fence posts, things were completely the opposite. Though things were tightly controlled on the ranch, the weather, which included droughts, snow blizzards, grass fires, hailstorms, flash floods, and tornadoes, still threatened business. Good cattle ranching years would be followed by dismal ones, in which massive numbers of cattle would die off in droughts or freezes. Though bison could withstand great extremes in temperature, cattle were more fragile.

The orderliness required for cattle-ranching also extended to the management of cowboys' conduct, which was known for its hedonism, on the ranch property. It seems that the desire to manage controllable behavior on the ranch was a way to temper one's lack of control in other areas, such as the weather, which threatened to destroy the business.

The fragility of the cattle trade put pressure on the syndicate. British investors wanted better returns. So, the syndicate looked into the real estate business to generate profits. The grassland did not offer much, but it was scenic in some parts. There was timber, but not enough to offer sufficient fuel. Rainfall was insufficient for growing crops.

The syndicate realized that they could tap into the desire of thousands of poor people—small Southern farmers and recent immigrants—to own property. Offering them a slice of land, any land, could rescue the syndicate from bankruptcy.

The army explorer and topographical engineer Major Stephen H. Long had first called the Great Plains "the Great American Desert." The name he gave it remained on maps until after the Civil War. Before him, the explorer and brigadier Zebulon Pike, who had scouted the area for Thomas Jefferson three years after the United States acquired it in the Louisiana Purchase, compared the plains to the Sahara Desert. Everyone who explored the land declared it uninhabitable and desolate.

To sell pieces of the XIT, the syndicate had to overcome the plains' reputation for aridity, which had existed since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The comparison to the Sahara was exaggerated, given the presence of grass in the region, but its absence of trees and flora, which early explorers would have associated with good soil, also made it unappealing.

To overcome the Great Plains' poor reputation, the Capitol Syndicate advertised heavily. They distributed brochures "in Europe, the American South, and at major ports of entry to the U.S.," claiming that 500,000 acres were available to become farm homes. The land would be cheap, "selling for thirteen dollars an acre." Twice a month, the syndicate would transport about 500 people from Kansas City and transport them to the territory by train, for no charge, to let them tour the Texas Panhandle.

The syndicate capitalized off of the desperation of poor farmers and newcomers to claim some stake in American soil. Property ownership was still a key aspect of citizenship. The syndicate tempted thousands of people with unbeatable salesmanship—free tours of large tracts of cheap land, up for sale to any white prospective owner willing to buy.

The syndicate created "experimental farms" on the Llano Estacado to show potential settlers, particularly immigrants, how well they could dry farm in Texas. The syndicate showed the travelers how they could succeed with the aid of a windmill, which would pump water for the livestock. They could plant dryland **wheat** in the fall, "when a little moisture would bring the sprouts up," let it go dormant in the winter, then wait for the crop to rise again in the spring. The prospective farmers were also told to use dust as mulch to help hold the ground in place.

The syndicate's dry farming gimmick was an attempt to override the High Plains' reputation for aridity by showing that its climate and landscape could actually work in a farmer's favor. Dryland wheat needed little care and was, it seemed, the perfect crop for a novice farmer to cultivate. Moreover, the livestock would practically take care of itself, drinking water pumped from underground.

Ranch hands on the **XIT** found the farming advice absurd, and thought that the farming demos were "a scam." The Panhandle was no place for farming, and dust could not possibly hold moisture in the ground. The grasslands were "high and cold," and there was not enough rainfall to sustain any cultivated crop. The only thing the Panhandle could grow was grass. Still, the nesters came anyway, and the cowboys resented them, regarding them as "bonnet-wearing pilgrims" and "religious wackos," in contrast to their own free-wheeling hedonism. By 1912, all cattle-ranching had ceased on the XIT. When Bam White arrived with his family, "only 450,000 acres were unplowed of the original three-million-acre XIT ranch."

The cowboys' resentment of the nesters was both the result of their fear of economic displacement and, possibly, also a distaste for the family settlements that soon overran the area. The culture around the XIT changed from that of a place dominated by freewheeling bachelors, who enjoyed drinking and carousing, to one dominated by domesticity and stability. The nesters got their names from their urge to build homes in which they cared for children.

The White family arrived in Dalhart on February 26, 1926. They camped on the edge of town and had little dried food left. The Whites, a family with indigenous blood, noticed that the presence of the first people had been erased. Members of tribes "who had drifted back lived a shadowed existence" and "dressed like whites." Dalhart had no history before **the XIT ranch**. Though the white nesters were basically refugees, the local newspaper, the *Dalhart Texan*, described them as people with "the highest type of Anglo Saxon ancestry." The railroad companies were still trying to lure people in, particularly those who were interested in speculating for oil. Between 1910 and 1930, almost thirty towns sprang up in the Panhandle.

The white settlers of the Panhandle succeeded in eradicating any sign that a culture had existed before their own. The indigenous people who remained in the area had to assimilate to whiteness in order to survive in the transformed High Plains. White migrants, who were diverse in their origins and had been looked down upon in their native regions, were recreated in print as a noble people whose "superior" white ancestry destined them to civilize the plains.

In most of Texas, Prohibition was strictly enforced, but not in Dalhart. Farmers who grew corn for whisk brooms had lost revenue after the invention of the vacuum cleaner. Then, grain became very valuable as alcohol. A single still could produce "a barrel of corn whisky a day, every day, nearly every year of Prohibition." Five counties within three states in the High Plains "shipped fifty thousand gallons a week to distant cities."

The farmers were nearly undone by technology, but the profitability of grain was revived by the thirst for alcohol, which seemed to increase after Prohibition. Ironically, farmers, who at this time were regarded as exemplary Americans, were key in undermining American law.

Bam White toured the town. Near the railroad switch tower there was a two-story sanitarium—the only hospital for hundreds of miles. On one side, Dr. George Waller Dawson, nicknamed "Doc," had a medical practice. His wife, Willie Catherine, a woman known for her beauty, helped him run the place. Dawson migrated west from Kentucky, coming to the High Plains to help cure a respiratory ailment. He arrived in Dalhart in 1907 with the intention of starting a ranch and living off of his investments in livestock. Then, he lost everything two years later in a market collapse. He opened the sanitarium in 1912. By the late-1920s, he decided to do less medical work and try to **wheat** farm.

Dawson was driven to the plains by the misfortune of illness, but his migration west did not improve his circumstances. Though he was in a better position than Bam White due to his education and greater funds, none of Dawson's enterprises succeeded permanently. He opened the sanitarium not out of a desire to provide necessary medical services to locals, but because it was the only venture available to him. Dawson seemed to prefer to work as little as possible.

Past the sanitarium and further down Denrock, Dalhart's main street, was a clothing store, "with window displays of new dress shirts and silk ties." The store was Herzstein's, and it was owned by one of the first Jewish families in the High Plains. Near there was the beautiful, "first-class" DeSoto Hotel, owned by "Uncle" Dick Coon, where a guest could dial 126 and get a prostitute from the Number 126 house. Next to the hotel was the Mission Theater, where movies played.

Dalhart quickly developed an air of some sophistication. The nesters were not all simple, plain-clothes farmers; they, too, liked to dress nicely and stay in elegant surroundings. They also were not the prudes that cowboys imagined them to be, given the popularity of the Number 126 house and their fondness for Hollywood films, which sometimes tackled risqué topics.

During conversations with locals, Bam found out that Dick Coon "owned Dalhart." Coon owned nearly every establishment in Dalhart, including the DeSoto and the Mission Theater. Coon, who had grown up in dire poverty, did not plan on getting rich on the plains. He didn't even plan on staying there. He was passing through in 1902, while trying to get a train to Houston, and had been seduced by one of the Capitol Syndicate's real estate agents to stay and buy land.

Dick Coon epitomized the American ideal of the "self-made man"—one who rises from poverty on his own initiative and builds wealth through his fearlessness and clever ability to seize on opportunities. The serendipitous circumstances in which Coon came to Dalhart only contributed to his legend.

When Bam returned to his family, he found his horse dead. Bam took it as a sign that they should stay. He figured there had to be plenty of jobs in what was still a new town. Someone in Dalhart had told him about jobs "in the newly plowed fields." Bam felt that the town might be his chance "to get a small piece of the world and make it work."

Bam, like Coon, also remained in Dalhart due to chance circumstances. However, his choice to remain was borne from desperation. Like the Comanche before him, his dead horse rendered him immobile. He also had nowhere else to go.

CHAPTER 2: NO MAN'S LAND

Whereas Dalhart was a place of opportunity and hope, Boise City, Oklahoma was a place where hope died. The town had been founded on a fraud—the promise of trees was in its name, which came from the French name for "woods," *le bois*. The Southwestern Immigration and Development Company sold lots at forty-five dollars apiece. The brochures advertised a lush place with plenty of clean water and infrastructure. The fiction helped them sell three thousand lots by 1908, "one year after Oklahoma became the forty-fifth state."

The fiction that allowed for the settlement of Dalhart is a part of the overall fiction that created the society of the High Plains, particularly the notion that the region had no history or culture until whites settled it. The advertising falsely promised a land that was the opposite of what actually existed, but the allure of cheap land mattered more than anyone's disappointment over the falsehood.

Boise City offered nothing to its landowners. There were no railroads or even tracks, and no plans to build either. The settlers saw none of the beautiful houses or businesses in the brochures, and the local well "was a stockman's crude tank next to a windmill, full of flies." Furthermore, the company did not even own the land that it sold. The developers were arrested, tried for fraud, and sent to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. By 1920, Boise City had 250 residents and its nearby county "at the far end of No Man's Land was approaching 3,500 people." There were hopes that the Oklahoma Panhandle, where Boise City was located, would become "the greatest **wheat**-growing country in the world."

The ability of the developers to sell land that it did not own suggests a certain lawlessness and lack of regulation in the settlement of the Southern Plains. Its lack of infrastructure did not deter people from envisioning its promise—on the contrary, Boise City's lack of offerings seemed to make it more appealing to those who believed that, through farming, they could be instrumental in "conquering" the land to make it appealing and viable.

Previously, no one had wanted to settle in No Man's Land. It was where some people, most notably Captain William Becknell and his thirty-man army, had nearly died of thirst. Spain was the first to claim the territory, which the nation then sold to Napoleon. The territory was then sold to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, then ended up in the possession of Mexico in 1819 as part of their claim of Texas. In 1836, the Republic of Texas owned "all territory north to Colorado." When Texas was admitted into the Union in 1845, it was on the condition that there would be no slavery north of the Missouri Compromise line. As a result, "an orphaned rectangle, 35 miles wide and 210 miles long" was left over, unattached to any state or territory. Its unclaimed status, in addition to its "unlivably arid" land, gave it its name.

The Panhandle is a sliver of territory characterized not only by its geographical difference from the rest of Texas and by the belief that nothing could grow or live there, but also by its general detachment from political or economic systems. The area was useless to the Southerners who controlled Texas, both due to the Missouri Compromise and the impracticality of trying to grow cotton in the arid territory. However, naming one part of it "No Man's Land" further reinforced the idea that the territory had no people and no history simply because whites were not present, despite the presences of natives and Mexicans.

In the late nineteenth century, the Oklahoma Panhandle was a haven for "outlaws, thieves, and killers." The Santa Fe Railroad pushed as far north as Liberal, Kansas, which was on the Oklahoma border. Kansas was a dry state, disallowing the purchase of alcohol, so a place called Beer City developed across the state line. It was comprised of "bars, brothels, gambling houses, smuggling dens, and town developers on the run." Beer City was the first settlement in No Man's Land, but it disintegrated two years after it was set up due to "law, taxes, and land title companies" coming to the Panhandle in 1890.

No Man's Land quickly became an alternative to more conservative Kansas. The territory's lawlessness and lack of permanent settlers made it an ideal place for those who sought to hide from the law. It was also a place where people could escape from legal strictures that legislated behavior, such as the consumption of alcohol. It became a land of both immorality and freedom.

The indigenous people for whom Oklahoma is named (the state name is a combination of Choctaw words—*okla*, meaning "people" and *humma*, meaning "red") lost their homes in a land grab which turned Oklahoma City, Norman, and Guthrie into towns overnight. People only settled No Man's Land when there was nothing else left in the state to take.

The settlers retained the territory's cultural lineage in its name while discarding the people who gave it that lineage. The willingness to seize No Man's Land, the final frontier in the state, is an effect of the white migrants' ravenous appetites for land.

Hazel Lucas's family settled in the grassland "just south of Boise City" in 1914—"the peak year for homesteads in the twentieth century." Hazel was a little girl when they arrived, and she was excited to be there. Her father, William Carlyle, had chosen the land because it was free, whereas the old **XIT ranch** property could cost up to "$10,000 for a half-section." By 1910, more than half of the two hundred million acres that had been homesteaded nationwide were in the Great Plains. Though the land was coveted, Hazel missed trees and did not want to live in a hole in the ground with critters crawling around. She also did not want to live in a leaky sod house.

The Lucas family settled their homestead in the same year that the First World War began in Europe. While Europe was reorganizing its borders, the United States was expanding its own through the settlement of previously neglected territories. Through Hazel's young eyes, one can understand the excitement of being in a new place whose expansiveness made anything seem possible, as well as seeing its negative aspects, such as the strange bugs.

Many of the settlers in the Southern Plains were from the Northern Plains—people fleeing the brutal winters in Montana, for example, where temperatures dipped to forty below zero and froze cattle in place. The federal government offered free train rides to prospective settlers to take a look at No Man's Land, just as the realtors selling bits of **the XIT ranch** had. In 1915, William Carlyle made a dugout and "started plowing the grass on his half-section, a patch of sandy loam."

Migrants from the north may have expected warmer weather and, more importantly, another chance to settle and farm land. Once again, they were fooled by realtors' deceptive advertising, which had initially convinced them to go north. Migrants seemed motivated by a combination of hope and foolishness.

Though their patch of land was fertile, the Lucas family would not have survived without the help of windmills. Windmills were introduced to the west as a result of the railroad industry. Railroads required windmills, for they were the only means of generating the large amounts of water needed "to cool the engines and generate steam." The mechanic Daniel Halladay invented a smaller version of the famous Dutch windmills, and the Union Pacific Railroad Company bought many. Later, a nester was able to purchase a windmill kit for around seventy-five dollars. Still, one had to dig for water. Sometimes it was only thirty-feet below the earth's surface; in other instances, it was "three times as deep." Some homesteaders used "steam or horse-powered drills" to dig, while others dug holes by hand.

Water, a basic resource, was not easy to come by. Nesters had to work the ground for every basic need, including this one. Fortunately, they had the technology to transform the land and the patience to work with it—though the need for water left them with little choice. The windmills were necessary for pumping just enough water, not only for a family to drink, but also to keep the livestock hydrated. The West's most precious resource was water.

While trying to dig for water, nesters feared grass fires. Hazel Lucas "was petrified of prairie fires." A few years after her family had arrived, a lightning strike lit up a field in New Mexico and the resulting fire spread all the way to Texas and Oklahoma. Fires were a "part of the prairie ecosystem"—necessary for the land to clear out "excess insect populations" and to help the grass regenerate. When there were not fires, there were floods. In the spring of 1914, the Cimarron River flooded, knocking out a newly completed dam.

Violent weather patterns were a key aspect of living on the Southern Plains. White people who settled there, it seems, never got accustomed to the land's means of maintaining its ecosystem, tending not only to react in fear but also to build edifices that were not sturdy enough to withstand the region's floods.

A few years after the First World War, William Carlyle "Carlie" Lucas built a home above ground. He invested in building materials, emboldened by the possibility of making a lot of money off of selling **wheat** for the war effort. When he was finished, the family enjoyed going to bed without first having to scan the floor for snakes. Then, one afternoon, a strong windstorm came. The Lucas family fled to their old dugout. The next day, Hazel poked her head above ground and saw their home being carried away with the wind. Four days later, the family searched for pieces of their home.

The initial profitability of wheat, spurred by the market created by the war, encouraged Carlie Lucas's sense that he finally had some control over his circumstances in No Man's Land. That jolt of confidence quickly receded, however, when nature again showed him that he and his family were entirely vulnerable to its whims.

Though the weather on the prairie was violent, the sky would become "open and embracing" after a storm. The indigenous animals were uniquely charming, and the sky seemed to go on forever. Hazel Lucas rode her horse Pecos to visit the James boys, one of the last big ranching families, whose property extended into both Texas and Oklahoma. One day, Andy told her how to eat grasshoppers. When she was sixteen, Hazel met Charlie Shaw. In the fall of 1922, Hazel rode Pecos to a one-room schoolhouse "sitting alone in the grassland." She took her first job there as a teacher. There were thirty-nine students in eight different grade,s and seventeen-year-old Hazel taught them all.

Though Hazel was initially fearful of the prairie's idiosyncrasies, she quickly adapted to it and decided to settle there as a young adult. She also played a role in helping to educate local children, fulfilling a role for which she was uniquely qualified. Though the settlers were hearty, they were largely uneducated, which left the region with a lack of qualified teachers.

Hazel taught her students how to play basketball, which she had played in high school, and safely guided a group of players through "a fit of hail" in her horse-drawn wagon. She wondered about life in other places, and knew how much faster American life moved there. She knew about "flappers, gangsters, and stunts," such as the two men who played tennis on the wings of a biplane. Yet, in Cimarron County, most people still didn't have electricity.

Hazel's education made her aware of the modern advances outside of No Man's Land, though the other inhabitants of the region probably had less awareness. The technological advancement in the cities contrasted with the settlers' lives, which seemed to be fixed in the nineteenth-century and largely determined by the whims of nature.

In fewer than ten years, **wheat** farmers on the Great Plains "went from subsistence living to small business-class wealth." There were new machines that made planting and harvesting easier, and in some cases, the profit margin was "ten times the cost of production." In 1910, the price of wheat was eighty cents a bushel. By 1915, it was double. Farmers increased production by 50 percent and were helped when the Turkish navy blocked the Dardanelles, making it impossible for Russia to supply Europe with grain. That customer base was supplied by farmers in the Great Plains.

The war fostered a wheat boom in which the farmers on the prairie were the primary suppliers of grain. The war thus also helped to pull the farmers out of their more rudimentary lives and into the modern era. Very soon, they bought expensive farming equipment and conducted business on par with industrialists in major cities.

When Carlie Lucas first arrived in No Man's Land, he hoped to make enough money to feed his family. A few years after his arrival, he was making $8,000 a year from wheat farming—a handsome six-figure salary in today's dollars. A worker on the Ford assembly line made an eighth of what a successful farmer took home in pay. Ida Watkins, "the self-described **wheat** queen of Kansas," said that she earned $75,000 in 1926—more than the salary of any baseball player, except for Babe Ruth, and more than what the president of the United States took home in pay.

Wheat farming had become a lucrative industry. The image of a simple, modest farmer contrasted with the real-life existence of people like Ida Watkins, who made as much money as some of the country's greatest luminaries. This newly found wealth diminished the line that separated the lives of people in the prairie versus those who lived in the country. Everyone seemed to be equally prosperous, for a time.

Hazel Lucas and Charles Shaw got married when she was eighteen. They were both working as teachers, but Charles wanted to leave the Panhandle for Cincinnati, Ohio, where he studied mortuary science. Hazel enjoyed Cincinnati but returned to Oklahoma to work when they began to run out of money. She secured a better-paying job, with additional duties as a bus driver. When she stepped off the train in Texhoma, she felt back at home in No Man's Land.

The marriage between Hazel and Charles seemed to be one between equals. This was often characteristic of pioneer life, in which women shared responsibilities, both for earning income and building a homestead, that were equal to those of men. Their lives also coincided with the advances that women were making politically and socially.

Hazel Lucas was one of few women in No Man's Land. Women were rather scarce, and Will Crawford was one of the territory's many bachelors. He was originally from Missouri, and had arrived on one of the free trains. He was an exceptionally large man, and liked to say that he was "fatter than any man in three states." He worked as a farmhand, mostly in exchange for food. One day while reaching into the front pocket of his specially-made overalls, he found a note from Sadie White from Wichita, Kansas. She has stitched Will's garment and was impressed by its size. He wrote to her, then built a more comfortable home—two rooms above his dugout. Will went away for a week and returned married to Sadie. They moved into the new home Will had built.

No Man's Land had not drawn many women, due to the harshness of the climate and the territory's previous reputation for lawlessness. Though Will Crawford's weight might have made him unappealing to many women, for Sadie, his largeness signaled an ability to provide and protect. She may also have been intrigued by Crawford's lack of shame in regard to his vast appetites, which White might have connected to an ability to afford however much food he wanted.

The Folkers family were Will Crawford's closest neighbors. They also arrived by a free train with very little money. Katherine Folkers disliked the emptiness of the prairie and cried herself to sleep at night. Fred Folkers planted an orchard, which was successful for a time.

Folkers may have built his orchard to calm his wife's fear of the emptiness. He may also have wished to add his own touch to a territory that resembled an empty canvas—anything seemed conceivable on the prairie.

Those who prospered on the Southern Plains were, in many instances, "first-generation aristocracy." Country clubs were newly established for the farmer-businessmen. They ignored those who warned that the prosperity would be short-lived, and that the land would not be sustainable for agriculture.

Like their forebears in other parts of the country, the plains settlers were stubborn and determined. They were also upwardly mobile and eager to build a class system in which landowners were at the top.

Fred Folkers started his **wheat** farm with the help of a horse-drawn plow, and then he bought a tractor. Suddenly, it took only three hours to do the same work. He also had a Case combine and a one-way plow. The one-way plow was a temporary blessing, but later a curse, due to its efficiency at ripping up large sections of grass. By the late-1920s, Folkers harvested ten thousand bushels of wheat, and by 1925, he could transport it out of Boise City by train. The wheat was then sold in Chicago, New York, and Europe.

Just as the cotton gin aided in picking and selling cotton at faster rates a century before, new farming equipment made it easier to till the soil and to plant wheat crops more quickly. Farmers were eager to be competitive in major cities that had the largest customer bases—thus netting them larger profits.

Soon, signs of prosperity were evident everywhere in Boise City. People drove around Model Ts. A clothier from Clayton, New Mexico arrived and took orders for suits and dresses. Simon Herzstein took trips to New York and arrived back with outfits "that could make a prairie couple look like a pair of dandies from the picture show."

The settlers' desire to have all the accessories of wealth that were available to city folk proves that they did not move to the plains to isolate themselves from metropolitan life, but instead sought to replicate it to the point where they too could generate wealth.

John Johnson's bank loaned money to people all over the county. People were happy to mortgage their farms in exchange for more money for farming equipment. By 1929, Boise City had grown exponentially: there was a theater, a hotel, a bookstore, a bank, a newspaper, a creamery, a few cafes, and a telephone office. The Folkers bought appliances, dresses for Katherine and Faye, more land, and "a big-shouldered house to replace the crumbling shack" in which they had lived for ten years. The sound of centipedes behind the walls made it difficult for the children to sleep. For Faye's birthday, they bought her a piano and provided her with lessons.

The prosperity in Boise City led people to think that the town's growth was unstoppable. People got so comfortable and confident with their success that they borrowed more than they could afford, not just for the things they needed, but also to indulge themselves in what they wanted. They desired lives that were not merely built around necessity and survival, but also pleasure and leisure. Finally, they could afford life's comforts.

The High Plains was a happy place in the 1920s. The population was growing. The banks seldom said "no" to an upstart and, after Congress passed the Federal Farm Loan Act, every town had a bank to cater to its farmers. They offered forty-year loans at six percent interest. No one thought they would be unable to pay that back.

It seems that no one thought of how impractical it might be to be in debt for forty years. The government was also complicit in encouraging the short-sightedness and covetousness of farmers who could not foresee any possibility of future misfortune.

