

The Dust Bowl

Prairie farmers suffer nature's wrath and economic crisis during the 1930s
By: CBC Learning

As a child in the 1920s, Anne Bailey remembered golden days on the Saskatchewan prairie when wheat was king and harvest time was the highlight of the year.

"I loved every minute, especially when I was allowed to haul the wheat to the elevator. It was worth working and waiting for all summer."

By the end of the decade, Bailey was a newlywed, working her own farm. Soon, she watched dark days descend on the breadbasket of Canada. Wheat prices plummeted and the world became mired in economic crisis. Then nature turned on the prairie farmers as well.



In 1929, an unprecedented decade of drought set in. The once-lush fields dried up and the crops burned in the sun

Within a year, most of the crops were destroyed by drought and eventually Bailey's husband joined a parade of other farmers seeking work in the city.

"I have the dubious honour of belonging to the 43% of farm wives who have kept things going while the boss was elsewhere, working for some cash to

improve the farm."

Thousands of families simply abandoned their farms altogether.

Bailey's family had worked the land for generations and she had no plans to budge. Until one day she and her children were alone against nature's wrath.

"My son came running into the house greatly excited," Bailey wrote. "'Come quick, Mom,' he shouted, 'there's a big black cloud coming in the sky.' He ran out ahead of me and pointed to the western sky where sure enough there was the blackest most terrifying cloud I have ever seen on the horizon. It was moving very quickly and the edge of it was rolling along."

The rain would provide much needed relief for the parched fields. But it wasn't a rain cloud, it was the dried topsoil of a hundred farms lifted into the air.

"Panic rose in me. What should I do? Where should we go? The house was sure to be blown away and our nearest neighbour was a mile away. At the rate the cloud was moving I could never make it as I would have to carry the baby. I shut the door tight, picked up the baby and yelling at the other two to follow, I ran for the dug out barn. Already the shadow of the cloud was upon us."

When it was light enough for me to see the forms of the cattle I knew it was safe to open the door, so once again I looked outside. ...Everything-land, air, sky-was a dull grey colour ... our feet sank in sand and we breathed and tasted sand. Such a mess."

Hundreds of millions of tons of parched top-soil were blown by the wind. Black clouds moved across prairies and continued east leaving residue on the ledges of skyscraper in New York.

In the wake, clouds of grasshoppers came in millions, eating whatever was left: crops, gardens even clothes left on line to dry. The cloud of locust passed with a mechanical hum.



Reporter John Gray described the scene in Saskatchewan.

"Anybody who lived in Regina that summer and could not get over being squeamish about walking on wall-to-wall grasshoppers stayed indoors ... Clouds of the insects obscured the sun."

Bailey and other farmers found little relief from nature during the 1930s. There were small gestures of help from other parts of

the country; Maritimers sent salt cod and Torontonians sent money. But as the Dust Bowl continued for most of the decade and wheat prices plunged to the lowest in recorded history, two-thirds of Saskatchewan farmers were forced to line up for monthly aid.

Images by Active History and the Canadian Encyclopedia.