

Mean Clouds

by Jerry Stanley

Life had always been hard on the farmers who lived in Oklahoma, and in the 1930s it was especially hard on those who lived in the Panhandle, a barren stretch of rock and red soil sandwiched between Texas, Kansas, and New Mexico. These people owned small family farms of forty to eighty acres and were “dry farmers.” They had no irrigation system, no reservoirs to store water, no canals to bring water to their farms. When there was enough rain, the Okies in the Panhandle grew wheat and corn and raised cattle. When there wasn't enough rain, they were forced to sell their livestock and farm machinery and borrow money from the bank. Every year they gambled with their lives, hoping for enough rain to get by.

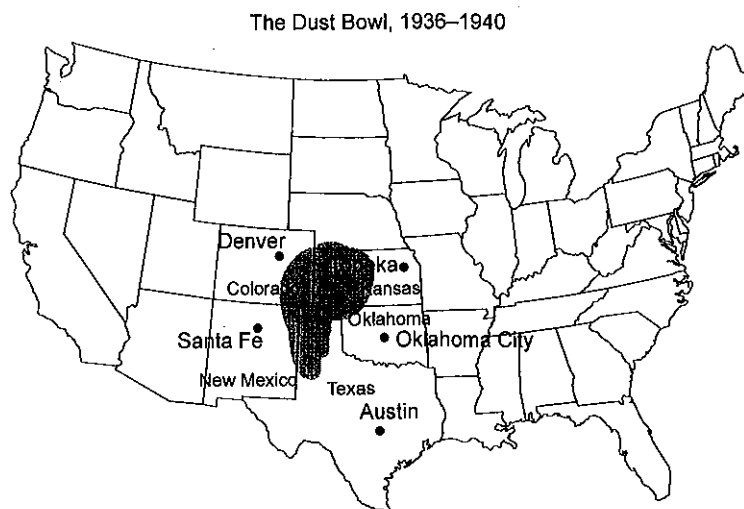
In 1931 it stopped raining in the Panhandle. The sky became bright and hot, and it stayed that way every day. Cornstalks in the fields shriveled from the sizzling heat. Shoots of wheat dried up and fell to the ground. The farmers were caught in an impossible situation. They were already suffering from the effects of the Great Depression, which had started in 1929 when the stock market collapsed. The Depression caused the price of wheat and corn to fall so low that it made growing these crops unprofitable. Most farmers had borrowed money to buy their land and had borrowed again against their land in lean years. When the prices for their crops fell,

many couldn't make payments to the banks that held title to their land. By 1932 one thousand families a week in Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas were losing their farms to the banks. And now it had stopped raining in the Panhandle, and the crops themselves were failing.

Then when it seemed that things couldn't get any worse, they did. The year was 1936. It hadn't rained more than a few drops in the Panhandle for five straight years. One day the wind started to blow, and every day it blew harder and harder, as if nature were playing a cruel joke on the Okies. The wind blew the dry soil into the air, and every morning the sun rose only to disappear behind a sky of red dirt and dust. The wind knocked open doors, shattered windows, and leveled barns.

It became known as the great Dust Bowl, and it was centered in the Panhandle near Goodwell, Oklahoma. From there it stretched to the western half of Kansas, the eastern half of Colorado, the northeastern portion of New Mexico, and northern Texas. In these areas, and

especially in the Panhandle, the dry winds howled for four long years, from 1936 to 1940. Frequently the wind blew more than fifty miles an hour, carrying away the topsoil and leaving only hard red clay, which made farming impossible.



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1. Which statement about the Panhandle in the 1930s is true?
 - A People had only recently started farming on the Panhandle.
 - B The farmers on the Panhandle ate most of what they raised.
 - C The farmers on the Panhandle did not have a lot of experience.
 - D There were few natural sources of water in the Panhandle.

2. In the first paragraph, how does a discussion of farming in Oklahoma **most directly** affect the rest of the selection?
 - A It shows how the Great Depression affected the farmers of Oklahoma.
 - B It discusses how the farmers in Oklahoma watered their crops.
 - C It gives background information that sets up the discussion of the Dust Bowl.
 - D It discusses the impact of the Great Depression on the farmers of Oklahoma.

3. What does the selection suggest about “dry farming”?
 - A It uses irrigation systems.
 - B It requires a lot of fertilizer.
 - C It is done near canals.
 - D It depends on adequate rainfall.

4. According to the selection, how did the Great Depression affect farmers?
 - A They lost money in the collapse of the stock market.
 - B They could not afford to purchase irrigation equipment.
 - C They no longer made a profit growing wheat and corn.
 - D They were unable to sell their crops in other areas of the country.

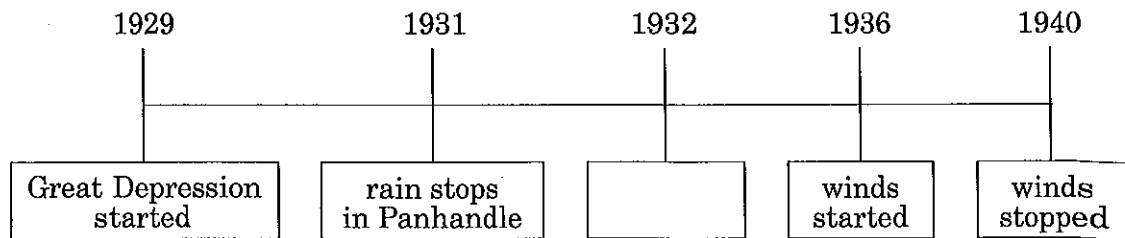
5. What damage caused by the Dust Bowl winds was *most serious* for farmers?

- A the loss of farm buildings
- B the loss of topsoil
- C the loss of water for crops
- D the loss of visibility

6. Which conclusion is based on the information in the selection?

- A Many farmers lost their farms even before the worst of the drought.
- B Farmers started making a profit again after 1940.
- C Most of Oklahoma lost its topsoil in the 1930s.
- D The farmers would have been more successful if they had had larger farms.

7. Which information goes in the empty box of the time line?



- A prices of crops rose
- B stock market collapsed
- C 1,000 families a week lost farms
- D small family farms of 40 to 80 acres
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8. According to the map, which of these states had the **most** land in the Dust Bowl?

- A Oklahoma
- B Kansas
- C New Mexico
- D Texas

End of Set

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