CHAPTER 3: CREATING DALHART

Bam White lived in "a shack outside of Dalhart" where he worked as a sharecropper in exchange for shelter. He wished that he could be a cowboy, but ranching was not paying and the ranches were disappearing. Between 1926 and 1929, the rains were steady, and everyone believed that the weather had changed permanently in the Panhandle. While there, Lizzie White gave birth to a stillborn daughter. She had a nagging feeling that the place was no good for them, but Bam remained optimistic, particularly in light of Dalhart's prosperity.

Like Bam, Lizzie seemed guided by omens. For him, the death of his horse was a sign to remain in Dalhart, while for her, the death of their child was a sign that they ought to leave. For Lizzie, perhaps, it seemed like a place where things died. More importantly, Bam now seemed unnecessary: no one in this wheat-farming town was looking for a cowboy anymore.

Meanwhile, Doc Dawson bought two more sections of land and thought about planting cotton, which paid more than **wheat**. However, the cotton never took hold. Everyone had a scheme to get rich quickly. A former film producer, Hickman Price, had already made money, but wanted more. Hickman bought 35,000 acres and decided to build factory farms on them. In five years, from 1924 to 1929, there was a three hundred percent increase in the acreage that was plowed on the Texas Panhandle due to Price's mass production.

Both Dawson and Price wanted easy ways to get rich— methods that would not require them to perform the labor of tenant farmers. Both men had the means, they thought, to make the land work for them. However, Dawson had yet to make his fortune, while Price was already rich. Dissatisfied with his wealth, he wanted more. The land was synonymous with money, and some people could never have enough.

Most of those who sought to make money on the plains stuck to **wheat**. Andy James still insisted on ranching and resented the destruction of the grass, which he did not think should have been plowed. People felt sorry for Andy James's lack of success. He had become a relic.

The cowboy had become nearly erased from the plains, like the Comanche. However, the cowboys at least had a recognized history, and their misfortune evoked a pity that no one extended toward the natives.

Dick Coon kept a lucky one hundred-dollar bill in one of his pockets. For him, this was not much money. He raised prized bulls both for show and for breeding. He owned the finest buildings on the town's main street, Denrock, including the elegant DeSoto Hotel, as well as a drugstore "where pharmacists filled prescriptions for whisky."

Coon no longer needed the C-note that he carried for good luck. He was a consummate businessman with one foot in legitimate businesses and another in bootlegging—one of the most prosperous businesses of the day, and which funded other ventures.

John McCarty arrived in town in 1929. He looked like a young Orson Welles and was a good talker. He bought the local paper, the *Dalhart Texan*, and became its editor and publisher. He was twenty-eight at the time. McCarty was excited by the town's growth—by then there were more than four thousand people—and wanted the people of Dalhart to see their own greatness. He believed that its citizens were strong men and women who were fortunate to live in a new town with great opportunities. He was thoroughly engaged in local life and loved the town's institutions.

McCarty became key in creating Dalhart's myths and creation story. He believed that the town was full of opportunistic pioneers, like himself. Egan's characterization of McCarty as "a good talker" contributes to his image as a storyteller, and the comparison to Orson Welles suggests someone given to as much grandiosity.

People moved to the High Plains because they missed out on the better land grabs that resulted from the first Homestead Act of 1862 and the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909. Of nearly two hundred million acres settled on the Great Plains between 1880 and 1925, about half was considered somewhat suitable for farming. The Southern Plains largely drew poor settlers, Southerners displaced by the Civil War, or Mexicans hoping to own a piece of land. By the 1920s, historians believed that the American frontier was closed. They had forgotten the Southern Plains.

The Southern Plains drew those who were outcasts in their respective lands. Everyone, it seemed, could get another chance to start over in the Southern Plains. The displacement of Southerners, presumably white Southerners, is a result of their losing small farms and plantations during Reconstruction. In Dalhart, they had a chance to recreate their old sense of glory.

Railroad companies played a significant role in bringing in "thousands of people who had been adrift for centuries" to the High Plains when they arrived at stations in Omaha or Kansas City. In the Northern Plains, people were furious with the railroads for promoting the fraud that they could plant **wheat** in dry, frigid places in Montana and North Dakota. In the Southern Plains, people welcomed the railroads, forgetting what had happened up north.

Though the railroad companies were guilty of fraud, they also offered migrants, particularly Russo-Germans "who had been adrift for centuries," a final chance to find a place where they could settle permanently. Any opportunity, even in less desirable land, was better than none.

Dalhart was doing well. Tractors pulled up a million acres of grass per year, and in just five years, between 1925 and 1930, another 5.2 million acres were plowed in the Southern Plains. John McCarty insisted that the town lay in "the best damned country God's sun ever shone upon," and many of those who read his words in agreement were people, such as the Russo-German immigrants, who read his column to learn English.

Immigrants' dependence on McCarty's column to build their language skills also helped them to internalize his belief of what kind of place Dalhart was. This idealization of their town was reinforced by its seemingly boundless prosperity.

CHAPTER 4: HIGH PLAINS DEUTSCH

By the summer of 1929, there was a food surplus in the United States. There were piles of unsold **wheat**. Europe faced the same problem after Russia began exporting its wheat again. In the U.S., prices fell quickly. Farmers had two choices: plant less and wait for prices to rebound, or plant more to try to make the same money on higher yields. They chose to do the latter. There was, after all, pressure to meet their bank debts.

A glut of wheat in the market had driven prices down. There simply were not enough people to eat so much grain, especially when the product came from two nations that both possessed vast tracts of farming land. Greed as well as panic over losing revenue led farmers to make matters worse.

In September 1929, George Alexander Ehrlich sat at a wedding table and told his grandchildren the story of what it had been like on the Volga River in Russia, where he had come from. He spoke "a very old style of German," mixed with Russian and "spiced with the dialect of Texas-Oklahoma." In the Russian countryside, George's father had been a leather tanner whom George accompanied to work so that he could learn the trade. George would have done just that if not for being drafted into the czar's army on his sixteenth birthday. To avoid service, he had to leave Russia. In 1890, George boarded a ship to New York out of Hamburg, Germany. The ship got caught in a typhoon in the Atlantic. The captain sent out an SOS and told the passengers and crew to prepare for death.

Ehrlich's story also becomes a part of the legend of the High Plains. Unlike the stories that John McCarty told in his newspaper, Ehrlich's are true, as well as a reminder that those who settled the Great Plains were a diverse group of people with complicated origins. The Russo-Germans had been a migrant people for centuries. Ehrlich's dangerous voyage to the United States gives his story a dimension of drama, suggesting that he nearly lost his life in his effort to build a new one.

George's story was the founding narrative of the Ehrlichs and how they got to Oklahoma. At the wedding table, they "poured wine and quaffed beer and ate the spicy, smoke sausages." The Russo-Germans were still regarded as strangers in the High Plains due to their accents, strange clothes, strange foods, and a German heritage that made them suspect during the First World War. After 166 years of bouncing from southern Germany to the Volga region of Russia to the former Cherokee territory of Oklahoma, they wanted only to be left alone. It seemed that, in the U.S., they were finally at home.

Because they did not fit into McCarty's ideal of "the highest Anglo-Saxon stock" due to their different manners and hard-to-place accents, the Russo-Germans did not fit in easily. Their experiences reveal that, though the Southern Plains was generally a place for misfits, it was also a place that demanded some level of assimilation, and the Russo-Germans held on to their culture to anchor them during their migrations.

Russo-German culture seemed "frozen in place in 1763" and transplanted to the Great Plains as it had been in Germany. When they boarded ships for America, they carried "seeds of turkey red—a hard winter **wheat**"—in the pockets of their vests. The crop was resistant to cold and drought and made agronomists rethink the notion that the Southern Plains were unsuited to agriculture. "Turkey red" had allowed the Germans to move from the valley to the drier and higher steppes.

Though the Russo-Germans were attached to their particular foods and cultural traditions, refusing to assimilate to the cultures in the places where they migrated, they were adept at assimilating their farming habits to new soil and climates. Their introduction of "turkey red" to the Southern Plains was also beneficial to the development of the grain industry.

The Russo-Germans were "migratory" and "tough-nutted pacifists" who earned a reputation for draft-dodging. Some were opposed to war on principle, while there were plenty who fought for the United States during both World Wars. What they would not do was fight for the Russian czar or—worse—the Bolsheviks. Catherine the Great had promised them, in a manifesto dating back to July 22, 1763, that they would be excused from military conscription. It was part of a beneficial package deal she offered to bring Germans into Russia. The empress was German-born and preferred the manners of her own people. She also wanted farming colonies filled with people who were not Russian. She believed that the farms would be a "buffer," deterring the warring tribes who roamed the steppe from pillaging villages.

What Americans interpreted as "draft-dodging" was more likely a habit borne out of the Russo-Germans' desire for survival, considering that they were a vulnerable minority. However, the unwillingness of some to fight during both world wars, in which Germany was the primary enemy, raised suspicions that they were disloyal. Those who did fight were regarded as exceptions to the stereotype that the Russo-Germans were not properly patriotic. They were strongly assertive—"tough-nutted"—in their unwillingness to fight, perhaps due to their weariness of having to defend themselves in Russia.

Catherine the Great was eager for as many Germans as possible to populate the villages. Most of the migrants had come from poor villages in southern Germany, where families had suffered in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War. Catherine also suggested polygamy to increase populations, but the Germans were not interested in this at the time. Instead, they were more concerned with keeping dirt away from their homes. After arriving, they did suffer invasions from the Kirghiz, a Tartar tribe whose members burned the Germans' church, raped women, and kidnapped babies. Captives were sold in Asia as slaves.

Though the empress had lured her people into Russia on the premise that they would have special benefits, those benefits were granted at the expense of their safety. Catherine wanted to diversify the Russian population with German blood, hoping that her homeland's mores would rub off on her adopted people, but the newcomers were adamant about retaining their native habits and protecting themselves from extinction.

By 1863, a quarter-million Germans lived on the Volga. Another group of Germans, composed of Mennonites, lived near the Black Sea. The German colonists never assimilated fully into Russia. Meanwhile, Russians became resentful of their prosperous farms and their exemption from military service. Then, in 1872, Czar Alexander II revoked Catherine's promises to them and demanded that the Russo-Germans stop speaking German and join the army. He raised taxes on them and revoked their exclusive licenses to brew beer.

The czar threatened the Russo-Germans with what they seemed to fear most: non-existence, both as a result of dying in the czar's wars and in being forced to give up their cultural traditions. Russians who were trapped in serfdom probably disliked seeing non-Russians living relatively easier lives.

Meanwhile, in America, railroad companies had already drawn the ire of farmers in Nebraska and Kansas for their promotion of fraud. The agents began courting immigrants—their last hope to avoid bankruptcy. Immigrants traveled in groups, worked hard, and paid on time. Brochures advertising land were printed in German. Some Germans returned from the U.S. to the Volga, talking about what they had seen of the Great Plains. They liked it. It seemed like the "Promised Land" all over again, as Russia had been.

The settlement of the Southern Plains with immigrants, particularly the Russo-Germans, seemed mutually beneficial. The Russo-Germans had nowhere else to go, so they would be committed to their new homes. The railroad companies also needed settlers who would remain on the land so that the mortgages would be paid regularly.

Starting in 1873, villages along the Volga "became near ghost towns" as people boarded "small boats on the Volga to Saratov." Then, they rode the train to a North Sea port where they took ships to major U.S. ports—New York, Baltimore, and Galveston. Many were amazed to see black people for the first time. In the 1870s, about 12,000 Russo-Germans arrived in Kansas. In fifty years, there would be 303,000 in the Great Plains. In Kansas, the Germans established numerous towns with German names and kept many of their traditional customs, including their tidiness and their fondness for singing.

The Russo-Germans' movement from the Volga to the Southern Plains was swift and organized. Coming to the United States confronted them with aspects of the world that they had never before experienced in person, such as the existence of black people. Their naming of towns in Kansas coincided with their wish for their new homes to be compatible with their language and traditions in a way that Russia was not.

George Ehrlich turned eighteen during his trip across the Atlantic. He strapped his money to a lower leg and put all of his possessions into a small bag. Though the trip was only supposed to take two weeks, due to the storm at sea, George's ship arrived in New York Harbor after two months. The ship had been lost at sea and ran of food, and some of the immigrants fell ill, but they had made it to America. It was New Year's Day, 1891.

Ehrlich's arrival on New Year's Day is a happy coincidence, for he was starting over in a new land just as one starts over in a new year. Like many immigrants, he came from Europe with little money but an abundance of hope, buoyed by the knowledge that he had survived a dangerous voyage.

In the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles, some Volga Germans were "shedding some of the thrift their forebears had practiced" by buying new tractors and borrowing money from banks to buy more land. The goal was to plant as much **wheat** as possible—fast.

The Russo-Germans were just as eager as anyone to be economically successful, but the pressures of life were different in the United States—more materialistic and acquisitive.

When George arrived in the High Plains, he initially stayed with relatives in LeHigh, Kansas and looked for work. He missed the land grab in 1893, when former Cherokee lands were opened up. Six years later, George heard that there were still a few sections left, far west of the prime land. During a trip from Kansas to Shattuck, Oklahoma in the fall of 1900, George staked his claim to "a quarter-section of rich grass at the base of [a] hill."

Once the indigenous people had been run off of the desirable land, the land grabs of the late-nineteenth and early -twentieth centuries ceased. Desperate immigrants and other settlers with few to no options took what was left in the Southern Plains. George lucked into an appealing tract of land—fertile and green.

George returned to Kansas to make peace with his family, then he took a train back to Shattuck, Oklahoma with hundreds of other Germans, who were accompanied by livestock and precious items from home. When the immigrants arrived, they witnessed a land that looked like hell. The prairie had been burned by the Cherokee in revenge for being betrayed by the U.S. government for the third time. However, the Germans stayed, despite the cold and the prejudice they faced from Anglos. Some Anglo shopkeepers initially refused to sell them food, and others tried to pass an ordinance against speaking German. The Germans stayed no matter what. They were used to living in a treeless, unfriendly place.

The sight of a charred land did not deter the Germans, who were accustomed to the violence of invaders in their home countries. They were also accustomed to the tendency of the dominant group—in this case, Anglos—seeking to impose their customs on others, as well as their attempts to drive out those who could not or who did not try to fit in, such as the Russo-Germans.

George Ehrlich's first job was as a ranch hand. To learn English, he carried a notebook in his back pocket, in which he wrote down new words. He married a fellow Volga German, Hanna Weis, and they had ten children. During the First World War, the family was nearly run out of town after a schoolteacher whom they invited into their home reported to the police that they had a picture of the German Kaiser in the house. The cops surrounded their homestead and searched it. George and eleven other German immigrants were accused of espionage, and rumors circulated that they were to be hanged.

Oddly, it was only when the Russo-Germans sought to conform to the American prairie through language and learning that they ran into trouble. A misunderstanding over a picture of the Kaiser made Ehrlich seem like a traitor. However, this notion was compounded by hysteria over the war, as well as the preexisting suspicion toward and dislike of the Germans.

Around midnight, the police went to the jail in Arnett, Oklahoma, where Ehrlich and the others were being held and took them to Woodward, a bigger town to the east. George appeared before Judge T.R. Alexander around 2:00 AM. The police explained that the Germans were spies. The judge spoke to George Ehrlich and asked what he was doing there. In his broken English, George explained that it was because of the picture of the Kaiser. The judge asked the Germans how many of them were supporting the war effort. All of their hands shot up. Ehrlich dug in his pocket and pulled out two hundred dollars' worth of government stamps. The judge asked the sheriff how many of his officers had war bonds or stamps. None of them did. The judge dismissed the case.

The argument against the Russo-German immigrants was that they were insufficiently patriotic, which was merely an excuse for the Anglo settlers to legitimize their ostracism. Judge Alexander's decision to release Ehrlich and the other German-speaking immigrants was based on the fallacy of the sheriff and other officers' prejudice. Ehrlich's ineptitude with language, which prompted the misunderstanding, did not matter in relation to the visual evidence of his willingness to buy government stamps for the war effort.

The youngest of the Ehrlich children, nicknamed Georgie, was doted upon for his boundless energy. One summer evening, on August 14, 1924, he wandered out onto the road, lost in the sand wafting in the air from the tractors. A cattle truck came along and ran him over—the driver never saw the boy. George Ehrlich and his wife, Hanna, remained shaken from the loss. Still, George thought that "he could live through anything." He did not realize that in five years, he would live through something meaner than old Russia and a "storm-tossed ship."

The Ehrlichs endured the pain of loss long before the dust storms overtook the prairie and dust pneumonia became the fear of every parent with young children. The loss of Georgie, coupled with George's near-death experience on the ship that delivered him to America, taught Ehrlich about the fragility of life and the ease with which blessings could be taken away.

CHAPTER 5: LAST OF THE GREAT PLOWUP

The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. In three weeks, the stock market lost 40 percent of its value. Brokers had taken unnecessary risks, and banks had gone on "speculative binges," using people's savings accounts as collateral for stock purchases. Meanwhile, most Americans continued to work the land. One in four people lived on a farm.

On the surface, affairs on Wall Street seemed very distant from life on the plains. When the Depression hit, the settlers retained this view, believing that New York brokers had created their pain, without understanding their own role in producing uncontrollable markets.

On the High Plains, things were still good. They associated the stock market crash with "city slickers." Meanwhile, they had "record harvests, a new railroad, and even dreams of a skyscraper in town." They did not notice a problem until the price of **wheat** began to follow the course of the equities market. Though most of the country was in a drought, that did nothing to push the prices of wheat back up.

There was more wheat for sale than the market could bear. The farmers' choice to continue planting and selling the crop, instead of letting some of it go fallow, created an excess, which caused the crop's price to plummet.

In Boise City, the Lucas family was preparing for its first harvest. Carlie Lucas had died, leaving the farm to his widow, Dee, and his brother C.C. Hazel, their daughter, had married Charles Shaw and went to live in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Lucases needed the crop to come in properly, as they had to pay back the loans they had taken out to buy new farm machinery. They had no electricity and still lived in a dugout.

Though the market was no longer in their favor, the Lucases, like many families on the prairie, had no other recourse but to hope that they could sell a crop of wheat in order to pay their debts. The Lucases' lives were very rudimentary, and farming was their only means of earning income.

A few miles from the Lucas farm, the Folkers family was doing well. Fred Folkers had bought a tractor, a new car, a new house, and a piano for his daughter, Faye, who was becoming a talented musician. He owed it all to his half-section of No Man's Land. Still, debts were piling up. In addition to growing **wheat**, he also had fruit orchards. Nebraska offered tax incentives to those who planted trees and for Fred, his orchard was a way to defy those who did not think that apples and peaches could grow in No Man's Land.

The Folkers family was ambitious and upwardly mobile. They wished not only to eke out simple lives as farmers, but to instill their creativity and personal imprints on a land that was characterized by absence. Fred's effort to grow orchards was a challenge to the High Plains' bad reputation and a show of his faith in the soil.

A June storm could be trouble for a **wheat** crop. The cold of late spring and the heat of early summer usually resulted in hailstorms. One June, hailstones as big as grapefruits fell on the Lucas farm. Dee Lucas told her children to go to the root cellar. When the family emerged, they saw that their crop was lost. In fact, the storm had crushed most wheat crops in Cimarron County, while elsewhere on the High Plains, wheat came in just fine. In southwestern Kansas, the harvest was up by 50 percent. Yet, on the Lucas farm, a year of work was gone in a few minutes. Dee and C.C. fell to their knees and began to cry. The children watched them and worried.

Though the wheat market was already suffering due to a glut in the market, the Lucas family, like many others in the plains, had no other source of income on which they could depend. The dependence on a crop that did not always yield a harvest, and one that might not sell even if it did, created a vicious circle in the 1930s, in which farming families were damned if they could yield a crop and damned if they could not.

By the end of 1932, a quarter of all banks had closed and nine million people lost their savings. The stock market had lost fifty billion dollars, and two million Americans lost their jobs. In the cities, people stood in line for food—young, well-dressed people. Some of those same people slept under bridges. What was ironic was that there was so much grain, much of it going to waste at train stations, because no one could afford to buy it. Productivity increased, but wages dropped and jobs disappeared.

People lost all of the income that they had earned during the wheat boom, leaving them with no additional source of income on which they could depend. Hard-working people in both cities and the country were experiencing great poverty. No matter how hard anyone worked or how eager they were to work, the nation's economy was evaporating.

Hazel Lucas heard about a job opening in 1930 at the New Hope School outside Boise City. However, the school could not pay her. Farmers were in too much debt to pay taxes, and without the taxes, teachers could not be paid salaries. The school offered to pay Hazel a warrant, a paper which she could later cash in for ten dollars. Hazel accepted it. Then, when she took it to the bank, she was turned away. John Johnson's bank would not cash the warrants. Hazel worked the school year without pay.

Hazel's willingness to work with no pay reveals her dedication to her work as an educator. Hers is an example of the personal sacrifices that some people on the plains were willing to make for the greater good. However, the school's absence of funds also illustrates how the collapse of the stock market impacted people's lives in ways that they did not expect.

The grain continued to come in "green and upright." However, in Texhoma, the price was only twenty-four cents a bushel. That was not enough to cover the costs of running a farm and having enough to live on. The price of **wheat** now offered only four hundred dollars for a year, whereas in 1921, the same amount brought in ten times as much. Farmers begged the banks to help, but the banks were too busy foreclosing on farms. To avoid having their property sold off, farmers got together and devised a scheme to bid only a dime for farm property—no more. The bank and Sheriff Hi Barrick, who was present to keep order at the auctions, grew wise to the tactic, but no one could do anything to stop it. Meanwhile, millions of acres had been left abandoned after the price collapse, leaving the land stripped.

A predatory system had taken effect: banks closed, taking the savings of thousands of farmers with them, and then the banks threatened to seize farms. Farmers were in a desperate position. They were unable pay the mortgages on their farms due to their loss of funds, and with the impending loss of their farm land, they would not be able to recoup their losses through the sale of crops. The farmers' dime bids at Johnson's auctions were a small but effective attempt at combatting a system that had failed them and now threatened to seize their way of life altogether.

In Baca County, Colorado, farmers were determined to make it the dry farming capital of the state. Baca was the last section of the Southern Plains "to be torn up and planted," partly due to resistance from cowboys. The Santa Fe Line extended into the county in 1927. In Springfield, Baca's county seat, streets were paved and there was electricity. Another town, Richards, sprang up nearby.

Dry farming was responsible for turning places like Springfield, which had been sleepy and isolated, into actual towns with infrastructure. The promise of making money from dry farming also made the county more populous.

Ike Osteen was only twelve when he and his brother Oscar went out on the family tractor and asked if people wanted their grass turned. They charged one dollar per acre. Due to their mother being widowed, this became how income was brought into the household. Ike noticed that there was a good market in bootlegging—that is, the illegal production and sale of liquor—but he decided to stick to plowing fields.

Though Osteen chose the more honest living of plowing grain, his work and that of bootlegging were related. After all, people drank grain alcohol that came from the wheat that Osteen plowed. The simplicity of wheat farming allowed for Ike and his brother, though still boys, to support their family.

Ike got up "well before the sun" to get cow chips for the stove and, in the winter, ensured that the animals had enough hay. Ike gave his earnings, which were substantial, to his mother, who was trying to raise eight children in a dugout. Fortunately, Baca was "the largest **wheat**-producing county in Colorado." What his mother wanted more than the income the boys brought in was for Ike to remain at Richards School and make it all the way through—no one in the family had before.

Ike, as the eldest son, had taken financial responsibility for his family, believing that their present needs were most important. However, his mother knew that he would need an education to ensure his own future survival. There was no guarantee that Baca's wheat boom would always be a reliable source of income.

Dick Coon saw the market collapse as an opportunity to buy more property at lower prices. There was talk of building a college in the town, and newspaper editor John McCarty did not think that Dalhart would be affected by the troubles of 1929. Doc Dawson, on the other hand, was worried about the money he had invested in farmland outside of town, which had not yet turned a profit. When Loretto Hospital opened in 1929, Doc and Willie Dawson felt free to farm full-time.

