

# Black Blizzard

THE DUST BOWL WAS ONE OF THE WORST NATURAL DISASTERS  
IN AMERICAN HISTORY. WHAT WAS IT, AND HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

1 Imagine this: You're eating breakfast one Tuesday morning, minding your own business. You chance to look out the window.

"Ma! Dad!" you yell. "It's back. Take cover!"

2 Even though it's nine A.M., the sky in the distance is pitch black. A dry tidal wave of dust and dirt — 7,000 feet high — is rolling, howling towards you. Your parents race to cram wet towels in the spaces under doors and windows, as the huge black cloud rumbles closer.

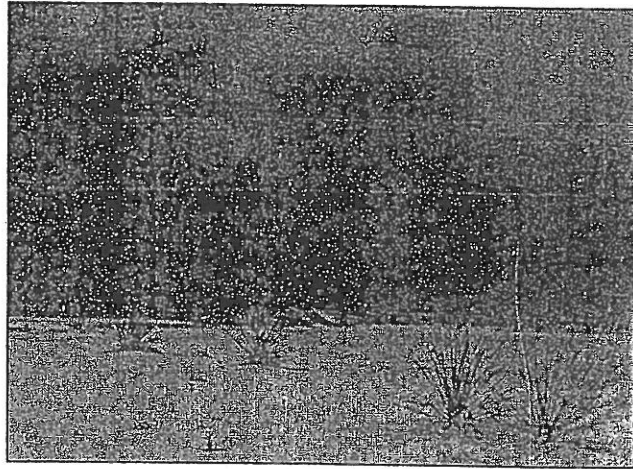
3 It's an eerie sight. In front of the cloud, birds fly and rabbits run, terrified. Soon the cloud is here. The sky is pure black. The wind is screaming, pelting your tiny house with dirt. Your mom hands you a wet towel, which you put over your face, but you can still taste the dust, feel it with every breath, gritty between your teeth. You huddle in the middle of the room with your family in the total darkness, and wait for the dust storm to end.

## A NATURAL DISASTER

4 In the mid 1930s, large areas of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, and Colorado were hit by hundreds of these storms. Together, the storms made up one of the worst natural disasters in America's history.

5 The dust storms destroyed the land, ruined the economy of the whole area, and threatened the lives of most of the population. Everyone who could, picked up and moved west. It became the greatest peacetime migration ever in America. How did it happen?

6 From 1900 to 1930, many families bought or leased small parcels of land in the Plains states, and built farms. The area was mostly dry grasslands, where



March 1936: A dust storm rises over the Texas Panhandle. Horace Ray Conley of Foss, Oklahoma, said storms like these made the sky "boil red, blood red."

7 crops are difficult to grow. With hard work, the farmers were able to grow wheat and corn, and to raise cattle.

8 But in 1931, a terrible drought fell across the middle of the nation. America was already suffering from the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. Now, from 1931 to 1935, the farmers got almost no rain at all.

9 For five years in a row, their corn and wheat crops failed. Farmers had no income, and couldn't pay their mortgages. And soon their financial troubles were matched by the horror of their surroundings.

## THE SOIL BLEW AWAY

10 With no rainfall, the soil in the area became loose, dry, and dusty. The region's native wild grasses, which had served to hold the soil together, had been replaced long ago by crops, which now dried up and blew away.

Soon, heavy winds began to howl, picking up

from *Scholastic Scope*, V46, Issue 14, March 23, 1998, p. 15-16; photos from *Children of the Dust Bowl* by Jerry Stanley  
© 1992 by Jerry Stanley; Eyewitness account from *The American Experience: Surviving the Dust Bowl*, PBS Online

the dust and soil. When the winds reached 50 or 60 miles an hour, they picked up the topsoil right off the ground. The flying dust buried roads. It flew through the walls and windows of flimsy farmhouses. It killed cattle, and ruined the engines of vehicles. Old people and children caught outside were suffocated. Thousands of others died slowly of "dust pneumonia."

The dust storms were the last straw for many area farmers. They had already suffered through five years with little or no income because of the drought. Now, banks and mortgage companies took their farms, sending tractors to knock their houses down and run them off the land. The farmers, with no other choice, packed up their families and meager belongings and headed west.

More than 1 million people migrated west from the Plains states during that time. Poor, dirty, and hungry, they rumbled down Route 66, searching for work picking crops, digging roads — anything that would keep their families from starving.

### TOUGH TIMES

But things were tough in the West, too. There were not enough jobs for all the new arrivals. Few could afford housing. Most of the migrant families camped or "squatted" wherever they could.

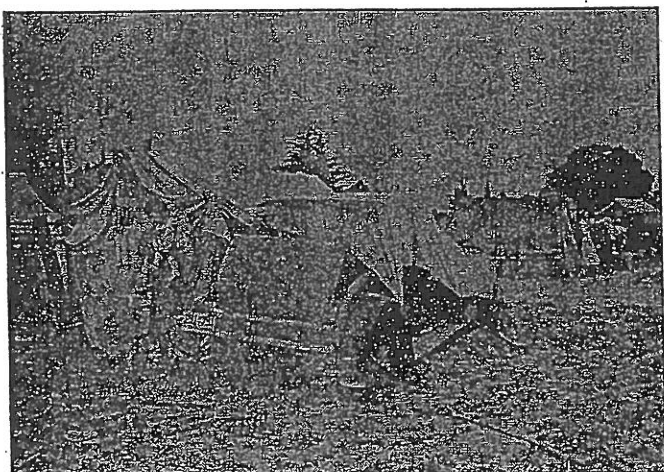
Many native Californians resented the migrants, calling them "Okies," and spreading rumors that they were mentally retarded. They felt the migrants were



*A migrant woman, recently widowed and the mother of six children, in an "Okieville" in 1936. This photograph, taken by Dorothea Lange, was widely published and, like John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, drew the attention of the American public to the plight of the Okies in California.*

ruining local schools with overcrowding. Mobs of local men, armed with clubs and ax handles, raided the squatters' camps and tried to beat the migrants into leaving.

Eventually, as America came out of the Great Depression, things began to improve for the migrants in California. Within a few years, the rains returned to the Dust Bowl, and people began farming again. Over the decades since, there have been several other serious droughts in the Plains states. But the Dust Bowl of the 1930s will always be remembered as the worst of all.



*An Okie mother and her two children in a squatter camp, or "little Oklahoma," in 1936. Their broken-down car still has its Oklahoma license plate.*

### AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

THE DUST I HAD LABORED IN ALL DAY  
BEGAN TO SHOW ITS EFFECTS ON MY  
SYSTEM. MY HEAD ACHED, MY STOMACH  
WAS UPSET, AND MY LUNGS WERE  
OPPRESSED AND FELT AS IF THEY MUST  
CONTAIN A TON A FINE DIRT.

—Lawrence Svobida  
Kansas wheat farmer

Name \_\_\_\_\_ IRLA Period \_\_\_\_\_

## Non-Fiction Text Structures: Review

Directions: Read the article, "Black Blizzard." Please do not write on the copy.  
Use the article to find ONE **EXAMPLE for EACH TEXT STRUCTURE** in order to complete the chart below.

	TEXT STRUCTURE	PARAGRAPH NO.	KEY WORDS	Explain your reasoning
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	Description or List			
	Time Order			
	Compare/Contrast			
	Cause-Effect			
	Problem-Solution			