Of Drought and Dust

Expressions in Kansas Literature

by Thomas Fox Averill

I first began thinking about "Kansas Literature of Drought and Dust" when I was asked to present a paper for the Kansas State Historical Society’s 1992 spring meeting to be held in Garden City. I searched my mind and my bookshelves for poetry and fiction that might annotate the subject. Then I gathered my materials and headed for the mountains: I would write the talk in my father-in-law’s cabin in the Pecos Wilderness Area above Santa Fe, New Mexico, then drive through Garden City on the way home and make my presentation.

In the cabin on Grass Mountain, I studied and wrote between hikes in the high country and occasional visits with neighbors. One of those neighbors, Olivia Windsor, has lived in New Mexico most of her life, and she moves up to eight thousand feet from May to October, her water source a spring just a hundred yards from her cabin, her attuned ear able to hear the rushing Pecos River half a mile down the mountain. She seems as far from drought and dust as a person can get.

On one visit to her cabin she asked when my family was returning home to Kansas. I gave her the date, telling her we were stopping off at Garden City on the way.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m from Kansas, you know. I know all that country around Garden.”

“I’m presenting a talk there about the literature of the Dust Bowl,” I said.

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Then it hit, and the air was so filled with blowing dust and grit and sand, we couldn’t see five feet. It got dark. “Dirt storm,” my father said.

— Bruce Bair
I put a mortgage on my farm
Way back in eighty-two;
And if the bankers had let up,
I could have worried through.

—Solomon L. Long

"I know all about the Dust Bowl days. I remember them well."

I went home, returned with my laptop computer, and asked her to tell me about her personal experience with drought and dust. Here is part of what she said:

I was the seventh child—and we had three more in Kansas (all my mother did, I guess, was raise kids). They leased a ranch, and my father ran the cattle. He worked in the cattle business for around five years, but it wasn't profitable for him. So we moved the whole family to near Dodge City where my father went into wheat ranching on two sections north of town.

That's when we got into the dust. Probably had one or two good wheat crops all the years we were there. Went to a one-room schoolhouse, walked there two-and-a-half miles. We had left Belpre when I was nine years old, and I don't remember the dust in Belpre. We had a beautiful home, and we put in lots of fruit trees, and we had lots of big trees and a garden, but the dust took it. Mother said they couldn't have things in Kansas like they had in Missouri—a big drought took the orchard.

My memory of dust comes from when I was around nine or ten. Lots of dust—blowing dust that would hurt your skin. It was really sand—it wasn't just dust. It would hurt our little bare legs. Lots of wind. I remember the wind blowing like a freight train howling down the road. We'd wake up in the middle of the night and think a big freight train was coming down the middle of the yard. We knew the sound of trains. That was about age ten or eleven, and I remember the wind. We stayed inside. You couldn't go anywhere. Sometimes you couldn't go anywhere for a couple or three days. We'd wait until it blew itself out—it'd blow itself out. Oh, we'd play—little children find a way to play in the house. And my mother used to hang sheets over the windows. You wouldn't go to school when they'd have those dust storms.

My father stayed in the wheat business from the time I was nine, going on ten, and then we were out of it. He got out of it because of the dust—blew the farms away. They couldn't raise—none of the farmers could raise—any wheat. I might venture to say they had two good crops, where they made money. We left when I was seventeen."

Olivia Windsor's first-person account, I soon realized, would be a perfect addition to my literary approach. After all, literature is personal, its images and narratives giving detail and texture to historical events. It is not history, but history, without the voices of literary and ordinary citizens, can be as dry as the dust I was to speak to in my talk on Kansas literature. Of course, I needed background on my source. "A personal question," I said. "When were you born?"

"In 1905," she said. "We left Kansas in 1922 or '23."

I didn't know what to say. My "perfect addition" to the literature of the Dust Bowl looked flawed, since Olivia Windsor's family had left Kansas about six years before the onset of what is often called the "Dirty Thirties," that period usually defined as the years between 1929 and 1937. I went back to my cabin discouraged and began to read Kansas poetry for the real examples I would use in my talk.