The actions of these three men, who were regarded as pillars of the community, reflect their sense that Dalhart was too exceptional to be impacted by the conditions that had afflicted he rest of the country. It was a town where, in their view, it would always be possible for a man to turn a profit.

One financial prospect was no longer explored: striking oil on the old **XIT ranch**. The price of oil had crashed not long after the stock market. A lack of regulation, as well as excessive consumption, had sparked a global depression. The bank in Dalhart was in trouble too, and its account holders had not been receiving statements. When they got their statements at the end of the year, the documents showed that their savings had been drained.

Natural resources that seemed to guarantee wealth were no longer viable sources of money due to poor management of the resource and the selfish actions of speculators. The effects of their practices were soon felt by common people who could no longer depend on their financial institutions.

Willie Dawson continued with "the literary society, the country club, and dinner parties." At the beginning of 1930, Doc Dawson used the last of his savings to buy property in town. He was worried about his sterile fields. He tried to plant cotton, but that too failed. The only vegetation that did grow was tumbleweed, which no one really wanted on their farms. Dawson hired a field hand to get rid of it so that he could plant winter **wheat**.

While Willie Dawson tried to forget about the Depression by enjoying the things she loved, her husband continued to work with his poor parcel of land, determined to make a profit from it. Willie's ability to find diversions and Doc's ability to find other things to plant signaled their relative privilege compared to other farmers.

In 1930, Bam White and his family still lived in the shack he had rented shortly after they arrived in town. It cost three dollars a month, which was a great deal. Still Bam told his sons that he wanted to roam—a tendency that he attributed to his indigenous heritage. Yet, satisfying that urge would be of no use to his family. He decided to put down roots in the town, and decided to find and buy his own house. He earned money by performing odd jobs in the field, and by selling turnips and skunk hides.

Bam White's attempts to scrounge a living contrast with Doc Dawson's efforts to build one farm after another. Despite his poverty and his feeling of distance from the local Anglo culture, White wanted to provide stability for his family—something that the indigenous people who had previously inhabited this land were not allowed to have.

Due to his dark skin and work-worn hands, Bam did not always feel welcome in Dalhart, where people wore "new clothes and [dined] fine and [drank] the best hooch from the county stills." Still, he did not have it nearly as bad as a black man who came into town one day, got off a train at the station, and tried to get a drink at Dinwiddie's, presumably not noticing the sign warning black people not to let the sun go down on them in Dalhart. The following day, the stranger disappeared. People said he had been killed, and were indifferent to the possibility. The thought of the man's potential murder frightened Bam.

Bam knew that, as a man of partial indigenous descent, he was not considered white, and was therefore vulnerable. It is also possible that his inability to acquire his own land was related to his ethnic background. His dark skin was a marker of his inability to be a full citizen of Dalhart, capable of reaping the rewards of the wheat boom that whites openly enjoyed.

With enough money saved, Bam finally bought a house. It was a "half-dugout." The roof was made of tarpaper, and the walls were extremely thin. Lizzie said that it was too cold, so Bam and his sons insulated it with six additional layers. They divided the dugout into two sides—a dining area and a sleeping area. There was no running water, no electricity, and no toilet. Melt was responsible for bringing in buckets of water for cleaning and cooking and collecting cow chips for the stove. Bam knew that his home was not much, but he was proud to call it his own.

Bam's house, which he reconstructed for his family's comfort, was the only property that he owned. Though he did not have the lavish properties of Dick Coon or the land that Doc Dawson could boast of, however infertile it may have been, he had a place that could give his family shelter. He had come a long way very quickly from being stranded with a dead horse.

Throughout the Southern Plains, **wheat** harvests were abundant. However, last year's harvest still had not been sold. The elevators at the train station, where wheat was stored until it was transported to major cities, were stuffed. Wheat was now only thirty cents a bushel. Those who had gotten into farming to make quick money—salesmen, barkeeps, druggists—quickly got out. No one understood why they could not sell. The drought had persisted through 1930 in most of the United States, but the High Plains had gotten the rainfall it needed to produce good crops, which no one was buying. There was plenty of advertising and plenty of hungry people, but there was simply too much wheat and not enough buyers. Farmers suggested that the government could purchase the wheat and use it to feed the hungry, but President Herbert Hoover rejected the idea right away.

Too many people were producing wheat. Even when the market was on the side of the farmers, there were not enough people to eat all of the wheat that was being produced, which led to a steep drop in prices. Strangely, no one understood this, which indicates that basic concepts of supply and demand were lost on most people. The suggestion from farmers that the government buy the extra wheat was an idea that President Roosevelt would later adopt, but Hoover, whose free market beliefs helped spur the wheat boom, would let the market sort out the winners and the losers in the industry.

To retaliate against the government's inaction, the farmers "burned railroad trestles" to prevent their grain from going to city markets, and "hijacked milk trucks" and spilled out their contents. They also planned a strike. They were going to withhold all remaining **wheat** and corn until people took notice of their suffering. Baca County had had a record harvest, as did Texas, most of Kansas, parts of Nebraska, and the Oklahoma Panhandle. The government insisted that they could do nothing; it was a free market. On the other hand, they were proud of the grain production. No civilization had ever produced so much grain.

The farmers' tactic was to starve everyone until more citizens took notice, which in turn would have prompted the government to ensure that farmers did not go out of business. However, because there was already such an abundance of wheat, much of it already rotting in railroad station elevators, it is unclear that these protest actions had any impact at all. People were already supplied with much more wheat than they needed.

None of the settlers intended to leave No Man's Land. They loved their home, and they clung to a hope that the next decade would be better than the previous one. Then, on September 14, 1930, a windstorm "kicked up dust out of southwest Kansas." It made its way to the Texas Panhandle and looked like nothing anyone had ever before seen. It was not a sandstorm, for it was the wrong color—much too dark. It also was not a hailstorm, though the sky suggested "the kind of formation you would get just before a roof-buster." It rolled, instead, "like a mobile hill of crud, and it was black." It also hurt. It felt like getting swiped by sandpaper.

This dust storm was the first of many to come. However, the sight of the black cloud, which many settlers could have read as a sign to pick up and leave, did not deter their commitment to the Southern Plains. This description of the storm's effect on the air contrasts with the region's reputation for clean, crisp air, which was a part of its appeal for those moving from polluted metropolises. Now, the air was filled with more dirt than any living being could stand.

CHAPTER 6: FIRST WAVE

Dalhart's First National Bank was not open for business on June 27, 1931. Customers banged on the door and were met with a sign saying that the bank was insolvent. On the same day, the heat reached 112 degrees Fahrenheit. It was the hottest day in the town's short history. Dalhart was starting to feel like the rest of the country—desperate and meaner. It now seemed as though the boom of the previous decade had burst, as though it were only hot air.

Egan draws a comparison between the heat of the day, which worsened people's feelings of being under pressure, and the metaphorical hot air of an economic bubble. The citizens of Dalhart were beginning to grasp that they had been lied to—wealth was not as abundant and guaranteed as they had hoped.

Doc Dawson had put money into First National and was worried about his future. He had no pension and Social Security did not yet exist. He had always refused money from patients, taking their offers of livestock and old cars instead. He was also frequently sick with a number of ailments, including Bright's disease, tuberculosis, and asthma. He did not sleep much and the work of farming was hard on his body. He wanted "to make the dirt work for him," but "his fields looked dry as chalkboard."

Dawson was ill-equipped for farming, but he was also ill-equipped for practicing medicine. His generosity made it difficult for him to take money from those whom he treated, and at this point, even if he had asked for monetary payment, it was unlikely that people would have been able to pay him.

A crowd formed outside of the First National Bank. They wanted their new sheriff to force it to reopen. Their accounts were guaranteed by nothing but the bank's good reputation. The new sheriff, Harvey Foust, tried to calm the crowd. There was nothing he could do; it was the federal government's concern. In November 1930, 256 banks failed. Sheriff Foust, who had been a hero just a year before for killing a pair of dangerous bootleggers and promoted from deputy to sheriff, was now drunk on the job. He seemed like a haunted man.

Foust, one of Dalhart's heroes, was showing people that he was merely a man who felt as powerless as they did in the face of forces beyond his control. His previous action had drawn a clear line between "good guys" and "bad guys." What was frustrating to people was that their enemies were no longer self-evident, and their heroes were no longer effective in confronting injustice.

In the DeSoto Hotel, its owner, Dick Coon, tried to keep people's spirits up. People thought that Dick Coon and other big shots kept their money in mattresses or dug ditches. However, Dick was in trouble. His properties were losing money due to the inability of people to pay rent. Still, he kept his poker face. Only his friends knew his concern.

Coon had bought more property than he could afford, thinking that the drop in real estate prices would aid his business. He did not anticipate that locals, who were largely dependent on the wheat industry, would not be able to afford his services.

The only business that flourished in the midst of Dalhart's decline was the brothel, the Number 126 house. The prostitutes who worked there showed off the business's prosperity by frequently getting their hair done and buying new clothes. The owner, Lil Walker, drove a pink Cadillac. They drove past Uncle Dick Coon's "crumbling empire," waving and shouting "yoo-hoo," leaving behind the scent of their perfume.

The Number 126 house was a place where men could forget that their farms were failing, that they had lost their savings, or that they could not afford to feed their families. The prostitutes offered moments in which the men could escape their fears and desperation, even if it meant giving away much needed money.

It infuriated John McCarty to see that the one business flourishing in his beloved Dalhart was a whorehouse. He insisted that the establishment had to go. When he went to the printer with a story advocating for the removal of the brothel, the printer shook his head and refused to print the story. The men of Dalhart needed those girls, he insisted. McCarty withdrew the story.

McCarty's vision of Dalhart's citizens was akin to that of an unanointed nobility. His ideals blinded him to the town's flaws and also incorrectly blamed the brothel for Dalhart's diminished reputation.

As the ranks of the unemployed grew, they moved from town to town by rail. Two million Americans were living like this. Some were farmers and factory workers, while others were merchants and bank clerks. As many as eighty people per day arrived in Dalhart at times. Sheriff Foust was responsible for putting them back on the train. If they were black, they could be arrested for vagrancy as soon as they stepped off the tracks, then sent to work on a chain gang for four months. In September 1929, over 1.5. million people were unemployed. That number tripled by February of the following year. President Hoover insisted that the economy was not sick; Americans simply no longer believed in themselves.

The Depression had created a nation of drifters, many of whom went West—where, they imagined, they could start over. Texas's pity for these strivers did not extend to black people, who were kept and forced to perform free labor for the state. This action indicates that Texas, for all of its progress, had not relinquished its view that black people were not citizens. The message from the White House was tone deaf, blaming the citizenry for its problems instead of recognizing flaws in free market economics.

By the end of 1930, eight million people were unemployed. The financial institutions that previously seemed invincible were now out of business, and bankers were regarded as swindlers who had stolen people's property and life savings. In 1930, 1,350 banks failed, losing $853 million in deposits. The following year, 2,294 more banks collapsed. Then, at the end of 1931, the Bank of the United States in New York folded. It held deposits of two hundred million dollars. That bank failure led to the loss of twelve million jobs, or 25 percent of the work force.

The collapse of the economy following the cataclysm of the stock market crash was swift. No system of insurance yet existed that would have allowed people to recoup their funds before a bank folded. Nevertheless, without financial institutions other industries could not survive, meaning that people would be unable to generate new income.

John McCarty worried about the survival of his newspaper. He had taken the paper from a weekly to a daily. Its circulation growth had been "robust." McCarty begged his advertisers to stick with him. He would only print good news, despite what was happening on the prairie.

McCarty's ploy only to print "good news" was not a decision that he made to uplift the spirits of the downtrodden, but rather to sell papers. He was not concerned with informing people about what had happened.

Some people said that Jewish people were to blame for what was happening, and that they did not belong in a place where its citizens believed themselves to be "of the highest type of Anglo-Saxon ancestry." They blamed a "Jewish system of banking" for the collapse of the economy. Father Charles E. Coughlin, the radio priest from Detroit, spoke to a million listeners each week and revealed the original Jewish names of Hollywood movie stars, "as if detailing a sinister plot."

With the absence of accessible information from newspapers, misinformation flourished. McCarty, who had previously connected the wheat farmers' success to their whiteness and Christian lineage, was also responsible for the growing resentment toward Jewish people, even though hardly any existed in Dalhart.

Herzstein's store, however, filled a need in Dalhart, Boise City, and at their headquarters in Clayton, New Mexico. They provided their customers with complete outfits, stitched to size. To help their customers continue to buy clothing after the Depression, they slashed their prices "below their break-even point." Still, they were falling behind, like most businesses. In 1931, more than 28,000 businesses failed, and those who retained their jobs saw their wages fall by a third or more. The typical factory worker went from making twenty-four dollars per week to sixteen dollars per week.

Despite the false belief that predatory Jews had ruined the economy that was now badly impacting the High Plains, the Herzsteins stayed. They also generously cut their prices and provided the same level of service, not only to stay in business, but also to help their customers feel some sense of pride in the midst of having lost so much.

Relatives from Philadelphia would visit and wonder why the Herzsteins had remained in the Southern Plains. They had originally come west over the Santa Fe Trail, and were the first Jewish people in New Mexico, beginning in the 1840s. They had staked their claim in Liberty, where they were hoping a railroad line would lay tracks. Then, one day in 1896, Black Jack Ketchum rode into Herzstein's general merchandise store and robbed Levi Herzstein, one of the store's owners, of all of the store's cash and much of the merchandise. Levi organized a posse and hunted Black Jack "up among the dormant volcanoes north of the Llano Estacado" and into No Man's Land. Herzstein moved forward to shoot Black Jack, who pulled a pistol from his side and shot Herzstein in the stomach.

Based on Egan's account, it seems that the Herzsteins were the only Jewish family in the High Plains. Their isolation, coupled with the anti-Semitism of the era, made them more vulnerable. Levi Herzstein's retaliation against Black Jack for the robbery indicates that the High Plains during the 1890s was a place of near lawlessness. Justice was meted out personally through vigilante gangs or the organization of a posse. It is also possible that Black Jack faced no legal action specifically because he had murdered a Jewish person.

It took four years for the authorities to catch Black Jack Ketchum. In the meantime, Black Jack was shot in the arm by a conductor while trying to rob a train. The shotgun blast shattered his arm and led to it being amputated. He was soon to be hanged in Clayton, New Mexico, which supposedly had "more guns per capita than any place in the West." Clayton was also the place where Morris Herzstein, the surviving brother, set up a new store and settled down. Black Jack was set to be hanged on April 26, 1901, the same week that Simon Herzstein, Morris and Levi's nephew, arrived from Philadelphia with his wife, Maude Edwards. When they got off the train in Clayton, Maude looked around and was horrified by the saloons and the advertisements for Black Jack's execution, but Simon found the town fascinating.

Interestingly, the authorities did not "catch" Black Jack until he attempted to rob a train. This suggests that the railroad companies, who did not want Black Jack to be an example for other potential train robbers, convinced the authorities to take swift action in arresting him. Despite their loss, the Herzsteins remained resolute in not only staying in the High Plains, but in expanding their business. Prim and proper Maude Edwards, however, was a bit out of place in a territory that prided itself on violence, crude entertainment, and swift retribution against offenders.

Black Jack Ketchum's execution was set for 1:00 PM. People came from hundreds of miles to see, and newspapers from St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Denver sent correspondents to report on it. Black Jack was not yet thirty-seven. He had a shock of black hair and he had gained more than fifty pounds in jail. His last words as the noose was put around his neck were, "Let her rip." However, the hanging went wrong. The tightened rope did not cleanly snap Black Jack's neck behind the ear; instead it caused his head to pop off. No one was sure how it happened, but a decapitation by hanging was rare, one of only a few in the recorded history of American execution. The sight of Black Jack's hooded head breaking and rolling to the feet of the crowd was Maude Edwards' welcome to the High Plains. Simon Herzstein never tired of telling this story.

The outcome of Ketchum's execution is both morbid and somewhat humorous, given his last words. He probably did not expect the rope to "rip" his head cleanly off of his head. The public appeal of his execution reveals that the country took a macabre interest in the execution of criminals. Public executions satisfied a desire for justice on Biblical terms, as well as feeding a curiosity about what it looked like to watch someone die—and provided a morbid scene of "entertainment" in an otherwise mostly utilitarian existence.

Simon Herzstein was an astute businessman. He never kept a ledger; all of his account records were in his head. He often let people buy on credit, confident that they would pay. Privately, Simon loved baseball, poker, and bridge. He also loved to throw big dinner parties, which Maude also enjoyed. The company distracted her from "the wind and the empty skies." Conversely, Simon loved the West—its freshness and its indigenous heritage. When the town began to fold financially, Simon stayed in good spirits, never letting anyone know that he, too, was in dire straits. Then, the town of Dalhart went after Simon with foreclosure papers for not paying his taxes in over a year. Dick Coon owned the property in which Herzstein's was housed. He asked his lawyer what could be done to save "the only man on the High Plains trying to keep people dressed to match their lost dignity."

Like Willie Dawson, the Herzsteins tried to distract themselves from their economic woes by continuing to do the things that they enjoyed. For Maude, the distraction was necessary to keep her from thinking about her relative loneliness on the plains, which did not offer the entertainments of Philadelphia. Coon's attempt to save Herzstein's was based partly on the invaluable service that the family provided to the people of Dalhart, but Coon was probably also worried about the financial loss that he too would suffer if the clothing business went under.

As Dalhart fell into further debt, people in other parts of the Panhandle tried to retain hope that the harvest of 1931 would save them. They were sure that the land would provide. Meanwhile, American families in Arkansas foraged for dandelions and blackberries. Further east, in the Carolinas and West Virginia, there were stories of "each kid getting a shot at dinner every fourth night." In New York, 500,000 people were getting eight dollars a month on city relief.

People either ignored the drop in prices or believed that they would rise again, not understanding that the market was oversupplied with wheat. It is also possible that people deluded themselves into thinking that the market would rebound to keep themselves from regressing into panic and fear.

On the High Plains, the wheat poured out of threshers in the early summer of 1931. On the Texas Panhandle, two million acres of sod had been turned—300 percent more than ten years ago. In Baca County, Colorado, two hundred thousand acres were turned over. In Cimarron County, Oklahoma, another quarter million acres were turned. The wheat harvest had hit a record of 250 million bushels nationwide. By the end of 1931, the prairie was a different land—"thirty-three million acres stripped bare in the Southern Plains." Still, the market remained at nearly 50 percent below what it cost farmers to grow grain. It was the lowest price ever.

Farmers, encouraged by Hoover's free market beliefs and the president's insistence that Americans could work themselves out of poverty if they just believed in themselves, continued to plow fields and thresh wheat, as though they were trying to stem the decay all around them by growing more wheat. What they were doing instead was fostering denial as well as the soil conditions that would create the Dust Bowl.

Then, the land hardened. The grain toasted in the heat. Bam White looked in the sky, scanning it for a "sun dog," a phrase he used to describe a "halo" that promised rain. He awaited it throughout July, August, and September, but saw nothing. The livestock was lethargic in the heat. The rains left and did not return for another eight years.

The plains became ominously dry and inactive. The weather pattern had been disrupted, and people like Bam, who knew the plains far better than the newcomers, were worried that something had gone awry.

CHAPTER 7: A DARKENING

Winter came, but only offered a brief snowstorm. Farmers needed more snow to insulate the nubs of **wheat** during the season of dormancy. The snow would also provide the first drops of moisture in the spring, which would help the wheat get started again. Life in the cities was no better; there was no work. In the country, the harder people worked, the less money they made. Wheat bottomed out at nineteen cents a bushel in some markets—"an all-time low." Both farmers in No Man's Land and policymakers in Washington were puzzled.

What is ironic is that the better educated and more sophisticated policy-makers in Washington were just as confused about what was happening to the wheat market as the less educated farmers. For working people, there was nowhere to go. Jobs had disappeared in the cities and the land was drying up in the country.

Farmers begged Washington for relief, but President Hoover refused to budge on his position not to interfere with the market. Farmers rebelled. The National Farmers Holiday Association encouraged its members to resist by staying home, buying nothing and selling nothing. This way, Hoover would be forced to set a minimum price for grain. The problem was that people were already buying and selling nothing. The head of one farmer's group suspected that capitalism was doomed.

Though Hoover was obligated to take some action to assuage the farmers' fears, the wheat market was also too far gone for any policy action to be effective. A minimum price for wheat should have been set long ago, in addition to discouraging farmers to grow all they could to make as much money as possible. Both greed and a lack of regulation were responsible.

By 1932, about one-third of farmers on the Great Plains were at risk of foreclosure for unpaid taxes and other debts. Nationwide, one in twenty were losing their farms. In Le Mars, Iowa, farmers barged into a courtroom and demanded that a judge not sign any more foreclosure notices. They threatened to hang him, but the judge's life was spared by calmer folks. The irate farmers were then "rounded up by the Iowa National Guard and detained behind a makeshift, barbed-wire outdoor prison." Both **wheat** and livestock sank below the cost of production. Farmers threatened that, if they went down, they would take the entire country with them.

The farmers' uprising was a sign of desperation and an unusual expression of collective solidarity on the plains, where people traditionally prioritized individualism and personal initiative as the means to challenge authority. The farmers' tactics paralleled the demonstrations of workers in major cities who fought for their own livelihoods through the demand of collective bargaining rights. Their clashes with authorities were often violent.

In No Man's Land, the Folkers family included their **wheat** in every meal. Fred Folkers became depressed and started drinking jars of corn whisky. Every bushel of wheat put him deeper into poverty, and he worried about losing everything he owned. He would need at least two years to pay back his debts, just to break even again. Katherine Folkers wanted to go back to Missouri, but things were no better there. Though Fred had saved money, his savings were wiped out in the banking collapse.

The Folkers were forced to eat the crop that they were unable to sell. Their lives were, in a way, ruled by wheat—they needed it to buy basic necessities. In the instance that they could not sell it, it became the only basic necessity available to them. Predictably, Fred sought consolation for his feeling of personal failure in alcohol.

The spring of 1932 was too dry to plant anything. The Folkers family's land started peeling away. Still, Fred Folkers tried to keep his orchard alive. Though he hauled buckets of water in to nourish it, "the heat bore down on the trees, pests swarmed on the leaves, and what little fruit came after the bud quickly browned and shriveled like raisins." Only Russian thistle, or tumbleweed, grew. The weeds trapped dust. The Folkers children hauled the weeds away from the barbed-wire fence and saved them to be winter feed for the cattle.

Folkers' orchard is arguably a symbol of hope—or naivete. His insistence on nourishing it, despite its inevitable failure in the midst of a drought, is an expression of his belief that things would improve on the plains. The family's use of tumbleweeds is an example of how resourceful plains folk were becoming in response to scarcity. Desperation led to them finding creative ways to survive.

Meanwhile, Fred Folkers had a stomachache and drank corn whisky to treat it. Fred went to a new female doctor in Boise City, and she diagnosed him with stomach cancer. The Folkers were sure that Fred would die, but the doctor assured them that she had developed a cure—salve and a bandage would draw out the disease, she said. Fred spent several weeks in the woman's small hospital while she applied the salve daily. Fred was too broke to pay her. She encouraged him to sell his cows and Model-T, but he needed them. He decided to give her some money that he had never put in the bank. He returned home with a scar on his stomach where the doctor had applied the salve. He believed that the treatment had worked. Then, his gut burst—and the doctor had left town. A doctor in Texhoma diagnosed him with appendicitis and saved Fred's life.

Fred's abuse of corn whisky led him to think that he had stomach cancer, a view that was reinforced by a woman who had come to the plains pretending to be a doctor. The family's desperate fear of losing their primary wage owner led them to trust an implausible idea for a cure. The charlatan had gone to the plains to capitalize off of the ignorance and naivete of its people, as well as their desperate hope that someone could relieve their pain. The "doctor's" salve was similar in effect to Hoover's empty rhetoric: it offered temporary comfort, but no cure.

The Folkers' neighbor, Will Crawford, met his wife, Sadie, after finding her note in the front pocket of his overalls. He took out another mortgage on their half-section, but their money dwindled and their old car died. Will felt ashamed of his hardship, feeling that he could not be the "real man" Sadie wanted. He appeared as though he no longer cared about his life. His and Sadie's clothes were tattered, but Sadie still planted a garden. They grew enough to stay alive—cabbage, potatoes, corn, and onions, but the cold northern winds froze their crops.

Crawford suffered a personal crisis regarding his sense of masculinity, due to being unable to take care of his wife. Sadie had married him based on an idea of manhood that she connected to his corpulence. His inability to provide was, to him, a demonstration of weakness that was incompatible with his self-image.

There was little cash in Boise City. People traded and sold what they could to survive. Hi Barrick, the Cimarron County sheriff, had previously wanted to get rich like everyone else "in the **wheat** bonanza," but he could never grow a big enough crop. Farmer Barrick saw the town sheriff drunk on duty and reported it. Someone suggested that he run for sheriff instead—Barrick did, and he won. He moved to Boise City "and took up residence in the courthouse, next to the jail." He chased the same bootleggers around No Man's Land, brought them in to serve a bit of jail time, released them a few days later, then chased them again. Busting moonshiners was a good way to spread their sugar around town, which he gave away in front of the courthouse.

In his position as sheriff, Barrick became even more effective in providing people with a resource that they needed, particularly given the national decline in the demand for wheat. He provided people with free sugar without really taking away the alcohol that provided them with comfort during hard times. He made it look as though he was interested in enforcing Prohibition by arresting the bootleggers, but he then released them to resume their business.

John Johnson's bank held weekly foreclosure auctions. He knew about the conspiracy of low bidding among the farmers—the ten-cent sales, during which they offered no more than a dime for expensive farm equipment. The threat of hanging prevented people from buying someone's homestead in a bankruptcy sale.

The farmers' tactic here allowed people to keep their farms and their farming equipment. They regarded people like Johnson as responsible for the crisis and, in this last effort of resistance, refused to let him win by giving up their farms.

The new governor of Oklahoma, William Henry David Murray, known as "Alfalfa Bill," gave people both hope and hate. He was elected in 1930 on a campaign based on "The Three C's—Corporations, Carpetbaggers, and Coons." He defeated his opponent by a huge margin. He got his nickname "Alfalfa" through his tireless support of agriculture as the basis of society. His father was a winemaker whose wine was a favorite of Theodore Roosevelt's.

In politics, hope and hate are not always mutually exclusive. Many Oklahomans were looking for people to blame for their hardship. Distant forces, such as corporations, were easy to vilify. It was also easy to blame a changing society. A society that gave more rights to black people was suspected of taking them away from whites.

Alfalfa Bill was born in Toadsuck, Texas in 1869. He ran away at the age of twelve to work on farms. As an adult, he got involved in populist politics, bought a newspaper, and educated himself to pass the state bar. He became president of the Oklahoma statehood convention in 1906. He believed that Oklahoma could only be a great state if segregation were strictly enforced and black people were limited to jobs in fields or in factories. In Texas, lawmakers had instituted a similar law during Reconstruction. Alfalfa Bill hated Jewish people, too. While he believed that blacks "had some virtues," he thought that Jews had none. He also disliked Italians, believing them to be among the "low grade races" of southern Europe.

Alfalfa Bill epitomized an American ideal of a self-made man. He had spent nearly his entire life working and, more importantly, was someone who understood the life of a farmer. However, he was also a man with a degree of learning—which he developed without the help of "snobby" professors—and some business success. These qualities encouraged people to listen to him. He was like them, but also a cut above them. He also validated their prejudices and reinforced the false view that minorities created white settlers' problems.

President Theodore Roosevelt would only allow Oklahoma to become the forty-sixth state after Governor Murray removed the segregationist planks from the state constitution. Murray was furious with the demand, and developed a lifelong grudge against the Roosevelt family.

This disagreement reveals that there was a disconnect between the national politics of the time, which were more progressive on race, and those in Oklahoma, which saw the maintenance of a racist status quo as fundamental to its identity as a state.

At the start of the Depression, Governor Murray "was a mustachioed, haunt-eyed, big-eared man of sixty" who talked for hours, fueled by caffeine and nicotine. He expressed his power through the National Guard. Murray ruled by martial law and called out the guard twenty-seven times in his first two years of office, and thirty-four times in all four years. When oil prices fell in 1931, he sent out troops to force the shutdown of three thousand wells to drive prices back up. When Texas supported the construction of a toll bridge across the Red River, on the border with Oklahoma, Murray sent the guard out, provoking a standoff. He showed up himself, waving his antique revolver in the faces of Texas Rangers. When black people tried to hold an Emancipation Day parade in Oklahoma City, he imposed martial law. Black people, he insisted, were supposed to be nearly invisible.

Murray was authoritarian, white supremacist, and anti-tax, seeing the toll bridge as an infringement on people's right to do what they pleased with their own income. His revolver-waving and open oppression of black people endeared him among whites who saw him as representative of their interests, which was to ensure that every white man willing to work the soil would make a decent living and would be able to keep every penny that he earned. Allowing black people to occupy public space freely was, for Murray and many of his supporters, a challenge to white dominance, which they met with violence.

In 1932, there was no rain. Alfalfa Bill encouraged people to fight nature with force. He plowed up grass on the grounds of the capitol and let people plant vegetables. He created lakes and ponds to show people that water could be dug up out of the ground. He insisted that the Ogallala Aquifer was there to be dug into. People in Boise City strongly supported his plans. Water was no longer trickling down from the Rockies, and the Cimarron had nearly dried up.

Alfalfa Bill was as ignorant as most people regarding ecology, which was not a well-known science at the time. He fostered the belief that humans were in total control of their environment and could get what they wanted from it. Though he was right about the human impact on nature, he did not see the ill that it could cause as well.

In the spring of 1932, Alfalfa Bill decided to run for president. He would use the same campaign model that got him elected governor in a landslide. This time, he would run on "Four B's: Bread, Butter, Bacon, and Beans."

Alfalfa Bill tailored his message to appeal to people in both cities and the country who could no longer afford food, though he had no tangible plan on how to address hunger.

The suitcase farmers—those who flooded into the Southern Plains during the **wheat** boom to get rich quick—abandoned the land that they had torn up. Some with homesteads also left. Others had no plans to go anywhere and, judging from the Movietone newsreels they saw in the Mission Theater in Dalhart, there was nowhere to go. Cities were just as desperate. At least on the farms, people could get some eggs from hens or a pail of milk from an old cow. They could get the windmill to pump enough water to grow vegetables or fatten a pig which they could slaughter and "then smoke [for] a winter's supply of bacon." They also insisted that things would change. They hung on, for they had nothing else, and going elsewhere meant venturing into the unknown.

There were plenty of people who moved to the plains in the way that "carpetbaggers" had moved into the South after the Civil War—they looked only to profit off of a region in the midst of an economic collapse. However, many of the settlers were committed to their homes and thought that it was wiser to depend on the few resources they had on their farms than to go to strange and crowded cities, where they would have to depend on factories to give them jobs that might not exist. They were accustomed to the soil's changes and believed that this might also be a phase.

Subsistence farming may have brought people temporary wealth, but it did nothing beneficial for the land. Sixteen million acres had been cultivated in Oklahoma, but thirteen million were eroded—and this occurred "before the drought had calcified most of the ground." Some of the erosion was due to natural phenomena—wind and the brief but heavy rain and hailstorms. Neglect was also to blame. Farmers had created the biggest **wheat** crops in history, transforming the grasslands into the source of a major global commodity. Then, they walked away from the land.

When wheat farming was no longer profitable, people abandoned the soil they had turned over, leaving it exposed and vulnerable to the elements that would have normally protected and nourished it. The ambitious farmers made wheat a major global commodity, but they had also transformed the physical geography of the Great Plains, resulting in shifts in climate, weather patterns, and an imbalance in native species populations.

Lawrence Svobia, a Kansas **wheat** farmer, kept a journal of the crop's decline. He had come to the plains in 1929, thinking that he could never fail. He declared his first crop "breathtaking," but he never made money on another crop. The native sod of the Great Plains held the land in place and nurtured the native wildlife. Even during the driest years, "the web of life held." When farmers tore up that sod, it left the land naked. No grass could grow because the roots were gone. No one was talking about this, though—instead, people were trying to find their way out of a dark economy.

Svobia was one of few nesters, it seemed, who paid attention to the impact that wheat farming had on the native soil. He also seemed to understand how the focus on cultivating more crops was distracting people from the longer-term damage they were causing, which would make it less feasible to farm in the future.

Around noon on January 21, 1932, a ten-thousand-foot cloud appeared outside of Amarillo, Texas. The sky turned brownish and then gray as the cloud moved. It looked thick, "like coarse animal hair." It moved up the Texas Panhandle, toward Oklahoma, Colorado, and Kansas. Bam White thought that he was looking at a moving mountain range, despite the Llano Estacado being "one of the flattest places on earth." There were no ten-thousand-foot mountains on the horizon. Bam told his sons to run for protection. The cloud passed over Dalhart quickly, briefly blocking out the sun. The dust invaded people's homes and bodies before moving on. They blew their noses and drew out "black snot." Melt White asked his father what it was. Bam said that it was the earth itself. It happened because people turned the earth the "wrong side up."

Egan describes a sky that was not only dark, but that had a texture and a mobility, like a roaming animal. The comparison to "coarse animal hair" conjures up the image of the bison—as though the ghost of the animals had returned to the plains to haunt the settlers who killed them in vast numbers. Interestingly, Egan positions Bam, the descendant of indigenous people, as a witness to the destruction that the white settlers' callousness had wrought.

CHAPTER 8: IN A DRY LAND

Insects appeared, and grasshoppers chewed up the **wheat** fields. Centipedes crawled up the drapes and around the floor. Willie Dawson began to see black tarantulas "with two-inch long legs and [bodies] the size of an apple" walking around her kitchen. Children and elderly people had died from black widow bites. Rabbits were also rampant. They were an easy source of food, but they took plenty of food in places where farmers were still trying to raise crops. John McCarty introduced the idea of rabbit drives and advertised them in the *Dalhart Texan*. People would gather and club as many rabbits as they could. Melt White disobeyed his father and went to a drive. He did not participate, but he watched. He later told his mother that he heard the rabbits cry as they died, and memories of the sound gave him nightmares.

Nesters were already accustomed to pests in their dugouts, but they were now overwhelmed by them due to the absence of the animals' predators. They were at war with a natural world that they did not fully understand, and believed that they could simply destroy the creatures that inconvenienced them. The rabbit drives were a particularly grim example of the ease with which people could destroy life for no other purpose than their delight in killing. The settlers bashed rabbits as though the animals were proxies for the people who had fostered their misery.

Rabbit drives became a weekly event in some places. In Hooker, Oklahoma people shipped off two thousand rabbits they killed after one drive "as surplus meat." However, it was hard to keep the meat from spoiling, and no one cared to butcher so many rabbits. The dead animals were instead left to buzzards and insects or buried in pits.

The need to cast blame for their losses, even on other elements of nature, created a culture of death and destruction in the plains. The settlers were fixed to destroy anything and everything that stood in the way of restoring their way of life.

The Southern Plains reached record temperatures. In Baca County, it was 115 degrees Fahrenheit one day. The heat was unbearable in the Osteen dugout. Ike's mother had the idea of cooling the dugout with water from the well. Ike and Oscar poured water over the roof and the interior "steamed like a sauna." There were only two windows. Sometimes, dust drifted to the windows and Ike had to shovel it. He continued to do his chores at home, but he resented going to school. Also, there was no money to make from plowing fields.

Though the Southern Plains generally experienced high temperatures, the lack of rain made the region especially hot. Osteen's comparison of the dugout to a sauna gives an impression of its extraordinary heat while also drawing an odd parallel between a place of relaxation and luxury—a sauna—and a dugout, which was known for its discomfort and association with poverty.

Black Jack Ketchum had been buried for thirty years—and in an age where bankers were perceived as thieves, Black Jack didn't seem so bad after all. He was the most famous outlaw from the Southern Plains. He had ridden with Butch Cassidy and the Hole in the Wall Gang between committing robberies in No Man's Land. A group of prominent citizens decided to exhume him and move his body into Clayton Cemetery. John McCarty wrote that "Black Jack had his good points when you compare him with the rats modern civilization is having to deal with." The Herzstein family were not pleased to hear this. Black Jack had never been tried for Levi Herzstein's murder. He had only been hanged because the railroad companies had lobbied for "the death penalty as punishment for certain kinds of train heists."

Through an odd twist of public opinion, Black Jack Ketchum had become a local hero for taking money away from the institutions that had taken so much from the nesters. He and other bank and train robbers of the era were famous, sympathetic figures. People forgot that they were killers and focused only on their willingness to take money away from dishonest banks. They also forgot that Black Jack did not merely rob trains but also local businesses, such as Herzstein's. However, it was a Jewish business, and many shared the false belief that Jews were somehow at fault for their pain.


Simon and Maude Herzstein kept their spirits up by holding a big Friday dinner party, for which they cooked duck or venison and offered their guests wine. On September 11, 1933, about three thousand people gathered to exhume Black Jack Ketchum. His body looked rather well-preserved. He was taken to the new cemetery but buried some distance away from others at rest. The citizens left the grave without a tombstone. The town felt that it "had done right by the Ketchum boy," but the Herzsteins found the gesture appalling.

The lack of sympathy toward the Herzsteins may have partly been due to their relative prosperity in relation to other settlers. It was also partly due to anti-Semitism. No one cared much about the Herzsteins' personal loss, despite how hard they had worked to offer people a feeling of dignity in troubled times.

In the fall of 1932, no one planted **wheat**. It was pointless. Only twelve inches of rain fell in No Man's Land, and the food that the Lucas family had kept from the 1931 harvest was all gone. Some families had a few row crops, but they dried up. There was nothing but tumbleweed to feed the livestock. Fred Folkers told his neighbors that, if one ground and salted the weed, the animals would eat it. Hazel Lucas was still living in town and teaching at a school that could barely pay her, while her husband tried to set up a funeral home in their rental house. Her uncle, C.C. Lucas, was struggling to survive.

People could not even manage to cultivate enough of a harvest to feed themselves. They still had enough livestock to provide sources of milk and meat, but the rich grass that had once nourished the cattle was gone, leaving only dried weed, which would cause the cattle to thin out. The Lucases' reliance on both tumbleweed and a funeral home to keep them afloat is indicative of the decay that consumed No Man's Land.


C.C. Lucas could not make a living from the land. He managed to squeeze a bit of milk out of his cows by rubbing their udders with axle grease. The Lucas children were bothered by all of the bugs. There were so many—green worms on the fence, black widows and tarantulas who might be hiding in their beds. Hazel Lucas still believed that the worst would soon be over. They had accomplished so much and they had seen nature's wrath before, including hailstorms that could collapse a house and the prairie fires caused by lightning. She thought that the best way to overcome despair was by thinking of a new life. She wanted to start a family. After all, this drought could not last into 1933.

The Lucas family had gone broke and were inundated by pests, which added to their torment. Hazel wanted to inject brightness into her own life and that of her family. A child would motivate them all, she thought, to look toward the future and to have hope. It would also distract them from their present lives, which seemed mired in decay and death.


People believed that the storm of 1932 that came from Amarillo was anomalous. The storms that came in March were shorter and smaller than the big "duster" from Texas in January. However, there were half a dozen dusters in late winter, and in April, there were nonstop winds. A bad storm was one in which a person could see no more than a quarter mile. In 1932, there were fourteen blinding storms. The biggest one frightened the children Hazel Lucas taught in her school, as the sky darkened and the sun seemed eclipsed. Suddenly, the windows of the school were blown out and dust poured into the classrooms. Some of the children could not stop crying, and went home with muddy tears streaming down their cheeks. After that particular dust storm, some parents kept their children home. School was not safe either.

Though western Texas experienced a series of these storms in 1932, people insisted that the blackest and most dangerous of them—the storm that stalled cars in front of the DeSoto and blinded a little boy—was an oddity. This belief probably gave them comfort, as they did not want to believe that something so frightening could occur again. Egan's anecdote of the storm's attack on Hazel Lucas's school uses the experience of children to emphasize the terror that the storms aroused. Parents kept their children home, as places that were traditionally regarded as safe no longer were.

Bill Baker, the county agriculture man in Boise City, was a history buff. One day he found a mummy inside of a cave in a corner of Cimarron County. It was thirty-eight inches long with a broad face and forehead, and a head of shoulder-length hair. Archaeologists who completed the excacation said that the mummified boy was from the "Basket Maker" period over 2,000 years ago. To Baker, this indicated that people had farmed No Man's Land and lived there since the era of Christ. It astonished him to think that the nesters had been there for barely a generation and the land was already "collapsing from within" and turning lethal. Others, however, knew how to live in this place. The Native Americans knew something, but they were mostly gone, pushed away before they could offer guidance.

Baker's excavations reminded the nesters that the land had a history that had existed long before their arrival. No Man's Land, which was nicknamed for its supposed inhabitability, had sustained human life for thousands of years. However, the nesters' excesses had rendered the land nearly uninhabitable. Their belief that they could make better use of the land than the indigenous people, a point of view first held by the cowboys, had been proven disastrously wrong.

Sitting Bull predicted that the land would get revenge on the whites for pushing the natives off of the grasslands. One Bull, Sitting Bull's nephew, tried to reverse the prophecy by asking a professor at the University of Oklahoma, Stanley Campbell, to return a medicine bag. The rightful owners of the bag could influence the weather, One Bull told Campbell.

Many indigenous people believed that the dust storms were a manifestation of Sitting Bull's prediction. The usurpation of their land and their artifacts by whites had, they suggested, resulted in an imbalance that only they could correct.

The Mexicans, too, had been pushed out of the territory. They had more history in the Panhandle than any whites in Boise City. Juan Cruz Lujan and his brother, Francisco, had a sheep ranch in Carrumpa Valley that was the oldest home in Cimarron County. Lujan was born in Mexico in 1858 and ran away from home to become an ox team driver. Later, he and his brother set up a sheep ranch. The animals thrived in the abundant grasslands. Juan fell in love with the daughter of a wealthy sheep rancher, Virginia Valdez, and they were married by a Jesuit priest who persuaded them to build a chapel on No Man's Land. It became a meeting place for Mexicans and Catholics. Together, they had nine children, though five died in childbirth or shortly thereafter. Joe Garza was also born on the ranch, and the Lujans treated him like a son.

Though Lujan and his brother were compatible with the region's valorization of self-made people who worked the land, they were resented for their ethnic identity. Mexican citizens were reminders of Mexico's former control of the region. As with their erasure of the southwestern tribes, white settlers were eager to inscribe the narrative of their settlement as the only legitimate one. Nevertheless, Lujan and his wife established their own imprint in the region, including the construction of community institutions that were unique to their heritage and traditions.

Bill Baker asked Lujan if there was ever a time when the town had been so dry. Lujan was a storyteller. He was sad about what had happened to the prairie and it was difficult for him to hide his rage. He was sure that there were dry times before, but the droughts had never destroyed the grass. Now, it was completely gone. There were only a few patches of brown. Worse, the dust was killing Lujan's wife, Virginia. Joe Garza's father, Pablo, also suffered from bronchial fits.

Lujan risked losing his grazing lands and, worse, his wife and father, due to the excesses of the wheat farmers. His personal history of the region reinforced the views of Bam White and newcomer Lawrence Svobida, who insisted that the problem was man-made, not natural.

Though Lujan had lived in No Man's Land longer than any Anglo, he and other people of Mexican descent now feared deportation. Lujan was American, but his ranch was perceived as a refuge for Mexicans "who took jobs away from Anglos." In 1930, there were around 1.5 million Latinos, mostly Mexican, living in the United States. Many arrived to work on sugar beet farms in Colorado and Kansas and on cotton plantations in Texas. At the beginning of the Depression, Hispanics were being deported. Los Angeles spent $77,000 to send over 6,000 Mexicans to Mexico. Lujan assured his ranch hands that no one would be forced out—a bigger concern was how to keep the ranch going with no grass.

In a region that had become dominated by Anglos, Lujan had come to be regarded as a "foreigner," despite his family's long history in the Panhandle. The jobs that he gave to Mexicans on his ranch, which many whites may not have even wanted, were perceived as jobs for whites by default, due to white settlers' sense of themselves as legitimate citizens versus the perceived illegitimacy of Mexican citizens. However, Lujan risked losing his workers anyway if the grass disappeared.

Though the first dusters of 1932 were a mystery, Hugh Hammond Bennett thought he could explain them—he was sure that they had been caused by humans. He believed that Americans, particularly, had been great destroyers of land.

Bennett blamed American arrogance for the problem on the plains. The notion of Manifest Destiny, which encouraged settlers to push westward and to consume all of the nation's land, seemed to justify their thoughtless exploitation.

Bennett grew up on a 1,200-acre cotton plantation in North Carolina, where he was frustrated by the government's encouragement of "an exploitive farming binge." The farmers on the Great Plains, he thought, were working against nature. The land had been eroded to "a thin veneer." Worse, people were walking away from the land they had destroyed, taking no responsibility. Soon, the land would become barren and the country would be unable to feed itself. Americans had become an awful geological force, changing the face of the earth faster than any weather or seismic activity "and all the excavations of mankind since the beginning of history."

Bennett came from the landowning background that many settlers hoped to replicate on the plains, due to their inability to acquire similar parcels of land in the East or in their home countries. Their desire to acquire wealth through land had made the settlers seem ravenous, as though they had clawed through the earth, devouring its richness.

CHAPTER 9: NEW LEADER, NEW DEAL

Towns were beginning to go broke. Texhoma, just up the road from Dalhart, had cut off its streetlights. People's desperation drew them closer to Alfalfa Bill Murray. He promised that, if he were president, no one would go without bread, butter, bacon, or beans. He criticized Oklahoma A&M for asking for public money to build a swimming pool, saying that they could simply go to the creek to swim. Conversely, he believed that every white citizen should get a piece of land.

Alfalfa Bill stoked populist resentment among poor farmers toward those whom they would have viewed as privileged elites, such as the students at the university. On the other hand, those farmers wanted to maintain their own caste system, in which their white identity would ensure their place at the top.

President Hoover was becoming increasingly unpopular. Most Americans paid no income tax in 1932, but Hoover wanted everyone to pay taxes to pay for the federal deficit. When he was shown pictures of fruit vendors on city streets, he said it was simply due to that being more profitable than working a regular job. Meanwhile, the Republicans had lost seventeen seats during the 1930 midterm election. They had also lost control of the House. Congress voted to raise taxes on the wealthy, while others pushed for an estate tax, taking half the worth of anything over ten million dollars. There appeared to be an attack on the rich.

Hoover lost favor with everyone due to his slow response to the Depression and his poor rhetoric. He did a poor job of explaining how taxes would contribute to the greater good by allowing people to keep their teachers and police forces. He did not sympathize with the indignity of businessmen selling five-cent apples. He also failed to compromise with a Democratic Congress that sought to recoup the nation's losses by seizing personal wealth.

Hoover was an engineer and an entrepreneur. He was worth four million dollars at the start of World War I. His past statements, including his inaugural prediction that the United States was close to eliminating poverty forever, and that one's character was defined by how much money they had, came back to haunt him.

Hoover discounted the lives of many people with his statements, especially those who never had a chance to take full part in the wheat boom, such as black and indigenous people. He stoked people's sense of failure through his words about wealth and personal value.