The Kansas Experience in Poetry, edited by Lorin Leland, is a fine anthology of poems that speak to what Kansans have lived through since settlement.\(^2\) Celeste May lived through dry days, and her poem "The Drought" speaks to the heartache of those times:

The sun beat hot upon the withered grass,
That crackled under foot like molten glass;
And there was heard
No note or call of bird,
Instead of cooling zephyrs' breath,
The southwest simoon brought but death.

Her poem contains images of "white heat," "vegetation, brown and bare," dry streams, dead fish, "scorched earth," "hard privation,amounting almost to starvation." But the poem ends, as many poems of dust and drought, with the claim Kansans like to make for themselves:

But they struggled bravely on,
Conquering hardships, one by one,
Until, incur ed to suffering and want,
Nothing could their spirits daunt.

Another poem, "How I Lost My Farm," by Solomon L. Long, speaks to the harsh economic climate of Kansas and the nation:

I put a mortgage on my farm
Way back in eighty-two;
And if the bankers had let up,
I could have worried through.

But prices for the things I raised
Kept lowering all the time;
And for the things I had to buy
Kept always on the climb.

Long's "infernal mortgage/Kept a daylight length ahead," until he ends up losing the farm, and having to rent land.

Still another poem, "The Prairie Pioneers" by C.L. Edson, speaks to the sacrifice of hope, even life, to harsh conditions:

Ever the hot wind blew, sapping the famished corn;
The night, unblessed by dew, fevered the breath of morn.
A man agape at the skies where no cloud fleeces go;
Weeping, the broken woman lies in the dugout's furnace glow.

His hope, like the sod corn, curls and wilts
She write on a bed of cotton quilts
In a mother's nameless woe.

O, wind, you are hellish hot; death is the song you sing;
The eggs in the quail's nest rot under her tortured wing.
Dust in a choking cloud waves and sits and flies;
Dust is the dead babe's pauper shroud; on her sick breast it lies.

The sod corn crumbles and blows away,
Chaff in the clouds of smoking clay,
Surging against the skies.

Allen Crafton, who later became a professor of theater at the University of Kansas, wrote from a young person's perspective about the dry, death-dealing prairie. His "The Prairies Possessed" addresses the prairie in blunt statements such as "I saw no hope in your eyes," "I heard no song in your sighs," "I beheld no God in your dust," "I'm content with the scars of truth/That I bear from your bitter lashes." In the poem he is bidding the difficult prairie farewell.
P. Roy Brammell's "Desert" also reads like a young person's questioning of an environment. The earth is "dried to a powder," "strewn with choked brown grass"; "stream beds are dry," and "bones like scattered, white as snow beneath the sun." Brammell ends his poem with the lines "God, the waste! the quivering waste! Where things grow up to die!"

A very recent memoir recounts days of drought and dust, just as the poems do:

My father figured . . . we were in it for the long haul. What else was he to think? Stepping out of the milk barn with my pail, I saw him running toward me. He had a look of resignation on his face I hadn't seen before. He blocked the barn door. Only then did I notice something different about the air. It had a brown color, and the sun was an orange disk. Then it hit, and the air was so filled with blowing dust and grit and sand, we couldn't see five feet. It got dark. "Dirt storm," my father said.

In the stores merchants kept sheets over the merchandise and in our house mother swept up the dust and threw it over the edge of the second story porch in a scoop shovel. "Go-o-o-d d-a-a-mned dirt," she drawled. The government stepped in and formed something called the soil bank which paid framers so much an acre to simply quit and let things go back to grass. We had disaster payments and soil bank payments and scraped by. It rained that fall or the next year, but Harold had to borrow the money to buy the next sheep herd. He had been wiped out.