The national unemployment rate was 25 percent. John Maynard Keynes said that only the Dark Ages were worse. In regard to the election, Alfalfa Murray was certain that anyone "who could stand up straight and string four sentences together" could become president. One wing of the Democratic Party favored Al Smith, but Murray was sure that Smith's Catholicism would work against him. Then there were "the Reds," or Socialists. From New York came a governor from the moneyed class, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Alfalfa Murray sensed that anyone who spoke to the concerns of desperate people could become president in 1932. However, he also knew that the prejudices of many Americans would disqualify certain candidates from the presidency. As a self-identified "man of the people"—that is, representative of both whites and farmers—Murray was sure that he could seize and build populist momentum.

Initially, people believed that Roosevelt lacked substance. He seemed to be running on his great name. Then, he took up the cause of the "forgotten man"—the destitute farmer on the plains, the apple cart vendor in major cities, and the factory hand without work. He gave people hope and justified their outrage. His health problems, including double pneumonia, which had nearly killed him, and polio, which paralyzed him, helped him understand emotional panic.

Though Roosevelt came from a privileged background, he used his personal misfortunes to demonstrate that he understood how people could be crippled by circumstances out of their control. Both hunger and illness brought people face-to-face with their own mortality. He understood that fear, and knew it existed in those who could no longer afford to feed themselves.

Hoover believed that the way to end the Depression was to help factory owners and business owners "get up and running again." Yet, Roosevelt said it made no sense to spur production if no one could afford to buy products. In No Man's Land, a farmer could only get six cents for a dozen eggs and four cents a pound for a hog or a chicken.

Hoover insisted that the only way out of the economic slump was through productivity, forgetting that the prices of products like wheat continued to decline, despite high productivity, due to a lack of demand.

At the Democratic convention in Chicago, Alfalfa Murray tried to stop Roosevelt, but the New York governor won the nomination on the third ballot. Murray was crushed. In the November election, Roosevelt won Oklahoma and every other state except for six. Hoover said that the Democrats under Roosevelt had become a "mob," while Murray said that Roosevelt was actually a Jew who had kept his heritage a secret.

Both Hoover and Murray used coded language to describe Roosevelt's win. Hoover's description of a "mob" signaled Socialism, while Murray's comment about Roosevelt being a secret Jew was meant to stoke fears that foreign influences were at work to change the country.

Roosevelt was sworn in as president in March 1933. Shortly thereafter, he went on a hundred-day dash. He called for a bank holiday—four days to stabilize the system. Then, he called Congress into session and signed the Emergency Banking Bill. By the end of Roosevelt's first week in office, deposits exceeded withdrawals. He added new provisions to the law, insuring individual accounts up to ten thousand dollars. Now, the government would back people's accounts.

Roosevelt first worked to stabilize banking institutions, knowing that without them, no one's money—rich or poor—would be worth anything. In the same year, Roosevelt took the country off of the gold standard and backed the American dollar on confidence.

The next task was to save farms. To avoid surplus crops, the government would *become* the market for farmers. It would ask cattlemen and **wheat** growers to reduce supply in return for cash. The newly created Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) would work "to stitch the land back together" by building dams and bridges, restoring forests, and creating trails in mountains. Also, the Volstead Act was permitted to allow for the sale of beer—the first step toward ending Prohibition.

The allowance of beer sales was key in helping to revive the grain market, since grain crops were necessary for the cultivation of beer. Farmers were happy to reduce their supplies, however, in exchange for cash. This not only meant being rid of what they could not currently sell, but it also meant less work for them and less concern about needing to sell a farm product to survive.

Hugh Bennett continued to rage about the destruction of the land. He was particularly outraged about land exploitation in Oklahoma. He could speak on the matter without sounding like an elitist because he, too, was a farmer and knew the soil. Still, most scientists did not take Bennett seriously. To them, the study of nature was associated with the appreciation of scenic wonders, such as grand mountains, rivers, and megaflora. People did not care about soil, and did not understand that humans could impact the environment at this level.

Bennett's warnings about the excessive exploitation of resources were an inconvenience to farmers. Furthermore, farmers did not identify the soil—a simple, mundane aspect of their lives—with the magnificent associations they made with nature. "Nature," to them, meant spectacle and grand beauty. The soil was their means of survival.

Roosevelt summoned Bennett to the White House, and asked him what could be done to undo what humans had caused. Bennett made no promises, but he suggested stabilizing the soil. He then became the director of a new agency within the Interior Department, one that was dedicated to the task. Bennett had no money or staff, but he knew his subject. Some estimates found that more than eighty million acres in the Southern Plains were stripped of topsoil, and more was disappearing each day. Millions of years of runoff from the Rocky Mountains had deposited "a rich loam over the plains, held in place by grass." To replace it, people had to remember how to farm without a plow. Still, it was unclear if the land could be restored.

Bennett advocated a reversion to a simpler way of life, one that would employ the farming methods that people had used before industrial farming was introduced into the Great Plains. Plowing had stripped too much of the soil too quickly. The reintroduction of simpler farming methods was intended to help restore the grass, though it would perhaps be centuries before the land returned to the state in which the settlers first found it.

CHAPTER 10: BIG BLOWS

One late winter day in 1933, heavy clouds gathered over No Man's Land. They dumped layers of dust, covering Boise City. The temperature fell more than seventy degrees in less than a day in February 1933, and the dust still blew around. March and April 1933 were the worst months of the year—"a two-month block of steady wind throwing fine-grained dirt at the High Plains." The freezing weather had killed what little **wheat** people had managed to plant in the fall. Fred Folkers spent most of his day shoveling dust, and knew that he would lose his orchard. At the end of April, with no green left on the land and no rain overhead, one dust storm lasted for twenty hours.

The region experienced unnatural extremes of weather that made it impossible to grow crops. The only task that people performed on their farms was the shoveling of dust, a problem that required constant attention. The dust storms had not only disrupted the weather patterns but also people's patterns of life. As Egan describes it, activity that had previously revolved around farming now revolved around controlling dust.

On May 6, Charles Lindbergh flew into the "corrosive air space" of the Southern Plains while trying to cross the Texas Panhandle. He seemed frightened by the dust storms. On another day in late May, dark clouds were back. They looked like rain clouds, but they brought "hard brown globs of moisture." Then, a funnel cloud appeared. At the end of the summer, another tornado appeared "at the southern edge of No Man's Land." The High Plains was soon in ruins, and farmers sent a distress telegram to Congress. Others left their farms, joining the exodus of tenant farmers from other parts of the plains. Meanwhile, Hazel Lucas Shaw had an announcement for her husband, Charles: she was pregnant.

Though the plains had become "dark" and "corrosive," Hazel would introduce the light and hope into her family that she believed a new life would provide. The plains, meanwhile, were assaulted by one natural disaster after another. Farmers were not only going broke but were also in imminent danger. Some left their farms and moved west, hoping to find new opportunities in California. Hazel, on the other hand, wanted a reason to remain rooted in No Man's Land.

CHAPTER 11: TRIAGE

The government went to the High Plains with a plan to kill as many farm animals as possible in exchange for money—sixteen dollars a head. Cows that could still walk and that still had a bit of flesh between their skin and bones would be shipped to slaughterhouses in Amarillo. In Dalhart, government men bought four thousand cattle for slaughter. The purpose was to restore market balance.

The relief plan worked both to help farmers rid themselves of cattle that they could no longer afford to feed, and it helped to supply the nation's soup kitchens with much-needed meat.

On May 9, 1934, whirlwinds started up in the Dakotas and eastern Montana. This created a mass of dust-filled clouds. The next day, they hit Illinois and Ohio. The day after, the dust fell like snowflakes over Boston and Scranton, and then New York fell "under partial darkness." The storm measured 1,800 miles wide, and weighed 350 million tons. Though New York was a dirty city, it had never seen airborne dust like this—the outline of the Statue of Liberty was barely visible. Then, the storm moved out to sea, where it covered ships that were "more than two hundred miles from shore."

For the first time, a dust storm moved first to the Midwest and then to the East coast, giving people in major cities a taste of what those in the plains had endured for months. The experience of the storm among people in other regions forced a sympathy that they might not have otherwise had toward those in the plains who were suffering, and daily saw far worse than the haze that enveloped New York.

Snowstorms made no difference in changing the bleak weather. A March snowstorm caused twenty-one inches to fall in No Man's Land, but they were dark flakes. The nesters called it a "snuster." During these storms, which were very frequent in 1934, "visibility was reduced to a quarter mile or less." The most persistent storms were in parts of Colorado, Kansas, the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles, and New Mexico. Even with Vaseline in their noses, people could not help inhaling dust. Windows were covered with wet sheets and blankets, which turned black. Men avoided shaking hands, as the contact could cause an electric shock that could knock people back.

The settlers invented new language to describe the bizarre storms that hit the plains, for there had never been anything like them. They also devised new means to protect their homes from dust, since it was not enough to just shut the door and the windows. Every crevice had to be covered and every orifice moistened to prevent the abrasion of dust. Even something as fundamental and desirable as human contact became perilous.

Caroline Henderson, a farmer's wife and Mount Holyoke graduate who lived in No Man's Land, clung to small things, such as a houseplant in the window sill, to avoid the feeling of hopelessness that nearly consumed her. By 1934, she and her husband did not bother to plant a single crop. Their animals starved and their supply of cow chips—"prairie fuel"—dried up as well. The awoke each day to more "wind and dust and hopes deferred."

Henderson's houseplant was a small sign of life, but the only one that existed in the deserted land. It may have also been a reminder of Henderson's life in New England. Like Willie Dawson and Maude Edwards, Henderson clung to the things that she loved and memories of her old life to keep her spirits up.

CHAPTER 12: THE LONG DARKNESS

Hazel Shaw went to Clayton, New Mexico to have her baby, as the higher ground was supposed to provide cleaner air. Her husband, Charles, returned to Boise City, then got the call, a week later, that Hazel was in labor. However, returning to Clayton was not easy. Charles got caught in a dust storm and his car became stuck in the sand. He eventually made it to the hospital, and Hazel gave birth to a girl, Ruth Nell, on April 7, 1934. The doctor ordered Hazel to remain in the hospital for another ten days; the air was not safe for a newborn. He also suggested that the young couple move. However, Hazel and Charles had opened a business in Boise City, and they planned to stay no matter what.

Hazel had a child to give her a reason to remain in Boise City, the place that she had considered home since girlhood. Though dust pneumonia had become a common reality, she and her husband were too committed to the lives that they had built to consider moving. However, their willingness to stay no matter what suggests that they did not consider the possibility that their family could also fall prey to an early death.

For others, 1934 was the worst year. Eight million acres of **wheat** did not harvest. Another two million had not been planted at all. It was the driest year to date, and the spots of original buffalo grass that had made some animal grazing possible were now "smothered by dusters." The government began to offer contracts to farmers *not* to plant next year, as part of President Roosevelt's plan to drive prices back up by reducing supply. This was how the farm subsidy developed. Without the government, Cimarron County may not have survived. The government bought 12,499 cattle, 1,050 sheep, and lent money to 300 farmers.

The patches of "original buffalo grass" were a nostalgic reminder of the territory's previous fertility. The subsidies were a method of ensuring that the market would never spin out of control again, risking both farmers' livelihoods and the nation's future potential to sustain a viable agricultural economy. Breeding too many cattle also had environmental consequences that no one could yet see.

Hugh Bennett sought to get farmers to break down their barriers regarding property to get them to understand that they were responsible for maintaining an ecosystem. He used the CCC to demonstrate soil conservation. Governor Alfalfa Bill Murray was furious with all of the government intervention. He thought that it was making Oklahoma too dependent. He quit the Democratic Party in protest of the New Deal, despite the plan's popularity in his state.

Bennett discouraged farmers from maintaining the view that they had to compete with their neighbors by continuing to plow soil. He encouraged them to instead work with their neighbors to maintain the soil so that everyone could continue to farm. Murray disliked these changes to Oklahomans' way of life, which seemed Socialist.

One proposal Governor Murray did support was the plan to dam the Beaver River near Guymon, a sizable town near Boise City. The dam would allow enough water for people to irrigate. When that ran dry, they could mine for water from the Ogallala Aquifer. In Washington, DC, people were skeptical, particularly Interior Secretary Harold Ickes. He thought that people should be paid to move out of the Southern Plains, which he had deemed uninhabitable, and that the lands should return to the public domain.

Murray's ideas sought to exploit existent water sources, not accounting for the fact that the aquifer was a finite source or that the river would not run fully during periods of drought. Ickes's idea to abandon the plains would have done nothing to address the damage that the settlers had already caused to the region.

Roosevelt did not like the idea of "reverse homesteading." Instead, he suggested planting a great wall of trees from the Canadian border to Texas. People were still skeptical. There was too little rain and too much wind for saplings to take root. Roosevelt insisted, believing that trees were the lungs of the land. He asked the Forest Service to search the globe for tree species that could survive the extreme climate of the Great Plains.

Roosevelt thought that the trees would prevent the eastward flow of dust during wind storms, as the trees would serve as a kind of buffer. Furthermore, trees are generally essential to human health and to the maintenance of ecosystems.

Fred Folkers eventually lost his orchard, and "the life-draining drought" killed the trees that Caroline Henderson had planted. People were running out of food. The last of the grain from the big harvest of three years ago was gone, and even the tumbleweeds that fed the livestock were in short supply. People began to wonder if they could eat tumbleweeds—after all, they were high in iron and chlorophyll. Cimarron County soon declared Russian Thistle Week, urging people on relief to help plant the tumbleweeds that the Germans had brought from the Russian steppe.

Folkers' dream of challenging the traditionally-held belief that the High Plains could not sustain life had come to an end. It seemed that the only plant life that the land could consistently sustain was tumbleweed. Once an undesirable crop, it had become the basis of people's sustenance. They learned that the plant actually had nutritional value and might sustain them through their hard time.

In addition to relying on tumbleweeds, the Lowery family also planted yucca. With the combination of yucca and ground thistle, they were able to feed themselves and their cows. Ezra Lowery, the family patriarch, was determined not to put his family in a soup line. Those who left, such as the Lowery family's neighbor, Clarence Snapp, never made any money. The Ehrlichs also tried to grind thistle to feed cows, but it did not work for them. The calves were born sickly and small and had to be killed shortly after birth. The Ehrlichs had a typical homestead—160 acres. Now, it was a barren patch. They survived on what they could make and store. Some, such as the Ehrlich's neighbor, Gustav Borth, had nothing on which to survive—not even a hog. He had sold the last of his cattle and was afraid of losing his combine, on which he still owed four hundred dollars.

The unwillingness of people to seek help in bread lines, as well as their desire to continue to live off of the land that they loved, forced them to be more resourceful so that they could stay. Not only did they live off of freshly sourced crops, but they also adopted the practice of canning so that they would be prepared for hard times in the future. Some, such as Borth, were unable to adopt any methods of survival and clung to things they could no longer use, such as expensive farming equipment, perhaps out of the hope that the wheat boom would soon return.

There were other ways to get food, such as waiting in a soup line or waiting in line for Sheriff Hi Barrick to hand out roadkill. Some people also stole food. People were committing more serious crimes, too. Wanted posters for Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow hung in Sheriff Barrick's office. Barrick understood why some people viewed Bonnie and Clyde as heroes: they robbed the banks that robbed the people. But they were also murderers. Still, Sheriff Barrick hated working at John Johnson's foreclosure auctions.

Crime became another means of survival. Successful criminals, particularly those who stole from the banks that people loathed and resented, became local or even national heroes. Barrick retained respect for the law, but he did not like providing Johnson with legal enforcement for taking away what remained of people's lives.

Barrick still had a salary—$125 per month. Hazel Shaw, on the other hand, could no longer rely on the school scrip. By 1934, 60 percent of the property owners in Cimarron County had stopped paying taxes. They simply did not have the money. As a result, schools fell into disrepair. The train station looked "windblown and empty."

Boise City was turning into a ghost town, showing signs of decay in its failing infrastructure. The railroad companies did not intervene to maintain the train stations, and citizens seemed to think that in hard times, a police force was more necessary than teachers.

One morning, while Hazel Shaw was rocking Ruth Nell, she saw a small coffee box on the steps of the church across the street. There was a coat thrown over the box. In the evening, when snow mixed with dust began to fall, Hazel saw that the coffee box was still on the church steps. She walked across the street and peered inside of it. Inside she saw a baby girl, "blue-faced and barely moving." Hazel rushed her home to warm her. She had been out in the cold for forty hours. As the baby's temperature rose, she started to cry. Hazel thought it was a miracle. She was horrified that a baby would be left in the cold, but Sheriff Barrick knew of a family that had abandoned all three of their children. The infant was adopted by a couple east of town, but it died of dust pneumonia shortly thereafter.

The desperate conditions produced by both the Depression and the Dust Bowl caused people to feel such a sense of failure that they no longer believed they could care for their own children. The dust storms had introduced an unpredictability to life in the plains that disrupted the stable patterns on which people relied to maintain their homes and the health of their families. Rather than see a child succumb to hunger or dust pneumonia, some people chose to leave their children, hoping that a kind stranger could care for them.

CHAPTER 13: THE STRUGGLE FOR AIR

In the winter of 1935, everyone in the Osteen dugout had a cough, a raw throat, and incessantly itchy eyes. They hung wet bed sheets against the walls to filter out the dust, but the dugout was like a sieve. A black blizzard in February knocked down telephone poles. In March, the worst dusters came from the north and blocked out the sun for days. Every school in the county was closed for a week that month. Ike considered dropping out of school to get a government job paving a road across southern Baca County into New Mexico, but Ike's mother said that "it would break her heart if he left before making it out of high school." He stayed and signed up for a senior play, which was cancelled when the Red Cross converted his school's tiny gym into an emergency hospital. Nine people died that month, including some of Ike's classmates.

Ike's school life provided a level of teenage normalcy in his life, which had been burdened by respiratory ailments, poverty, and the constant presence of dust. Though Ike was not interested in school, he remained to please his mother, who valued education. His wish to participate in a school play indicates that he too was interested in participating in activities that gave him some semblance of a normal social life. This was especially necessary given the deaths of some of his classmates, which may have alerted Ike to his own vulnerability, despite his youth.

In Oklahoma, Dr. John H. Blue of Guymon treated fifty-six people for dust pneumonia. All of them also had signs of silicosis. Other patients were suffering from early symptoms of tuberculosis—people were filled with dirt. Doctors saw a pattern of children, infants, and the elderly with "coughing jags and body aches, particularly chest pains, and shortness of breath." Others had nausea and could not eat, and some died within days of being diagnosed with dust pneumonia.

The plains region, once lauded for its fresh, wholesome air, was now the cause of a litany of illnesses. Dust pneumonia was particularly feared. Children diagnosed with the respiratory illness were not expected to survive, and those who did ended up with permanently scarred lungs.

Desperate parents begged the government for help to escape. One hundred families in Baca County gave up their property to the government in return for money to move. Roosevelt had not yet created a relocation plan, but there was money and there were some relief efforts that could help people move. Meanwhile, the Red Cross opened six emergency hospitals across No Man's Land, Baca County, and southwestern Kansas to assist people who lived too far away to get to hospitals.

People who might not have wanted to leave the plains now felt that it was necessary to do so to ensure the survival of the next generation. Private organizations like the Red Cross provided medical assistance in areas that were underserved by the government, demonstrating that both public and private sectors worked to serve those in need in the Dust Bowl.

Jeanne Clark's mother, Louise Walton, who had left New York for the High Plains to cure her respiratory ailment, now watched her daughter cope with a high fever, chills, and a chronic cough. The doctor did not know if Jeanne would live to Easter Sunday 1935. The former haven for "lungers" had turned deadly, and the Red Cross warned people against going outside. If they had to, they were to wear respiratory masks. Rail travel was hazardous, too. People had to scoop the dust out of passenger cars.

The air had become toxic and Jeanne, like many children, had contracted dust pneumonia. There was a cruel irony in Walton's original decision to leave New York for the cleaner air of the prairie, as the prairie, like the city, had now developed dangerous air as a result of human activity.

CHAPTER 14: SHOWDOWN IN DALHART

Foreclosing became its own business in Dalhart. It allowed "Uncle" Dick Coon to seize a pool hall, but Simon Herzstein lost his store due to $242 in back taxes. Black people had never been welcome in Dalhart, and still weren't. One February, two young black men got off the train, hungry and freezing. They sought food and warmth at the train station and were promptly arrested. The justice of the peace, Hugh Edwards, ordered them to dance. The railroad agent said that the men were only good for "Negro toe-tapping." The men complied, but the judge still ordered them back to jail for two months.

Dick Coon had arrived in Dalhart a poor man, yet he was given the chance to become a prosperous one who later profited off of others' misfortunes. No such opportunity, whether ethical or not, would ever be extended to the black men who arrived in town. Dalhart remained true to John McCarty's valorization of their "Anglo-Saxon" stock, which they protected by excluding non-whites.

Judge Wilson Cowen organized a jury to hear the story of a young white woman who was "found wandering the streets, muttering incoherent pleas." She had been bankrupted by the **wheat** bust, her husband died of dust pneumonia, and her children were "hungry, dirty, coughing," and "dress in torn, soiled clothes." The woman had gone mad due to panic over the dust. He suggested that she find some relief at Doc Dawson's Dalhart Haven, where Dawson ran a soup kitchen.

Like Lizzie White, who had experienced a panic attack in her family's dugout, this young woman was fearful and frustrated by the dust. However, her sanity, unlike Lizzie's, reached a breaking point.

Privately, the judge wondered what the government could do to help tame the prairie. First, people would have to change their farming habits, and it was difficult to get a community consensus on that. Meanwhile, Judge Cowen committed the distraught woman to an insane asylum, and her children were given to the state. Cowen remained bothered by the case fifty years later.

Judge Cowen was sympathetic to the young woman, who had no means of supporting herself after her husband died. Her tragic story reveals the personal impact of the Dust Bowl and the wheat farmers' excesses. Cowen hoped that people's habits would change so that he would never again hear such a story, but most were more concerned with their own prosperity than someone else's misfortune.

Lizzie White nearly lost her mind, too. The wind seemed to haunt her, and keeping out the dust was a never-ending task. Her children were hungry and she was afraid of dust pneumonia, which her sister had contracted. Young Melt's job was to tend to the garden, which soon died. Shortly thereafter, the children came home to find Lizzie crouched in a corner, crying.

Fear of losing her children either to hunger or illness, and her lack of control to prevent either, caused Lizzie to have a mental breakdown. She had never liked the High Plains or believed that the land was a good place for her family to settle.

Bam White continued to sell skunk hides and worked odd jobs. Otherwise, he spent much of his time talking with old **XIT** cowboys. He also spent time talking to the James boys. Andy James's heart was still broken over his family's loss of its land. A meeting was called in the Dalhart Courthouse in which about 150 men and women, former ranchers, complained about their losses. Then, Andy James spoke. He talked about the 2,560 acres his family had owned, and how there were no farmers when they started. He hated what the nesters had done to the land—tearing up good earth. It was a crime against nature, he said. The nesters who were in the room stared angrily at Andy, while the cowboys applauded him. James supported Hugh Bennett's soil conservation proposal. If a majority of people agreed to it, he said, they could get the grass back.

The cowboys mourned what they felt was their displacement from the prairie by the newcomers who plowed up acres of grass. They saw the grassland that they loved disappear and were unable to do anything about it, due to farmers' eagerness to cash in on the wheat boom. Bennett was also an outsider, but he was someone who understood the ranchers' dismay over what was happening to the local environment. Of course, the cowboys were also motivated by resentment: they wanted the grassland back in the hopes that they could revive ranching.

The crowd at the courthouse elected Andy James and Mal Stewart to write a letter to Hugh Bennett in Washington to tell him that they were ready to try soil conservation. Bennett had told Congress that fifty-one million acres were so eroded that they could no longer be farmed. It would take a thousand years to rebuild another inch of topsoil. Still, people in the Panhandle were willing to do something about the dust in Texas— they just wanted to know what they could do.

The local effort to address the soil with Bennett's help demonstrates an instance in U.S. history in which a small, rural contingent was willing to work with government bureaucracy to accomplish a task. These groups were not always so diametrically opposed.

The two black men who had been arrested in Dalhart and kept in the Dalham County jail for three months were brought back for a trial. The judge found the pair guilty of "criminal trespass" for entering a place that was the property of the Rock Island Railroad, looking for food and shelter. The judge ordered the young men to another 120 days in jail. Then, he ordered them to dance again. The men obliged and the judge, prosecutor, and the Rock Island Railroad agent enjoyed another laugh before sending them back to jail.

The judge's racism precluded any interest in giving the men a fair trial. They had been arrested on the Panhandle's policy of arresting black migrants for vagrancy so that they could be put to work on chain gangs, performing free labor for the state. In this instance, the men were also forced to demean themselves for entertainment.

John McCarty was dismayed by the image the country was getting of the High Plains through Fox Movietone News, and disappointed by the region's willingness to beg Washington for help. There had been a black blizzard that covered Dalhart in half of inch of dust, but McCarty buried news of the storm and promoted a plan of action: "a rabbit roundup to exceed all others for slaughter." McCarty wrote that there would never be another cold snap like that during "the dark winter of 1935," but a month later the temperature fell to six degrees Fahrenheit and a "monstrous" duster rolled through, covering most of the Southern Plains. McCarty tried to spin the tragedy by saying that the storms were "majestic, in their way." People thought he had gone mad.

McCarty spun information about the dust storms to aggrandize Dalhart's image. He did not want the rest of the country to feel sorry for the town, and he certainly did not want the town to feel sorry for itself. To give people some sense of control over their environment, he promoted a major "rabbit roundup." Killing the rodents would allow people to vent their frustration at the elements of nature that overwhelmed them. His attempt to find beauty in the storms was meant to dissuade people from thinking they lived under an ugly cloud.

Some people welcomed McCarty's positive approach. He scoffed at Secretary Harold Ickes' idea for relocation and condemned the newsreels as lies. Some wrote letters to McCarty, praising his column, "A Tribute to Our Sandstorms." One reader compared him "to some of the greatest American writers of all time." McCarty believed that "the strongest men" arose from the worst conditions. Americans were generally soft, but not the High Plains nesters—they were "Spartans." Meanwhile, Hugh Bennett had received the letter sent by the cowboys. His project would only cover part of the three million acres in the Panhandle that needed help, but his blueprint was a start.

McCarty told the farmers what they wanted to hear. They did not want to believe that they had played a key role in destroying the grassland. They wanted to view themselves as heroic conquerors who had made something viable out of a land that had long been viewed as an arid wasteland. The cowboys and their action to send for Bennett confirmed the farmers' negative view of them, which was why the nesters resented their presence.

Meanwhile the plague of dust pneumonia continued to take lives. A young mother from Dalhart died at the age of twenty-six and left behind a baby, also suffering from dust pneumonia. In his newspaper, John McCarty exaggerated dusters in other states while minimizing the impact of those in Dalhart. He seemed to revel in news of storms from Kansas, which had surpassed those in Texas for deadliness. He claimed that the dust problems in Texas were caused by dust swirling in from other states, and encouraged people to maintain hope that it would rain again. In the meantime, he said, they should regard the dusters as an adventure.

McCarty took pleasure in the misfortunes of nearby states, hoping that media attention in places like Kansas would distract from Dalhart. In keeping with the locals' refusal to take any responsibility for their role in creating the storms through excessive plowing, McCarty blamed the dirt in Texas on other states. He ignored the long-term harm that the storms caused, preferring to see them as temporary challenges.

People were hungry, however, and they got fed in Doc Dawson's kitchen, which he ran out of his sanitarium building. On some days, two hundred people waited in line. He made a big pot of beans and brewed five gallons of black coffee, and no one could go through line more than once. "Uncle" Dick Coon had quietly financed the kitchen, buying the dried beans, potatoes, and coffee. He had lived through terrible poverty and the horror of Galveston's hurricane. At the same time, the Red Cross organized a shoe drive. Still, what people really needed was rain, and 1935 was turning out to be drier than 1934, which had been the driest year on record.

The men in Dalhart who had the most personal wealth upheld their reputations as pillars of the community by giving back to those who had far less. Local charitable efforts kept Dalhart afloat, providing services that the government could not always address. People retained hope that it would rain, despite the persistence of the drought. Hope was their only spiritual nourishment in the face of crushing poverty.


Town leaders sought ideas on how to draw moisture out of the sky. They looked to history, and came up with the concussion theory, which Congress had appropriated money to test in the 1890s. In 1910, C.W. Post was obsessed with commanding it to rain on the massive tract of land he owned in West Texas. He ordered his ranch hands to make 150 kites to carry 200 pounds of dynamite into the clouds. The sky had to be tricked into thinking that a battle was occurring on the ground, he thought—then rain would fall. Explosions thundered in the clouds, but there was no rain. People in Dalhart also wanted to test the theory and contributed money to the effort. Tex Thornton was hired to "squeeze the clouds." They paid him five hundred dollars altogether, and he promised rain by the first week of May.

A combination of ignorance, desperation, and superstition led people to turn to the concussion theory as a possible solution to the drought. The imagined connection between rain and the tragic disaster of war is not totally implausible—there were plenty of battles in which it rained, but there were also plenty that were fought on sunny, clear days. The local funding of Thornton's visit is proof of Dalhart's desperation. Completely out of their own solutions, they were truly willing to try anything; getting rain naturally already seemed impossible.

CHAPTER 15: DUSTER'S EVE

Hazel Shaw's baby, Ruth Nell, was diagnosed with whooping cough. A doctor advised Hazel to leave for the baby's health. Meanwhile Ruth Nell's great-grandmother, Louzima Lucas, was dying of dust pneumonia at the family's homestead in Texhoma, Oklahoma. She hated what No Man's Land had become. She was also more worried about Ruth Nell than she was for herself. Two days before Ruth Nell's first birthday, Hazel and her husband Charles decided to leave their home in Boise City.

In the Lucas-Shaw family, two generations were suffering from the dust storms' impact on health. Louzima remembered No Man's Land before it had been transformed by wheat farmers into the lethal territory that she worried would kill Ruth Nell. Already elderly, Louzima took less interest in her own fate.

At the end of March, 1935, there had been twelve days in a row of dust storms. During one storm, the wind blew at forty miles per hour for a hundred hours. Hazel initially planned to stay with her in-laws in Enid, Oklahoma, but they had been hit by a tornado. Still, the family had to leave quickly. Sheriff Barrick said that roads were blocked by huge dust drifts—as soon as the CCC dug one out, another appeared. A professor at Kansas State college estimated that, "if a line of trucks ninety-six miles long hauled ten full loads a day, it would take a year to transport the dirt that had blown from one side of Kansas to another—a total of forty-six million truckloads."

Hazel felt trapped by the storms. Boise City had become overwhelmed by dust and the weather was no less violent further inland. The memory of the baby on the steps haunted Hazel because it reminded her of the possibility of Ruth Nell dying. It may also have made her wonder if she could ever become as desperate as the mother who had abandoned her infant to the wind and dust. Meanwhile, even the CCC was burdened with the or never-ending task of moving dust and replacing it—a job that settlers had previously performed on their own.

Hazel tried to get to her family's homestead in Texhoma. The train ride had not been easy, as they stopped frequently to shovel sand off of the tracks. The baby's cough worsened, and she cried constantly. Hazel worried that Ruth Nell had fractured another rib from all of her coughing. The baby had a temperature of 103 and could not eat. Ruth Nell had dust pneumonia.

The dust storms injected a level of heightened drama into mundane aspects of life and into special circumstances, such as Ruth Nell's worsening illness.

Hazel summoned her husband to come to Enid, Oklahoma, where they had stopped. Charles tried to drive through the dust to get to his wife and daughter, but this proved to be hazardous. He wore goggles and a respiratory mask, but both clogged quickly with dust. He avoided a crash by driving along a ditch. Midway through his journey, he got caught in a duster and the static shorted out his car. After nearly an hour, the black blizzard dissipated, and Charles was able to restart his car.

It was hazardous to remain in one place and equally hazardous to travel. People had to leave home wearing safety equipment, such as Charles's goggles and respiratory mask. Charles's ability to withstand such extreme conditions contrasts with Ruth Nell's inability to hold up.

By the time Charles made it to St. Mary's Hospital, he was blackened with dirt. He found Hazel crying. Ruth Nell had died an hour earlier. Back in Texhoma, Louzima had been running a high fever for several days and still not eating. She asked if there was any word about Ruth Nell, but her son had not heard anything. Louzima turned away, closed her eyes, and died hours after her great-granddaughter. The family decided to hold a double funeral in Boise City—they would then proceed out of town to the family plot. Arrangements were made for Sunday, April 14, 1935.

The death of Ruth Nell, particularly, is a moment of defeat for the Shaws. Hazel and Charles remained committed to a land that, in a way, betrayed them by taking their first-born child. Louzima hated what wheat farmers had done to the land, and saw that the worst possible outcome—that it would become uninhabitable for future generations—had come true.

CHAPTER 16: BLACK SUNDAY

The day of the funeral began clear, with no wind. A rabbit drive was called back on after "a month-long delay" due to dusters. Little Jeanne Clark had just left the hospital in Lamar after "a long bout of dust pneumonia." She only had dresses made of sackcloth, with the brand names of onions printed on the side. She did not want to go to church wearing the sack; other children would point and laugh. In Baca County, Ike Osteen "had a burst of energy" and used it to do chores around the dugout. The family garden was covered in a dust drift. In a few places, he found arrowheads. He could see the outlines of graves, which made him wonder about the Comanche and what they would think to find the buffalo grass gone and the land destroyed.

Jeanne Clark and her family were crippled both by her illness and by the destitution caused by the Depression. However, even as a small child, she had a sense of pride and did not want to go to school in her makeshift clothes, despite the fact that her classmates were faring little better. Ike forgot his family's troubles by dedicating himself to work, which resulted in finding an artifact that reminded him of the region's indigenous history and the destructive changes that whites had wrought.

Baca County was having its warmest day of the year, with temperatures in the eighties. However, about eight hundred miles to the north, the Dakotas were dealing with a cold front from the Yukon Territory. The clash of warm and cold currents caused the air to turn violent. In two hours, temperatures dropped more than thirty degrees. By mid-morning, windblown soil advanced from South Dakota to Nebraska, and the sky grew dark. The weather bureau could not explain what was happening. The storm that had made it to the East coast the year before rode out on a jet stream—this storm was moving south with the cold front, but it was darker than any other that had advanced on the prairie. It looked like a wall of muddy water.

The Great Plains has a naturally diverse climate and is accustomed to extremes of heat and cold. However, the changes caused by excessive plowing made harsh gusts turn deadly. The wind became a current that lifted the soil off of the ground, as well as the fuel that propelled it forward. Changes in weather patterns made it unclear how some storms, like that which hit the High Plains on "Black Sunday," were able to form without a jet stream to carry it forward.

Robert Geiger, an Associated Press reporter from Denver, went to No Man's Land with the photographer Harry Eisenhard. They were looking for anecdotes from locals about the black blizzards that blew through the Southern Plains almost daily. They planned on going to the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles. Meanwhile, the advancing dust storm "was reported to be two hundred miles wide, with high winds like a tornado." The sun had been eclipsed. A small boy who had been playing in the fields got lost and suffocated on the airborne dust.

The press had gone to the region expecting to hear stories of how the storms had changed and disrupted the lives of the locals. Instead, they endured their own experience of the dust storms. Fatefully, Geiger and Eisenhard arrived to experience the worst storm that hit the High Plains in the 1930s. The eclipse of the sun and the disappearance of a small boy made the storm seem especially horrific, and even mythical.

At 2:30 PM, Dodge City, Kansas went black. South of Elkhart, people were gathering for a rabbit drive. With cattle gone, chickens going blind and hungry, and no **wheat**, people were starting to can rabbit meat, along with pickled tumbleweed. Ike Osteen was five miles away from his homestead when he saw rabbits and birds fleeing south. It seemed to be a desperate migration. It struck him as odd that there was no wind, but the sky was still bright. He scanned the horizon. Then, he saw it—"the mother of all dusters." Ike and the two schoolmates with him were blinded and struggled to breathe. They crawled to a farmhouse that was black inside. Ike could hear the voices of the others, but he could not see them. He could not see his own hand.

Though the purposes of the rabbit drives were to help nesters vent frustration and feel some sense of control over an environment that was out of control, the settlers realized that the rabbits could have some practical use, too, as a source of food. Ike paid more attention to the live rabbits who sensed trouble on the way and fled toward safety. The cloud that descended quickly shrouded Baca County, which had been enjoying a warm, sunny day, in cold and blackness.

The Lucas double funeral was held at St. Paul's Methodist Church in Boise City that morning. More than two hundred people were in the church. Faye Folkers, Hazel Shaw's brightest student, was there. The funeral procession started in the direction of Texhoma. Hazel and Charles stayed behind to bury their baby in Boise City, but they later learned that the Boise City Cemetery was covered in sand. Hazel and Charles then decided to bury Ruth Nell in Enid, and to wait until Monday to go east. The procession started at 3:00 PM. After an hour, everyone came to a halt. The Lucas men, dressed in their best clothes, got out and started digging sand from a drift that blocked the road.

Hazel and Charles wanted to bury their daughter Ruth Nell in their hometown—a hope that was spoiled by the dust storms. Those who attended the funeral were burdened yet again by the dust. The dust had killed Ruth Nell and her great-grandmother, and it now risked making it impossible to bury either of them as well.

In northern No Man's Land, Joe Garza was taking advantage of the clear, sunny day to find stray cattle. He was thirty-five years old and his father had just died in Clayton. The cows were acting strangely and Joe's horse pawed the ground, "nervous and sniffing." Then, Joe saw an enormous formation—"a tidal wave of roiling black"—only one-quarter of a mile away. The blackness frightened him, and now, it was cold. Suddenly, Joe heard a cry out in the distance, It was the Guyago boy, a sheepherder. He was crying. The boy said that the dust cloud had knocked him down. Using the voice of the other ranch hand, Ernest, as a guide, Garza and the boy crawled back to safety.

As was the case with the rabbits that Ike Osteen saw fleeing across the plains, the livestock, too, indicated that a torrential storm was on the way. There is a juxtaposition between some settlers' attention to these signs from animals and the vicious attacks on rabbits, as well as the indifference toward livestock who could no longer be sources of food. This attitude suggests a general inattention toward the natural world, unless it served the settlers' interests.

At around 5:15 PM, the funeral procession, composed of about fifty people, was six miles outside of Boise City. The cars were driving through the flattest part of No Man's Land. When the Lucas clan saw the black cloud approaching, they debated about what to do. They thought that it would be disrespectful to turn around, so they "closed ranks with the hearse in the middle and raced south, so the storm would not hit the engines first." C.C. Lucas got drinking water from canvas bags next to the radiator. Everyone poured water into scarves, shirts, and handkerchiefs, and the children crawled under the cars with the damp clothes tied to their faces. Everyone got on the ground or got inside of a car.

By working together quickly, the funeral procession was able to continue on. Bravely, they did not allow fear of the massive storm to deter them from their obligation of laying the bodies of Ruth Nell and Louzima to rest. The attendees were just as resourceful in moving the procession forward as they were each day on their farms, finding sources of water and ensuring that no one, particularly the children, would be exposed to breathing the dust.

The duster picked up more power and intensity as it moved south. The earth went black, and people saw flashes of electricity around their cars. Those flashes provided the only light in the overwhelming darkness. Around 6:30, the winds finally calmed to the point of not knocking anyone down. People were soon able to see their hands in front of their faces. Half a dozen men took off their coats and joined hands. They then walked the road to guide the hearse and other cars to Boise City.

The men refused to allow the storm to prevent the proper burials of Ruth Nell and Louzima. This commitment to proceeding with the ceremony in the face of the storm was a testament to people's unwillingness to allow their lives and rituals to be disrupted by the unpredictable weather, which controlled everything else in their lives.

People were in the midst of the rabbit drive in the northeast of town when the dust storm hit. At the Folkers' homestead, Katherine and her son crouched down, unable to light their lantern. Black dust showered their walls and trickled through the ceiling. Meanwhile, the Associated Press team was crossing the state line into Oklahoma. The wall of dirt was closing in on them, and Eisenhard took a picture. Bob Geiger estimated that the cloud was several thousand feet. They tried to outrun it, going sixty miles per hour on a dirt road, but that was not fast enough. Their car went into a ditch. They pushed it out and continued on, finally making it to the Crystal Hotel in Boise City. Geiger had no answers for guests in the lobby who overwhelmed him with questions about the duster. He just wanted to get back to Denver to print the pictures.

The storm had been more spectacular than the reporters expected. The destructive force of the storm and the rabbit drive—forces of nature and of the damage wrought by humans—were occurring simultaneously, as though the forces were at war with each other. The storm seemed to be chasing Geiger and Eisenhard, who could not see where the cloud began. As tired as people were of the dusters, they also could not resist news about another one, reflecting both a fascination with and a fear of the storms.

Thomas Jefferson Johnson was walking home from the funeral when the storm hit. He got knocked down, and crawled forward along the road on his stomach. When his family found him later, his eyes were full of black dirt and he could not see. His vision never recovered. Meanwhile, Hazel Shaw was packing for the next day's burial of Ruth Nell. Her four-year-old niece, Carol, was staying with them that afternoon. Suddenly, Hazel could not find Carol. Hadn't slept since she took her dying child to the hospital the week before—now, her niece was missing. Charles grabbed a large flashlight and searched outside. He thought the girl was lost for good, but then voices in the dark told them that she was safe. She had run home when she saw the dust cloud.

Incongruously, Thomas Jefferson Johnson—a large, formidable man, with a name to match—was rendered helpless by the dust storm. He was both blinded and crawling, as though the storm, with its massive force, had returned him to a state of infancy. On the other hand, little Carol remained safe, despite Hazel's fears that she would be killed by the dust as Ruth Nell had been. Incredibly, Carol was also able to find her way home in the black storm.

Aviators like Roy Butterbaugh, the Boise City newspaper publisher, and Laura Ingalls saw the cloud. Butterbaugh and his buddy decided not to fly, but Ingalls saw it from above. The formation was "a deep purple" and "stretched so far" that one could not see the end of it. Ingalls recalled it being "the most appalling thing" she had ever seen in all of her years of flying.

The contrast between the aviators, who represented technical expertise, and the natural wonder of the storm reveals the disconnect between modernity and nature. Despite having the tools to conquer aspects of nature, such as developing the ability to fly, few people could even comprehend the storms.

The Volga Germans were just leaving church. They wanted to enjoy the sun and clear air. After four years of drought, the Ehrlichs were out of grain and George Ehrlich was too overwhelmed by grief to keep the homestead afloat. His only surviving son, Willie, took control of it instead. On that Sunday, Willie had his calf out for a walk, looking for grass. Willie's sister then suggested that he recover the calf, for it looked as though it would rain. Willie said that what hung overhead was no rain cloud. He was picking up the calf when the dust cloud knocked him down. The storm had blown open the barn door. He crouched down in a corner and waited until midnight, when he could recognize the world again. He never found the calf, which he had to drop along the way.

George Ehrlich was still mourning the death of his youngest and favorite child, Georgie. When Georgie died, the elder Ehrlich's hopes for the future and his enthusiasm for working the land evaporated. The calf's disappearance coincides with the loss of innocence that was felt after Georgie's death. Willie's inability to protect the calf is also similar to George's inability to protect his son from the oncoming cattle truck—both the storm and the truck were forces outside of Erlich's control, which turned fate out of the family's favor.

The White family was preparing for evening church services. Lizzie had been talking about leaving Dalhart. She was crumbling emotionally, but they could not leave—Bam was too old. Meanwhile Melt had just found out from an aunt about his indigenous ancestry. Initially, he tried to deny it. The indigenous people were run off the land and routinely mocked. Kids at school made fun of him for his skin, calling him "Mexican" or "nigger." Melt was Cherokee, Irish, and English through Bam, and Apache and Dutch through Lizzie. He was told it was disgraceful to be part-Native American, particularly Apache—"they were the meanest, sorriest tribe in the world" and only wanted to drink and fight, his relatives said. Melt looked outside and said that they would be unable to go to church. Bam looked, then he hurried back into the house. By then, the dust had overwhelmed them.

The family was both outcast in Dalhart due to their ethnic backgrounds and facing Lizzie's possible emotional breakdown. In their need to hold to the narrative that whites were the rightful heirs to the grasslands, despite the irreparable damage that they had caused to it, the settlers vilified the indigenous people, telling stories that made the natives sound ill-equipped to manage the land's bounty. Melt's classmates pelted him with racial slurs and called him by an identity that was not his own— "Mexican"—to reinforce the racist notion that he did not matter because his people no longer existed in the prairie.


The dust blizzard fell on Dalhart at around 6:20 PM. Cars died in front of the DeSoto Hotel. A nine-year-old boy wandered in, screaming that he had gone blind. John McCarty was reading a book when the page turned black. Dust entered his office and settled there. A woman in southern Dallam County called the newspaper people in Amarillo to alert them to "the biggest duster of all." Inside of a blackened room in Pampa, Texas, 110 miles southeast of Dalhart, the folk singer Woody Guthrie thought of the first lines to a song about the world coming to an end. The duster produced enough static electricity to power New York City.

Egan evokes a vision of a black hell that consumed Dalhart. The sight of cars dying and the disruption of McCarty's reading session show how the storm disrupted people's relative comfort in every how. However, a boy's temporary blindness also conveys how dangerous the storm could be. The air had become too dangerous to breathe and to touch.

CHAPTER 17: A CALL TO ARMS

Images from the Associated Press ran in every newspaper, as people tried to explain what they had witnessed. The drought was now in its fourth year. Though dry periods were a part of life on the Great Plains, the ground was naked in 1935. That was not normal. Hugh Bennett wanted a permanent reform to address "an environmental disaster bigger than anything in American history." Within the Roosevelt administration, there were conflicting views. A Harvard geologist warned the president that the climate itself had changed, "the start of a cycle that would take a hundred years or more and leave the southern plains 'a desert waste.'" The Agriculture Department thought that it was just a severe drought—not a sign of a shift in climate. The area that had once been called the Great American Desert might come to fit the description.

The Agricultural Department and other government officials were not inclined to listen to warnings from Bennett and other scientists. Firstly, environmental science had not yet developed as a field of discipline, making it very difficult for many to believe that humans could impact climate. Secondly, they were wary of encouraging changes to lifestyle that could result from such shifts in policy. Instead, the government encouraged the view that was already dominant in the plains: this was a temporary dry season that would rebound next year, despite the trend having continued for several years.

Roosevelt called for "young, uniformed CCC workers" to save America's heartland by planting the vast row of trees that he had proposed. Harold Ickes continued to push for reverse homesteading. Hugh Bennett wanted to form farming districts where everyone would follow a set of conservation rules, "rotating crops, fallowing land, abandoning tear-up-the-earth methods of plowing." Bennett also worked with Congress to create "a permanent, well-funded agency to heal the land." He believed, too, that the most important goal was to change human behavior.

Ickes and Bennett had opposing solutions. Bennett's idea was to encourage soil sustainability, no matter where the farmers lived. Ickes thought that the problem was in the Southern Plains itself, which, he believed, was not designed for habitation. Ickes's reverse homesteading plan also did not take into consideration people's personal investment into their farms and homes.

Some politicians thought that other parts of the country needed more help. Twenty-five million people lived without regular income, and the unemployment rate for black people was 50 percent. Throughout the South, and in some Northern towns and cities, signs read, "No jobs for niggers until every white man has a job." Roosevelt created an executive order in May 1935, opening public works up to all races. Per capita income had fallen, and between 1930 and 1935 there were 750,000 bankruptcies and foreclosures on farms. Some people thought that the people of the Southern Plains should not get such attention, because they were perceived as stupid. H.L. Mencken referred to them as "inferior men."