Each of these literary examples speaks to the conditions of drought and dust, giving personal voice, as Olivia Windsor does, to economic hardship, daily struggles with heat and wind, crop failures, mental and physical despair, and the closeness of death. But these examples have one other thing in common with Olivia Windsor's account: none of them comes directly from the Dust Bowl, from the period 1929–1937. May's "The Drought" was published in 1886. Long's "How I Lost My Farm" in 1890. Edson's "The Prairie Pioneers" in 1914. Crafton's "The Prairies Possessed" in 1924. Brammell's "Desert" in 1927. And the final "dirt storm" memory comes from a recently published memoir by Bruce Bair, who is writing about 1956.

This literature shows that Kansans have a long and continuing tradition of writing about dust, drought, and economic hardship. When the Dust Bowl days descended upon Kansas and the Great Plains, literary Kansans did not have to invent a

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whole new literature to incorporate a new experience: they wrote with knowledge and power, their edge already sharpened by years at the grindstone of harsh weather and hard times.

Velma West Sykes, in "Dust Storm," is adding to a tradition, not creating one, when she writes:

The farmer, facing doom, protects his stock,
Then makes his bitter way from barn to house;
His right-lipped wife stuffs window-cracks that mock
The tidy ways that women-folk espouse.

They light the lamp, noon but an hour away,
And sit in silence, stricken past all speech.5

Edna Becker even alludes to the constant tradition of harsh conditions in her poem "Dust-Bowl Farmer":

He had seen the scourging dust
Destroy his greening wheat, and now
His field stretch to the sky,
A barren waste.

But in his veins the blood of sturdy pioneers ran cool,
And he, season by the endless wind,
The blazing sun, the drought, the lonely plains,
Looked at the ground and said,
"I aim to try again."6

Becker's conclusion is the watchword of much of Kansas literature, which might take the state motto as its theme: "Ad Astra per Aspera," or "To the Stars Through Difficulties," or, as William Allen White wrote: "to the stars by hard ways, is the State motto, and kindly note the 'hard ways.'"7 "I aim to try again" reflects the Kansas spirit in the face of all those things pioneers were seasoned by: "endless wind," "blazing sun," "drought," and "lonely plains." And this spirit seems doubled during hard times.

Because Kansas Dust Bowl literature is so much in the tradition of other Kansas hardship literature, other stories of courage, John Ise's *Sod and Stubble* might be read as an important Dirty Thirties book. This classic Kansas work is the story of Ise's mother, Rosie Ise, a seventeen-year-old girl who married an older German farmer in 1873 and came with him to central Kansas, near Downs. The book ends in 1909, when Rosie sells the farm and her belongings and goes to live in Lawrence. What makes the book important to this discussion is its publication date, 1936. John Ise, economist, would have been very interested in the history of people like his parents, people who had survived against great odds, had become landowners, had raised eleven children, and had succeeded, as he writes in his introduction, in sending "nine of them through college, and some of them afterward to Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, the University of Chicago, and the University of Zurich, Switzerland." He calls his book "a story of grim and tenacious devotion in the face of hardships and disappointments, devotion that never flagged until the long, hard task of a lifetime was done."8

Obviously, Ise wanted *Sod and Stubble* to speak to a contemporary audience who, especially in his own state, was struggling to keep its spirits up during hard times. Contemporary reviews spoke to this wish. The *New York Times* wrote:

Their story is a story of heroism... that went on day by day for twenty years, constantly meeting new perils, shouldering new burdens, surmounting new bewilderments, and reaching a victory not merely material in the end... It is a stirring book.9

A regional review spoke directly to those people who might be flagging after years of economic hard times and environmental disaster:

6. Ibid., 102.
poor to no medical care, and hard economics. In fact, when Henry thinks of taking out a mortgage on the farm, Rosie makes a litany of disasters:

It's always bad luck. Anyhow, that's what you have to figure on. If it isn't hot winds, it's chinch bugs, or grasshoppers, or black leg, or cholera, or distemper, or something you didn't expect. Interest is a terrible thing anyhow, a terrible thing, the way it eats and eats, due twice as often as it ought to be, and always at the hardest time.¹¹

But Ise has a Kansas sense of humor too, as when he quotes a neighbor, "When we have rain and crops, we don't want to go, and when there ain't no crops we're too poor to go; so I reckon we'll just stay here till we starve to death."¹²

This is the same understatement that Carl Becker points out in his 1910 essay "Kansas," which examines the kind of humor that ignores a tragedy. During the midst of the "overwhelming disaster" of "grasshopper time," he writes:

when the pests were six inches deep in the streets, the editor of a certain local paper fined his comment on the situation down to a single line, which appeared among the trivial happenings of the week: "A grasshopper was seen on the court-house steps this morning."¹³

From the first quoted poem, Celeste May's 1886 "The Drought," to the publication of Sod and Stubble in 1936, to Bruce Bair's 1997 description of a dust storm in 1956, the tradition of Kansas hardship with drought and dust should be clear. The major themes are the harsh landscape, a cynicism about politics and finance, a survivor's humor, and the ultimate survivability of strong Kansans. Not surprisingly, these are the themes of the Kansas literature that comes directly out of the

¹¹. Ise, Sod and Stubble, 183.
¹². Ibid., 112.
Dust Bowl/Dirty Thirties themselves. Five writers
give representative focus to this era of our writing.

May Williams Ward writes most beautifully,
most elegantly, of those hard times. Living in
Wellington, editing a magazine entitled The Harp,
Ward is one of a generation of poets who graced the
pages of Kansas Magazine during its revival in the
1940s. Two poems reveal her art and her perceptive-
ness about the human reaction to the withered land-
scape:

Reversal
Dust again. All our values are shaken
When earth and air reverse their functions, when earth
flies upward and air pressed downward, when earth
is taken
And swirled in the sky, earth that should be massive
and hard beneath our feet, and when air
Is a choke and a curse and a heaviness pushing despair
Under the sill and into the hard-pressed lung,
Air that is meant to be symbol of lightness and spirit,
flung
Down in the dust.
We could not bear it except we must,
For all our values are shaken. What is earth? Is there
anything solid and sure? And what is air?
Is there sun anywhere?

Rain
We had known we should not really starve
Though the cows and the grass had died,
But we moved like sleepwalkers half alive;
Our hearts were dry inside . . . 
Today when it rained we ran outdoors
And stood and cried.14

Julia Ferguson Siebel, who was born in Colby,
was a teenager during the Dust Bowl, graduating
from Colby High School in 1932. She left that same
year and never returned to Kansas to live. But she
returned with two novels, both set in fictional
Kansas towns very much like the northwest Kansas
town of her upbringing.

The Narrow Covering, published in 1956 (ironical-
ly, another dust storm year), is about the life of Ella
Beecher and is set between 1914 and 1943. Ella has a
fanatically religious mother, a depressed brother
who commits suicide, and, by novel’s end, she suc-
cumbs to the family’s despair, a suicide herself. The
Great Depression is slight metaphor compared with
Ella’s own struggles. And the dust and drought re-
fect her own withering life. Siebel adds to the
themes of Dust Bowl literature the great conscious-
ness of biblical overtones that other writers of that
time speak to as well. About two-thirds of the way
through The Narrow Covering, the dust begins:

There was one more good wheat crop, but the
price fell so low, as the Wall Street market dropped,
that it scarcely paid to haul the grain to town.
And then the plagues began in earnest. . . . On a
dull wind-hard day in March, they watched a
brown cloud grow in the southwest, rise tower-
ing over them, brown and denser brown. The sun
yellowed and went out. The town was lost under
a night of dust.

Ella, at home with her daughter—her husband
at work and boys at school—experiences the dark-
ness, the gritting teeth, the running water that
leaves “paths of mud swirls in the sink.” She de-
cides to read from Pilgrim’s Progress:

Their marker was at Christian’s descent into the
Valley of the Shadow of Death, the place as black
as pitch, crawling with unearthly demons and
satyrs, and Ella read until Christian had come
out of that place and caught up with his friend,
and gone on.

Only one thing brings her consolation: “This is one
plague Mother didn’t see, Ella thought. This one she
was spared.”