Some politicians' indifference to conditions in the Southern Plains was due to provincialism. They were only interested in the problems and concerns of those to whom they were exposed. Similarly, white employers did not want to hire black people. Though blacks suffered more from joblessness, they were excluded because of the racist belief that whites were entitled to jobs. Mencken did not think that the plains folk deserved the attention they received.

Bennett found out that the huge storm was moving east, picking up dirt in other states. While he was meeting with senators on an early afternoon in mid-April, soil from the Southern Plains—the weather bureau said it came from No Man's Land—fell on Washington, DC. Bennett said that this was what he had been talking about. Within that day, Congress gave Bennett the money he needed and a permanent agency to restore and sustain the soil. One hundred and fifty CCC camps were redirected from the Forest Service to the newly formed Soil Conservation Service, and twenty thousand workers were sent to the Southern Plains.

When lawmakers saw and felt the dust that had plagued people in the plains, they finally understood the seriousness and magnitude of the storms. The politicians' distance from the problem, due both to geography and their vastly different lifestyles, made it difficult for Bennett to explain the issue. In an odd twist of fate, the politicians were able to experience the problem in person.

Roosevelt had two ideas about what to do. First, he created the Resettlement Administration, which could give loans, about seven hundred dollars per family, to fund them to go elsewhere. He also signed Executive Order 7028 for the federal government to buy back what it had given away to homesteaders. Some people resented the "push to depopulate the plains."

Settlers were committed to staying in the Southern Plains. Besides, the loans would not address the problem of the homesteaders being without a steady means of earning a living. Conditions were equally bad elsewhere.

John McCarty was furious with Roosevelt's offer. In response, he formed the Last Man Club, designating himself as president. No matter what, he and other like-minded nesters said, they would not leave the land. The first signatory was a former **XIT** trail boss. "Uncle" Dick Coon was the second man to sign his name next to McCarty's on a declaration the editor had drawn up. Another was Texas governor James V. Allred. Doc Dawson was the fourth.

All of the members of the Last Man Club were prosperous and partly the cause of Dalhart's problems. They had sought to exploit economic hardship for their own gain (Coon), insisted on plowing until they yielded a crop (Dawson), and told the people of Dalhart lies that they wanted to hear (McCarty).

Dalhart citizens also still believed that they could blast rain from the clouds, and enlisted Tex Thornton to do so. Tex exploded dynamite for several days, to no avail. On the fourth day, he rested. Then, the temperature dropped and there were reports of snow in Clayton. A tenth of an inch also fell in Dalhart. People thanked Tex, though it had also snowed in places in which no explosives had been sent into the clouds.

Thornton was a charlatan who profited off of Dalhart's desperation as well as its ignorance and superstition. Like the Christian God, he rested on the days between his creation of rain. In their need to believe that they could control the weather, people insisted that Tex made it snow.

There was no optimism in Boise City, though they also saw snow flurries. Black Sunday had stripped the town bare. Hazel was nearly broken by depression, and felt claustrophobic. Livestock had died from starvation or from suffocating on dust—their bellies were full of dirt. More than a thousand people left Cimarron County by the end of the year, but some people, such as the Lowerys, vowed to hold on. Some of Hazel's friends who had joined the exodus reported that things were no better in California, where many had sought shelter. People from the Southern Plains were roundly described as "Okies" and faced discrimination. Only 16,000 of the 221,000 who moved to California came from the Dust Bowl. Hazel and Charles were now ready to leave—there was no point in continuing their mortuary business when people could not pay. There were no options and no future, it seemed.

Californians, probably fearing that their own jobs would be threatened by desperate people from the Southern Plains willing to work for far less, were eager to keep the migrants out. The term "Okie" was a reflection of the provincial view of people like H.L. Mencken, who thought that those in the plains were unlettered rubes who had caused the devastation that they suffered. The discrimination against the migrants was the result of both insensitivity and a fear of being economically compromised.

CHAPTER 18: GOINGS

The Osteen dugout was unbearably hot. Ike's mother thought about moving the girls to town and surviving by doing odd jobs. All of Baca County seemed to be in a state of decay. In the 1920s, it had been so heavily plowed that more than 1.1. million acres would probably never grow another crop. Most Baca residents would have starved without government intervention.

The town that had once been regarded as ideal for the cultivation of wheat was now ruined by the pursuit of the crop. They could not grow any more wheat, nor could they grow anything else. Ironically, the cultivation of grain had nearly caused them to starve.

In the summer of 1935, Roosevelt initiated the Second Hundred Days. He instituted the Social Security Act, and started the Works Progress Administration backed by the National Labor Relations Act. The latter "enshrined union rights in the workplace." The farm economy was improving, thanks to his measures. Still, the Supreme Court declared that Roosevelt's control of the farm economy was unconstitutional. The government could not be the market, it seemed. Roosevelt was outraged, but his Resettlement Administration remained intact.

Roosevelt perceived that certain elements of the government were hostile to the swift changes he was making to the system, though his measures were popular among voters. He was "outraged" because he felt that, without the government controlling prices, the agricultural market would spin out of control again, as it had due to President Hoover's "hands-off" approach.

Ike Osteen remained in school, but Oscar saw no use for education. School had always been easy for Ike. One day, he was able to make a small speech as class salutatorian—the second in his class. Ike spoke about how the future would be better than the past. He said that, despite the black blizzards, Baca County was a great land. His mother was crying as he spoke. Ike finished by thanking the teachers who remained, though they were only "paid in grocery scrip." Ike did what no Osteen had done before: he graduated from high school.

Ike fulfilled his mother's hope that he would get an education, and perhaps even exceeded her hopes by graduating at the top of his class. His speech about the future being "better than the past" could have also described his view of his family, which had overcome the death of his father years before, as well as its trend of rejecting education in favor of available work.

Later that year, Ike's mother left the dugout with the two girls and moved to town. She said that the boys could split the homestead if they wanted, or sell it to the Resettlement people. Ike gave the homestead to his brother. Ike decided to leave "with just the clothes on his back and his bag of food and water." He just kept walking.

Ike's abandonment of the dugout was both an attempt to assert his individualism and to put the past behind him by literally walking away from it. Ike's wish, like so many others who left the Dust Bowl both temporarily and permanently, was to define his life beyond tragedy.

CHAPTER 19: WITNESSES

Don Hartwell started a diary on New Year's Day, 1936. He and his wife, Verna, had lived through four years of drought. They could not grow a single crop and went further into debt. Black Sunday had nearly destroyed their farm completely. Hartwell's way of fighting back was to write his history, which would be about "one farmer's life on the Kansas-Nebraska border during a decade when homesteads became graveyards." He kept his diary secret—not even showing it to his wife.

Hartwell had not shown the diary to anyone during his lifetime, not even his wife. His decision to write his history was likely rooted in a fear of death and the possibility that he might not survive the dust storms. The diary would then be evidence that he had existed. It would also provide a record of the suffering that the prairie folk had endured.

Hartwell wrote that most narratives tended to be about "noble pioneers," but the women and children were the ones who suffered the most. Women, generally, had two children every two years and did as much work as two ordinary men while living in abominable conditions. Their men were, in many instances, drunks or religious fanatics.

Hartwell validates histories that argue that pioneer women took on roles of equal value to their husbands. However, Hartwell takes this view a step further by arguing that women did more, for they were also responsible for maintaining the homestead if they had negligent husbands.

Hartwell's family had arrived in Nebraska in 1880. His mother never adjusted to the state, which she despised, and she loathed Hartwell's father's family. His father died in 1934. That year, Nebraska got just fourteen inches of rain, the lowest rainfall since 1864. Hartwell raised livestock on a piece of land that he had claimed near Inavale, not far from Willa Cather's childhood home in Red Cloud. It was several hundred miles northeast of No Man's Land. The town flourished during the **wheat** boom and was devastated by the decline in wheat prices and drought. The town bank closed in 1932. Hartwell earned extra money by playing piano at dances or in lodges along the Republican River, and his wife made dresses for people in town. They had no children.

The story of the Hartwells coincides with the development of Inavale. The family arrived as homesteaders, but they contended with building farms on land that received little rainfall. They were briefly prosperous during the wheat boom, and then lost everything in the bust. Like many of the other migrant women in Egan's account, Don Hartwell's mother did not like the land where her family had settled. Though pioneer life may have signaled greater freedom for men, it likely meant more work for women.

Egan chronicles a selection of Hartwell's thoughts from the worst years of the storms. They include mundane thoughts about holiday customs, as well as Hartwell's fears of losing his sense of ambition. He also describes the storms. Hartwell recorded "one of the worst storms" on Independence Day—"wind and dust of gale proportions" in 100-degree weather. He wondered if he would ever plant corn again. He sold his livestock and mowed Russian thistles, wishing that something else would grow. There were also happy moments, such as listening to the World Series on the radio on October 2, and having dinner with his wife on Christmas.

Hartwell's life as a farmer revolved around the storms and other whims of nature, which made it impossible for him to grow another crop. Still, Hartwell tried to enjoy other aspects of life, such as Christmas and baseball. His diary describes an unwillingness to succumb to the misery of his poverty. His ability to find joy in small things, particularly in the company of his wife, suggests perseverance.

Meanwhile, Roy Emerson Stryker also had the idea of creating a record of the decay of the land for the files of the Farm Security Administration. The purpose was to help Roosevelt get elected to a second term. Documentary records of conditions would help people understand why the president had taken such strong measures. Stryker's contributions would prove to be invaluable to American history. Stryker hired Arthur Rothstein, a young photographer, to go to Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma in the spring of 1936. Rothstein returned with images that the nation had never before seen.

Though the initial purpose of Stryker's mission was to use the photos as propaganda to show the extent of the prairie's devastation and the necessity of Roosevelt's measures—despite opposition from Republicans and the Supreme Court—the pictures also told the story of a region that people on the coasts generally overlooked. It revived the story of the "forgotten man," which Roosevelt had introduced in his first campaign.

Outside of Dalhart, Rothstein photographed a lone car running just ahead of a black blizzard cloud. In Boise City, he photographed a drifting prairie. He also captured a father and son running for cover to a "half-buried outbuilding." Pare Lorentz, an amateur filmmaker, wanted to film a narrative of "how and why the Great Plains had been settled and then brought to ruination." It would be like a fable. Hollywood was not interested in working with him, but in 1935, after Stryker set up a documentary division, Lorentz found his backer—the United States government.

Rothstein's photos of the dust storms each seemed to tell a rich story of desperation and survival. Lorentz recognized the value of constructing such a story, particularly for the benefit of those who did not live in the Great Plains. Perhaps the film would help the rest of the nation sympathize with a problem that they believed did not affect them directly.

Studio heads did not want the U.S. government in the film business. Lorentz's film was going to be a commercial release. Others said that the film would be perceived as propaganda. Lorentz said that he only wanted to tell a story that needed to be told. One part of the government was trying to save the plains, while another arm would show people how they had caused the problem. Lorentz only took a salary of eighteen dollars a day, and paid for some of the production himself.

For Lorentz, the film would be a key instructional device. Despite opposition from the studios, who did not want the film to compete with their own releases and who refused to make it at all, perhaps fearing low box-office turnout, the film would come to be regarded as an important historical record.

Lorentz and his crew filmed in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. When he reached Dalhart, he asked if anyone knew an old cowboy, and people gave him Bam White's name. White was perfect for the part. Lorentz offered to pay him twenty-five dollars—two months' pay for two hours' work—to hitch a horse to his plow and pull it through the fields. That image of Bam White, "silhouetted against blowing soil," became the best-known image in the film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*.

Lorentz sought someone who could epitomize the life and culture on the plains. For Bam, who still lived on selling skunk skins, the offer was a boon. He would earn enough money in two hours to support his family for months, easing the common worry of earning enough to live during the Depression.

The film depicted the Great Plains as an Eden, spoiled by the plow. In New York, the film was shown alongside *It Happened One Night*. In Dalhart, it opened at the Mission Theater. Bam White took his family, and it was the first time Melt had ever seen a movie. The boy could not believe that he was watching his father onscreen. The film moved Bam to tears. In March 1936, the movie played at the White House and the president, too, saw the "hard, sun-seared, dust-chipped face of Bam White, the wanderer, the Indian half-breed" who became the face of the High Plains in the 1930s.

Bam, a former cowboy and a man of partial indigenous descent, personified the plains in Lorentz's film. His complex identity allowed him to represent the people who had been displaced (the natives), people who could no longer adapt to the region's economic and social changes (cowboys), and those who suffered from what they reaped (white farmers and nesters).

CHAPTER 20: THE SADDEST LAND

At the beginning of 1936, Hazel Shaw was five months pregnant. It was unclear if there would ever be a home in No Man's Land ever again. More than 850 million tons of topsoil had eroded from the Southern Plains within the year, which was nearly eight tons of dirt for every American resident. No one knew where the dirt had gone and what it meant, beyond being unable to farm—and that dust pneumonia would continue to infect people until the soil was stabilized again. Unless something was done, the plains would become as arid as the Arabian desert.

It was as though the explorer Zebulon Pike's prophecy about the region had come true. Though No Man's Land had not truly been a desert, it soon would be. Moreover, no one understood what it meant to lose the soil, understanding its absence only in terms of its inability to provide a source of food and income. They did not consider disruptions to other plant and animal life in the area.

Meanwhile, the towns died. Stores and schools disappeared, and nearly a million people left their farms from 1930 to 1935. The exodus started slowly, initiated by declines in **wheat** and cattle prices in the northern plains. Drought and dust storms chased people out of the rest of the prairie, particularly Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

The towns died nearly as quickly as they were born. Some people were eager to abandon the land they had plowed to seek new opportunities further west. Others simply sought fresh air to breathe.

Hugh Bennett's challenge was in finding a way for the ground to become stable enough to hold seeds long enough for them to sprout. The administration bought 2.25 million acres to start. One idea was to give some of the land back to the indigenous people. The government decided to purchase up to one million acres for natives, who would run livestock over the land after it had been allowed to rest and regenerate for a few years. Some of it was old Cherokee land in Oklahoma anyway. The government would thus be getting rid of the cowboys and returning the natives.

For untold reasons, this plan never took hold. The administration did not seem clear either on which indigenous people belonged on the land. The Cherokee only existed in Oklahoma due to displacement resulting from President Andrew Jackson's seizure of their lands in the Southeast. A Comanche reservation was nearby, but few members of the original tribe were still around.

Baca County was another place where the government wanted to put grass back on the prairie. The government paid $2.75 per acre to take back a homestead. The land would then be left alone—to either re-grow grass or become a desert. This would take place after the windmills and fences were dismantled and the houses were torn down and sold for scrap.

The civilization that whites had built on the plains would be dismantled—and had to be dismantled—so that the region could return to its natural state and once again harbor life. It was unclear what the land would become as a result of human settlement.

The journalist Ernie Pyle, one of the most influential writers of the day, called the Dust Bowl a withering land of misery. The *Atlantic Monthly* carried a series called "Letters from the Dust Bowl" written by Caroline Henderson. She wrote about the "bad days of wind and dust." She wrote nothing during the tortuous summer. Hazel Shaw's focus for the next year was to bring new life to the world to replace that which had been lost to the storms. She went north to Elkhart, Kansas to give birth to "a black-eyed baby boy." The baby was named Charles Jr., for his father. He was strong and robust. Hazel was unsure of where to live. Cimarron County had killed both Grandma Louzima and Ruth Nell, and she would never see it the same way again.

Both Caroline and Hazel sought creativity as the means to remain optimistic. For Henderson, creativity took the form of writing. Hazel, on the other hand, remained committed to the more traditionally feminine practice of seeking meaning through the creation of new life, despite the loss of Ruth Nell. Both writing and procreation are acts of survival—an affirmation of life and of one's willingness to continue on.

Summer temperatures were especially hot. During two days in July and two in August, the temperatures reached 118 degrees—the highest ever recorded in No Man's Land. It was 117 degrees in Dalhart and 120 in Shattuck. There had been some rain, but it came in massive bursts, causing flash floods. Then, the drought and high temperatures returned. Hazel kept the place so sealed it was like living in a can. Charles, Jr. later developed claustrophobia as a young man, which he thought came from spending his early months "looking up at a dusted, wet sheet from a crib in a sealed apartment."

Hazel's fears of the climate and weather, which had previously killed her daughter and her grandmother, instilled a paranoia in her that made her overprotective of her son. The dust storms were not as severe as those that occurred in the early- to mid-1930s, but lingering fears about the unpredictability of the storms led Hazel to take precautions that inadvertently created neuroses in her son.

Hazel left No Man's Land at the end of the year. She had first seen the grassland in 1914, at the age of ten. She, Charles, and Charles, Jr. moved to Vici, closer to the center of Oklahoma, near the Shaw family. Hazel would always remember the blackest days in Cimarron County, but she would not hold on to the memories. She wanted to live.

To overcome her fears, Hazel had to leave No Man's Land, fully putting the past behind her. Though she remained attached to the land—her family's roots were there—she had experienced too much loss for it to remain a healthy environment.

One hundred miles to the east, the Russo-Germans tried to maintain their community around Shattuck. They got some money from the government, about seven dollars a head for cattle, which gave them enough to buy dry goods like flour or sugar. They tried to keep their spirits up by playing music, but the drought was in its fifth year. Their neighbors, the Borths, were suffering from dust pneumonia. Two of the children suffered from the common symptoms of chest pains, fever, and sore ribs. They had to get out of the High Plains or to a hospital. With his children facing death and his land already dead, Gustav Borth thought often of the Russian steppe. Then the bank took his combine, which had allowed him to pile his **wheat** high during the boom years. He moved the children to Texas to live with cousins. He was homesick and felt like a failure.

The Russo-Germans faced especially hard times on the High Plains, so hard that some of them were nostalgic for life on the Russian steppe. Borth either recalled the steppe with fondness because times had indeed been easier there, or because he had forgotten about the group's ostracism from native Russians and the invasions from Asiatic tribes. It is also possible that their inordinate success from the wheat boom gave them such a high, such a feeling that nothing could go wrong, that it became more difficult to cope when things did *go wrong.*

The Plow That Broke the Plains put Dalhart in the spotlight, but for John McCarty, it was the wrong kind of publicity. He furiously denounced the film as propaganda. Other Politicians joined McCarty in his outrage. However, Lorentz was not the first person to blame careless agriculture for the wreckage of the plains. Hugh Bennett and cowboys on the **XIT** had offered similar messages. Doc Dawson's youngest son, John, shared their view. He left Dalhart in 1929 to practice law in Houston, and returned in the mid-1930s to help his struggling father see if anything could be salvaged from the land—perhaps enough to provide for Doc in retirement. John saw a land that had become like a "moonscape"—no wildlife or vegetation. He thought that the people had done this to themselves, and even his father shared some of the blame.

Outsiders like Lorentz, Bennett, and John Dawson, who cared about the High Plains and the people in it, were better able to see the flaws in the settlers' practices. John Dawson watched his father desperately try to farm land that would not yield any crop, despite the impact his incessant plowing would have on the soil. Instead of examining their own behaviors, the settlers blamed Lorentz for promoting a negative view of the farmers' way of life which, they believed, had contributed to civilizing the plains.

The government kept the town going. In August 1936, Hugh Bennett went to Dalhart to preside over the biggest soil conservation project on the plains, called "Operation Dust Bowl." He intended to "slow the drifts by contour plowing, which created great furrows and made it less likely for the earth to lift off in great sheets." Then, it could be planted over with grass seed imported from Africa. They were building life back from scratch, "to create a place of interdependence, not a crop." John McCarty tried to impress Bennett, showing him that Dalhart deserved a second chance. They were fighters.

Though McCarty and the other settlers would not accept the view that they were to blame for the dust storms, they were fully cooperative in fixing the conditions that had caused them. Bennett's program allowed the settlers to create a new grassland, one that they had built themselves "from scratch," just as they had developed the wheat farms. This time, the nesters would give something back to the land in exchange for all that they had taken.

CHAPTER 21: VERDICT

Hugh Bennett returned to Washington, DC believing that the Great Plains could be restored. Congress approved a plan "to reverse the flow of water under the Continental Divide," a kind of "hydraulic savior." Others thought the solution was to drill into the Ogallala Aquifer. Meanwhile, four million acres of farmland were empty, with no takers, not even among the Resettlement agency whose responsibility it was to buy back land.

Despite Bennett's conservation efforts, the presence of millions of acres of unoccupied farmland, coupled with the existence of an underground reservoir, made it inevitable that farmers would retake the plains and try, once again, to install industrial farming.

Hugh Bennett proposed saving the land through contour plowing, crop rotation, and soil conservation districts. The crisis had already cost tax payers five hundred million dollars in 1933 for remedial land projects, grants, loans, and relief. Before spending any more money, Roosevelt wanted to know if the plains could be saved, and how. Also, had homesteading been a mistake? The report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee was delivered to the president on August 27, 1936, and said that the climate had not changed, but that the plains were in the first years of "a hundred-year cycle of change." There was also simply not enough rainfall to raise crops. The problem of the Great Plains was not the product of a single act of nature, it declared, but of "a single year or even a series of exceptionally bad years" caused by mistaken public policies, particularly a misguided homesteading policy.

The homesteaders were not singularly at fault for their shortsightedness and greed. They had been encouraged to settle the land without being taught how to manage it. The realtors tempted them with advertising that told them how easy it would be to dry farm the plains, but the syndicate did not tell them that the soil would require care. The syndicate also told people that they would not need much rain to raise their crops, which was a lie. The settlement of the High Plains was not exactly a mistake, but it had been settled in the wrong way, with a focus on adapting the land to the people's needs instead of the people adapting to the land's needs.

The report also described how the disaster occurred. A chart showed how quickly the grass was overturned. Ten million acres were plowed in 1879. Still, Bennett and his team did not blame the settlers, since the nesters lacked the knowledge to be aware of their mistakes. Instead, they were misled by the Federal homestead policy. There would be no easy solution to the problem of 80 percent of the Great Plains being in a state of erosion.

Though Bennett blamed the government instead of the settlers, policy makers' initial inaction in response to excessive plowing, and their encouragement to dig up as much land as possible, indicated that they understood the soil as little as the nesters did.

Roosevelt was worried, but during one of his radio broadcast "fireside chats," he tried to encourage people to hold on. He remained extremely popular. Meanwhile, things in Europe were tense, and Hitler's power was growing. In the next election, the Republicans ran the Kansan Governor Alf Landon, who said that Roosevelt had no idea how to fix the plains and "was taking the country in a radical direction." Most Americans disagreed, and Roosevelt was re-elected in a landslide. Later, Landon himself would say that the New Deal saved American society.

The New Deal is one of few pieces of legislation in American history toward which most Americans, across partisan lines, have a positive view. Though there may be some ideological disagreement with Roosevelt's use of government to solve so many problems, few can deny that the policy worked and provided desperately needed relief.

Bennett's agency was ready to start planting the first new sections of sod, but he was worried about its survival in a land prone to drought. They planted a mixture of weeds, grass from Africa, blue grama, bluestem, buffalo grass, and other flora. It might take fifty years before a large swath of turf was rooted in place. Roosevelt still wanted to build his trees from North Dakota's Canadian border to an area just south of Amarillo, Texas, and the Forest Service was saying that it could be done. Trees could not stop dust, but "they could provide shelter from black blizzards."

The flora that Bennett planned to install in the barren soil was foreign to the land, but capable of survival. Interestingly, he designed a carpet of grass that would be more diverse than what had originally existed. Still, it was unclear how long it would take before the plains resembled what it had once been. It had taken hardly any time to dig up the grass, but it would take countless years for it to grow back fully.

A tree-planting crew was sent to Oklahoma, just east of No Man's Land. The tree planters were CCC crews. The goal was to plant 180,000 acres per year, mostly on private land. The owner would then care for the trees, and farming would continue between the strips. Roosevelt ignored Bennett and others who said that one could not alter "the basic nature of the Great Plains." He would have his trees, "from the top of the plains to the bottom."

Both Bennett and Roosevelt wanted to transform the Great Plains, just as the wheat farmers had, but they wanted to do it in a way that would be beneficial for the region in the long-term. Their efforts were proof that humans could impact the land in both negative and positive ways.

CHAPTER 22: CORNHUSKER II

Don Hartwell was worried about his health, and 1936 seemed like the driest year ever in Webster County, Nebraska. He continued to record the simple facts of life on his farm, including the inconveniences, such as gas selling for twenty cents a gallon, which meant that it took a full day's work to fill a tank.

Hartwell's description of the difficulties of maintaining normalcy in the Dust Bowl helps the modern reader understand how completely dependent the settlers were on the soil. If they were unable to farm, they were unable to do anything else.

In Hartwell's entries from January to July, he wrote about outbreaks of influenza and smallpox and the difficulties of feeding the livestock. He also included the mundane entries of the previous year on holidays and the daily effort to contend with the dust. On February 25, Hartwell recalled a Chicago man who offered to give away his baby so that he could keep his car. He and Verna continued to worry about being able to keep the farm, and his alfalfa and corn crops failed. Hartwell tried again to plant corn in late May. In summer, the temperatures became unbearable. The corn burned in temperatures that registered at 140 degrees on July 15. One small cloud came from the west on July 16, providing rain and hail and, later, a light shower. The storm did not give Hartwell much hope, however.

Hartwell describes increasingly fraught circumstances on the plains. People were not only burdened by the dust and the consistent failure of crops, but also by the threat of disease and unbearably hot temperatures. His description makes the plains sound like a cauldron of despair, where people's fears of destitution made them so immoral that they were willing to trade their children in exchange for mobility or for some remnant of their past material comfort. Hartwell had become so accustomed to this despair that small spurts of rain did not change his pessimistic attitude.

CHAPTER 23: THE LAST MEN

People in Dalhart shunned Bam White for being in a film that made it seem as though the nesters were responsible for their own demise. They berated him as a "half-breed and traitor to Texas." Bam did not care what people said about him, but it hurt him when Melt came home from school, heated about what people had said about his father. Melt was proud of his dad. Furthermore, Bam, Andy James, and the **XIT** cowboys knew they were right; the nesters had destroyed the grass without caring what it did to the "natural order."

The white settlers may have been especially offended by Bam White's presence in the film, due to his indigenous ancestry. His cameo may have seemed like a rebuke from the people who had been dispossessed of the land, and who, contrary to the settlers' need to characterize them as savages, knew better than anyone how to look after the prairie.

The government handed out seed for grass and provided grants for gasoline. Hugh Bennett's project, Operation Dust Bowl, "was in full swing." With the help of the CCC, Bennett started working on 16,000 acres, but soon the project expanded to 47,000 acres. After so many years of destruction, people wanted to be a part of the restoration. It felt good to try to heal something.

Bennett, who came from a farming family himself, gained people's trust and capitalized on their regret, and in the process secured their cooperation. He did not make farmers feel bad about what they had done, but instead demonstrated how they could correct their wrongs.

The White family planted corn and some grass on a section of ground outside of their small, two-room house. Bam planted alfalfa so that he would have hay for his horses. The rain came in the spring, one inch each day for two days, then ten days of sun. Then there was a two-inch downpour. Bam was hopeful that there would be a crop in the summer.

Small-scale farming, like that practiced by the White family, would have to resume in the plains. This was how people lived before the plow and before they came to regard crops as sources of endless wealth instead of food.

Doc Dawson took some time away from the soup kitchen to try to farm one last time. He followed the advice of the CCC and plowed in furrows "so the wind would ripple instead of rip and lift." He also tried planting grass seed and drilling holes for corn and maize. People in the Panhandle had finally agreed to Hugh Bennett's recommendations for strict conservation. They agreed that they needed help to save them from themselves.

Dawson cooperated with the new conservation initiatives, but he would not give up on the hope that the land would one day make him rich. When both cotton and wheat failed, he tried new crops. His stubborn persistence was typical of many farmers, though Dawson's efforts never yielded success.

Alexander Hogue grew up near Dalhart. He left for art school but returned to paint the town. He painted starving animals and drifts that covered tractors and homesteads, as well as the "predatory snakes and bugs." *Life* magazine profiled his paintings, calling Hogue "the artist of the Dust Bowl." His piece *Drouth Survivors* was a portrait of "an agrarian nightmare." It depicted two dead cows face down in a drift, the top of a leafless tree covered in dust, a tractor nearly covered in sand, and a fence that had drifted. The painting hung in the Pan-American Exposition in Dallas. McCarty despised it, and wanted to buy it to burn it. A representative for Dalhart offered fifty dollars for it. The town assumed it was not worth more, but in Dallas they wanted at least two thousand. The painting was later purchased by a museum in Paris and burned in a fire.

McCarty himself would spend his retirement painting renditions of the dust storms, which he chose to portray as "heroic." Hogue rejected this idealized vision to show the devastation of the plains. While McCarty was intent on portraying Dalhart as the place of a pioneer's dreams, Hogue depicted it as the place where dreams died. He depicted a land in which nature had taken over, undermining settlers' attempts to define the land according to their needs. McCarty's willingness to destroy a painting that was incompatible with his vision is evident of how obsessive and fascistic he was in controlling how Dalhart was portrayed.

In early summer, there were a few storms. Bam White's small patch in the front of his house grew into "a blanket of green by early July." Doc Dawson's withered section finally grew healthy corn. On Andy James' ranch, there was "ankle-high carpet." People gave God and Franklin Roosevelt equal credit for performing a miracle. Still, Hugh Bennett warned people not to read too much into this growth spurt. They needed to maintain the conservation districts. In July, the rain stopped and the heat returned, reaching past 110 degrees. The ground burned in areas that remained barren.

People in the High Plains were eager for the worst to be over and became easily excited by small signs of progress, which showed the land reverting to its original state. Bennett reminded them that their problems had not been solved for them; on the contrary, they would have to continue to work to ensure the regrowth of the land and the sustenance of the soil. The burning of the barren ground was a reminder of the many tasks ahead.

Melt White was outside one early evening when he heard a buzz that sounded like electricity from a broken power line. He then saw a thick, dark mass overhead. The cloud was producing the noise. It wasn't a dust storm; it was a cloud of grasshoppers. The hoppers descended moments later, smothering the garden and invading the White family home. Then they moved on to Doc Dawson's farm, chewing the corn down to thin stalks. They even tried to consume polished wood and fence posts. The hoppers had destroyed Doc's last hope of producing any income for the year. He had nothing left.

The arrival of the grasshoppers, or locusts, is a scene of Biblical proportions. Just as the Book of Exodus describes the delivery of locusts as one of the ten plagues inflicted upon Egypt for its hubris, Egan depicts a land whose final hopes for crops were swallowed by the insects. It was as though Sitting Bull's prediction of nature's revenge for the natives' suffering had come true.

The insect clouds moved from county to county. They ate every flower, leaf, and sprig of grass in sight. Bill Baker, who was the county "ag man," or agricultural authority, said that he had never seen a surge of insects like it. There were 23,000 grasshoppers per acre. The government men said that the insects had come out of the dry Rocky Mountains, "locusts that laid eggs in the flatlands and multiplied during the dry years without predators." A wet year would normally produce a fungus that killed many of them, and birds and rattlesnakes usually ate grasshoppers, but they were all gone. The ecologists in Bennett's soil service were starting to examine how life had been disrupted below the surface—not only the land animals but also the insects and microorganisms.

The conservation efforts of the nineteenth century aided in creating an appreciation for the nation's magnificent flora, but it had not instilled any understanding of how those wondrous forms were supported by the life forms that one did not see, and by the soil that held everything in place. By killing or displacing animals, either unintentionally through plowing, or intentionally through the rabbit drives, the settlers had destroyed the ecosystem they needed to maintain healthy and safe farms.

The National Guard was called to exterminate the insects. Troops tried burning fields. They also tried to crush and poison the insects. What finally worked was a combination of arsenic and bran—grain husk separated from flour after milling—but it killed everything else too. Then the dust storms started again. By the fall, 500 million dollars' worth of crops were lost.

In trying to kill the grasshoppers, people also further impacted the land in counterproductive ways. In their efforts to poison the insects, they also poisoned the air and the soil, which could not be farmed anyway due to the storms.

John McCarty had a surprise announcement: he was leaving Dalhart for a better job in Amarillo. He still appreciated the town, but he could not afford to turn down the better opportunity. He wished everyone luck and said "good-bye," turning his back on the town he had vowed never to leave. The town felt betrayed. Worse, the land was moving again, and children were dying of dust pneumonia.

McCarty was committed to Dalhart as long as the town provided him with economic opportunity. Though he cannot be blamed for making the best choice for his finances and his health, he can be blamed for encouraging others to remain, despite it not being in their best interests.

Dick Coon was the only town pillar left. He used the last of his money to throw a barbecue with all of the **XIT** cowboys. While standing outside of the DeSoto, he spotted a young cowboy down on his luck and gave him his lucky C-note. Dick Coon was broke. His properties were mortgaged and no longer generating income. He only had four dollars in a bank account. He did not want to leave the High Plains—he had taken the Last Man Pledge seriously, but his health was in peril. Friends advised him to go to Houston. He did so, moving into the Rice Hotel and dying with little more money than he had when he was born.

Dick Coon's life had come full circle: he was born with nothing, spent his life enjoying wealth, and then died with nothing. Egan does not portray this as tragic, for Coon had no family to whom he could have left his wealth, if he still had it. His gift of the 100-dollar bill did not only give the younger man a head-start; it was also a wish that he would have some of the good luck Coon had once enjoyed.

Lizzie White feared starvation, as grasshoppers ate everything Bam had planted. The family got government clothes and food. The winter was harsh and Bam seemed to have lost his spirit. He directed Melt to bring him his fiddle, which he played until his fingers started to bleed. A few days later, on a Saturday in the first week of February, Bam remained in bed. He was burning with a fever and said his stomach was killing him. On Monday, he died. Bam was buried near the **XIT** and a small service was held. He had never been asked to join the Last Man Club, but he stayed on the plains until his last breath, never giving up. Unfortunately, the family had debts--$2,300 worth—and Lizzie could not pay. She moved the family south, as she had long wanted to, and picked cotton.

The White family never escaped poverty. Bam's inability to provide for his family was due to a confluence of circumstances—racism, the Depression, and natural disaster—that he could not control. He played his fiddle demoniacally, as though if he played long and hard enough, the music could soothe the pain of his heart. He had never been welcomed into his community as a full member and, worse, had been blamed for giving it a poor reputation. He also never saw the land return to the endless prairie his ancestors had known.

Melt packed a bag one day and said that he was going back home to where his father was buried—he missed the open range. He was going to go back to Dalhart and find work on a ranch. Melt said that it was "his Indian blood" summoning him back to the Llano Estacado, a place that belonged to the natives and that one day might be restored.

Melt, unlike John McCarty, felt a personal connection to Dalhart—not one born from a personal creation myth but from the city being the birthplace of some of his ancestors. His unwillingness to leave was an inability to walk away from part of himself.

For Doc Dawson, Dalhart was a lonely place in his last years. He missed Dick Coon, John McCarty, and Bam White. He did not know the new people in town, who were mostly workers from the CCC. People were reaching into the Ogallala Aquifer, eager to get the water out of the ground. Dawson was done with working the land. He had tried for a decade to raise a decent crop, but the dirt was cursed. He still kept a small office in town and saw a few patients, but most of them could not pay for his services. Many just came by to talk. Then, one day in the spring of 1938, Dr. George Waller Dawson died of a massive brain hemorrhage. His son later found the Doc's "tattered, crumbled" Last Man Club card in his wallet.

The new farmers were careless in their exploitation of local resources, but they were successful. Their success may have felt, to Dawson, like a mockery of his failures to yield a single successful crop. He kept trying to farm until the end of his days, refusing to accept his poor luck of having bought a sterile parcel of land. He had fulfilled his promise to remain in Dalhart until he died. Though he had given a great deal to his town and was more successful than White, he also died feeling like a failure.

CHAPTER 24: CORNHUSKER III

In seven centuries, only a single tree grew in a certain fold of land in Nebraska. It was cut down in 1936, and its rings were examined. It showed that Nebraska had been through twenty droughts over 748 years. At the start of August 1937, rain still did not fall. When Don Hartwell put a thermometer in the ground, it registered 151 degrees. His farm was down to three lame horses and one hog. His wife still made clothes and he played music in town, but these odd jobs did not bring in enough income. The bank began to send him notices that he was behind on his mortgage.

The very old tree, which was cut down for reasons that are unclear, was evidence that Nebraska had endured a series of difficult weather events over many years. Egan compares the tree's endurance despite these droughts to that of the Hartwells, who insisted on remaining on their farm despite its impending failure.

Hartwell's entries from August to November describe unbearable heat and the destruction of crops. Again, Hartwell listened to the World Series in October—this time in the company of his wife. By November 19, the last hog had died. They had nothing left.

The World Series was a welcome escape from the Hartwells' problems. However, when their last hog died, they were out of food sources.

The communities around the Hartwell farm were also disappearing. One of his friends left for Wyoming, saying he would return, but Hartwell knew that he would not. Around Thanksgiving, a letter arrived from a friend in Denver, encouraging the Hartwells to move west. Denver seemed like a big, strange city to the farm couple. However, Hartwell had no options at home. His car still ran, but he had no money for gas. He spent most of early 1938 begging the bank not to take his farm after he failed to make a payment for six months. Hartwell looked around his homestead for something of value. There was the piano, but he could not bring himself to sell it.

The piano had been a source of income—Hartwell played music in town for extra money—but it also gave him pleasure. Unable to farm, the piano music was his only creative outlet, his only way to feel that he was contributing something to the world. All of the opportunities his family was given came with a sacrifice. He and his wife could possibly find work in Denver, but that would force them to give up their farm. It would also force them to adapt to a city.

Verna, Hartwell's wife, managed to take in some sewing work, but their electricity was turned off on April 6. Hartwell did not think he would have the money to pay the bill ever again. A friend loaned him some seed, but he expected Hartwell to pay him back in corn or money. Hartwell planted twenty-two rows of corn and Sudan grass. As soon as the corn came up, the grasshoppers descended on it. Verna found work washing linens in hotels, and after a while, they were allowed to eat the hotel's leftover food in the laundry room.

The Hartwells had gone from a simple farming couple with some comforts to one that had experienced one misfortune after another, due to their inability to contend with an environment that had become hostile to farming. Unlike the Lowerys, they could not find anything to subsist on while they awaited another crop. They were completely dependent on the land.

July felt like hell with its dry, deadly winds. Hartwell wrote in his diary that he felt lost without his horses, and that he and Verna seemed stuck in a cycle of bad luck that would not end. The following week, the couple left for Denver to find work. Verna found some as a maid in a doctor's house, but there was no work for Hartwell and no room for him in the house. The separation was supposed to be temporary. However, it was the first time in 26 years that they were apart. Hartwell played music to keep himself company, but he cried at the sight of "one of Verna's dresses or a half-opened can of peaches."

Once again, music plays a role in assuaging the despair of life in the Dust Bowl. Hartwell not only risked losing his farm, he now risked losing his wife to economic necessity. Again, an opportunity came with a sacrifice: he would be able to hold on to the farm for a little longer with Verna's income, but he would have to live on the farm without Verna. Remnants of her remained throughout the house, reminding him of his losses.

Hartwell's diary entries for the end of the year chronicle how much he missed his wife. He tried to drive to Colorado, but he did not have enough money to get to Denver. He spent Thanksgiving alone. Verna returned home for Christmas and stayed for a week. She made forty dollars per month, and sent her husband five dollars every two weeks. Hartwell had sold his farm machinery. He felt like a failure and he was desperately lonely.

Hartwell was unable to sustain the farm that he and his wife built shortly after they married—a symbol of their hopes to build a life together and to prosper. The loss of property forced Verna to take menial work wherever she could get it and to retain it to support her husband, who had no other means to sustain the farm or to feed himself.

Hartwell's entries for 1939 depict his loneliness. In late February, the bank foreclosed on his farm. He continued trying to plant corn, though the wind was "chilly" and "driving." By August, the crop was destroyed. September was one of the driest ever. This feeling was confirmed by the Weather Bureau, which recorded it as the driest in 40 years. Hartwell also noted the start of the Second World War in Europe. For his birthday, Verna sent him a dollar. He used it to buy himself dinner at a hotel. By the end of the year, the bank seized the property the Hartwells had owned since 1909. Don Hartwell later found work on a government road crew, while his wife stayed in Denver. She returned for Christmas.

By the end of the decade, when the region was recovering from the damage caused by the plow, Hartwell's farm and his hopes for the future had been taken away from him. He saw the world changing around him, but he did not feel like a part of any of it. His role was largely passive. He relied on Verna's income to survive until he found a government job, which may not have even been permanent. Still, he and his wife retained their tradition of celebrating holidays, which provided them with some sense of stability.

CHAPTER 25: RAIN

President Roosevelt was set to visit Amarillo, Texas on July 11, 1938. He chose Amarillo because it was the headquarters for Operation Dust Bowl, and the president wanted to see how farmers were managing to hold down the soil. A hundred thousand people gathered to see Roosevelt. The wind gathered force and the clouds thickened, and people feared a dust storm. The year had been dry and exceptionally windy. Still, Hugh Bennett and Roosevelt's initiatives were taking root. Roosevelt's trees had been planted, and Bennett hoped that seven million acres would eventually be replanted in grass.

The visit was a triumphant one. People arrived to celebrate the president who had not only preserved the land, but had also devised ways to keep the nation fed using agricultural products that no longer sold on the free market. Amarillo had been where farmers sent their starving livestock to be slaughtered. Though the clouds looked ominous, people's spirits were up. Even with the threat of another dust storm, it seemed that things were getting better.

By 1938, the New Deal had run out of steam. Over four million people lost their jobs amidst government cutbacks. The stock market also fell again. Those in the High Plains, however, remained hopeful because something had been done to keep the faith.

Roosevelt's economic programs were unsustainable, but his grassroots efforts had provided a guideline for mending the soil and for pursuing other conservation efforts.

Melt White returned to the old **XIT**, outside of Dalhart. He found "new boomers" who were drilling deeply into the Ogallala Aquifer. The newbies wanted no part of Bennett's preservation initiatives. They believed that the water from below would never run out, and that they could plant all of the crops they wanted.

The desire to make money again preceded any wish for sustainability. Greed also encouraged people to overlook the inevitable consequence of natural resources running out.

In Amarillo, the land still showed signs of disorder and disrepair. Then the rain started. Roosevelt had ridden in an open car and had no hat. The rain pooled in the street, and the president saw a good omen in the rainfall. He said that he wished people from other regions could see more of the plains; perhaps then there would be less ridicule. Still, he would never give up on the nesters. He believed in the power of restoration, and was starting to believe that the conditions that caused the Dust Bowl could have been prevented. He left to begin work on planning for an impending war. President Roosevelt never returned to the High Plains.

The "good omen" was an indication that Roosevelt's conservation policies would benefit the region in the long-term. The rain, normally a depressing damper on an outdoor event, was a welcome respite from years of drought. Roosevelt had come to show respect to the people he had championed in his first campaign, though their needs would become less relevant during his years as a war-time president.

EPILOGUE

The High Plains never recovered from the Dust Bowl. The land has healed in some places, but in others it is still deeply scarred. The government bought back 11.3 acres to return to grassland. The original goal was 75 million acres. Some animal species are missing or endangered, and the indigenous people never returned, despite New Deal attempts to buy them rangeland. The Comanche live on a small reservation near Lawton, Oklahoma. They still think that the old treaty lands belong to them.

Despite the fact that the Comanche were clearly betrayed, they insist on upholding the honor of their end of the agreement, which declared certain lands their own for grazing. The Anglos had not fulfilled their commitment to restore the grasslands fully, and their neglect had additional environmental consequences.

The trees from Franklin Roosevelt's arbor dream have mostly disappeared. Around two hundred and twenty trees were planted and cut down in the postwar era, after the regular rain returned in the 1940s. Occasionally, a visitor to the plains sees a row of elms or cottonwoods, but no one seems to remember how they got there.

The willingness to cut down the trees in an effort to create more farmland was an effect of farmers' belief that the worst was over; the plains would never again be a Dust Bowl, they thought.

Currently, less than one percent of jobs in the U.S. are in agriculture. The farm population on the plains has shrunk by 80 percent. The subsidy system has persisted, however, giving some farmers up to $360,000 per year. However, those subsidies generally go to corporate farms that push small suppliers out of business. Only a handful of farmers still work on homesteads in No Man's Land and the Texas Panhandle.

The economy has long shifted away from agriculture. During Franklin Roosevelt's administration, manufacturing became the dominant industry. In the late-20th century, manufacturing was unseated by the service economy as the primary source of jobs. Both manufacturing and service jobs required more people to move to cities.

The Ogallala Aquifer is the nation's biggest source of underground freshwater, but it is depleting rapidly. It is declining at a rate of 1.1. million acre-feet a day. Though it provides 30 percent of the water used for irrigation in the United States, it may be completely depleted in one hundred years.

Excessive exploitation of the aquifer—a finite water source—is an indication that the lessons of conservation were not effectively passed down, or that they simply do not matter to those who value short-term profits above all.

The dust storms returned in the 1950s after a three-year drought. There were then more droughts from 1974-1976 and 2000-2003. However, this time, the soil did not drift. Hugh Bennett's soil conservation districts had managed to hold the earth in place, as he said it would. Bennett died in 1960 at the age of 79, and is currently buried in Arlington National Cemetery. His soil conservation legacy is the only New Deal grassroots operation that persists to date.

Bennett's legacy is not only the prevention of more devastating dust storms, which endangered public health and the sustainability of farms, but also instilling an understanding that seemingly abundant resources are finite and that we can maintain them only through cooperation and regulation.

Dalhart, Texas never recovered its heyday population. At the entrance to the town is a monument dedicated to the **XIT** cowboys, and every year, the town holds a celebration in their memory. John McCarty never returned, and took up painting in later years—portraying "heroic" dust storms. He died in 1974. Melt White lives with his wife of more than sixty years, Juanita, and worked as a house painter and paperhanger, though he still identifies himself as a cowboy. He keeps a couple of horses near the old XIT.

For McCarty, Dalhart mainly existed in relation to the Classical narrative that he constructed around it. Its people were "Spartans," and the storms were examples of the ways nature tested the spirits of its people. White, too, has a vision of the town that is somewhat incompatible with what it has become, and one that is also nostalgic for one phase of its history.

Boise City barely survives with three thousand people. The Folkers family still owns its homestead. Hazel Shaw had another child, Jean Beth. Charles died in 1971, while Hazel outlived all of her friends. She died in 2003 at the age of 99. She told her grandchildren that she missed No Man's Land. Inavale, Nebraska, where Don Hartwell lived, is a ghost town. A neighbor stopped Verna Hartwell from burning her husband's diary, which was turned over to the Nebraska Historical Society in Lincoln. Ike Osteen remains in Baca County with his wife. He enlisted in the army during World War II and fought on the beach at Normandy on D-Day. His mother died when she was 92. Ike still puts in a full day's work on chores, and loves life on the High Plains.

Though the population of the High Plains has been depleted because of changes in the economy, which required people to move closer to cities, some, such as Osteen, remained dedicated to the land. Osteen's war experience may have committed him more deeply to the plains, whose spirit of freedom was threatened during the war. In trying to forget the dusters, which ruined her farm and spoiled her marriage, Verna nearly deprived the nation of a key aspect of history, told by a man who barely survived the wrath of the plains.

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