That evening, people get on the telephones to
check on each other. Siebel writes:

Bood Nelson’s wife must have gone out to close
the chicken coop, too late to make her way back.

14. May Williams Ward, In That Day (Lawrence: University Press of
Kansas, 1969), 72, 75.
We had known we should not really starve
Though the cows and the grass had died,
But we moved like sleepwalkers half alive;
Our hearts were dry inside . . .

—May Williams Ward

When Bood finally found her, lying on her side
beyond the barn, the dust drift sharp around her,
she was dead, suffocated.

The next day they knew there was no wheat
left in Sutton County.¹⁵

The Narrow Covering is bleak, a difficult novel in
its excruciating events and an effective psychological
portrayal of a woman beaten by her life and her
environment. It is masterfully written and representa-
tive of Kansas’s best literature.

C. Robert Haywood, who grew up near Fowler,
Kansas, takes a different tone in describing similar
years and similar events. In The Preacher’s Kid, Hay-
wood writes about Bobby Woodward, a “PK” trying
to cope with “Mr. Hoover’s Depression” in the west-
ern Kansas town of Dalton. Bobby’s voice combines
elements of Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (inno-
cent honesty), Harper Lee’s Scout Finch (adven-
turousness and sense of justice), and author Haywood’s
historical acumen (bigger events lurk behind every
story). Humor is the watchword of the book. As the
cover promises of the stories: “Over it all hangs the
dust, the Depression, and a growing awareness of
life’s farcical victories and survivable defeats.”¹⁶

One story in particular provides contrast to Julia
Siebel’s darkness. Using the same dust storm set-
ting, same near panic, same biblical overtones,
“Black Sunday Baptism” is lighthearted, humorous.
In it a rancher brings his grandson to be baptized at
Reverend Woodward’s Dalton Methodist Episcopal
Church—North. The father of the child, a Southern
Baptist, has insisted that the baptism won’t proceed
until his father-in-law rancher brings a stock tank
into the church. All is ready and cooperating except
for the weather, and just as the child is ready to be
dunked (and he’s not happy about it), “that black
curtain of dust blotted out the sun, and the church
turned as dark as midnight.” In the dark, everyone
hears a splash and worries for the baby’s safety. But
it’s the baby’s parents in the stock tank, after over-
reaching to recover their son from Reverend Wood-
ward. Pandemonium breaks loose. Some think it
must be “the second coming of the Lord.” Mrs.
Woodward, at the piano, begins playing the nation-
al anthem.

When things settle down, Reverend Woodward
finishes the baptism and hands the hysterical child
to his mother. But she’s wet from the tank, and
muddy from the dust that’s blown in the church,
and the newly saved baby skids out of her arms and
begins to crawl off under the pews:

The crowd panicked again, scrambling around
among the pews calling for the poor lost soul . . . .
He was making tracks for the door as fast as he

¹⁵ Julia Ferguson Siebel, The Narrow Covering (New York: Har-

¹⁶ C. Robert Haywood, The Preacher’s Kid (Topeka: Woodley Press,
1985), back cover.
could crawl, trying to escape from that madhouse. When I stumbled on him, just before he got to the vestibule, he was trembling all over and too terrified and exhausted to resist. . . . he clung to me like I was his last friend on earth, and wouldn’t have a thing to do with his parents, who had put him in harm’s way to begin with. 17

The moral of the story, according to Reverend Woodward, is “He who would seek salvation in murky waters need not rap at my door.” 18

Some Kansas Dust Bowl literature shows a decided cynicism about political and financial institutions, but none more than Earl Thompson’s A Garden of Sand. This big novel, published in 1970, treats the life of a young boy from a down-and-out family who lives in Wichita. Jackie grows up around his Grandpa Mac, who is a salty old Kansan, independent, mistrusting of governments, religions, banks, or any other institution. A short passage will make the point adequately:

He would read about Roosevelt’s latest pipe dream and ask the boy, “What do you think about a hare-brained goop like that?” When the boy was noncommittal, “Well, let me tell you, Mister Man, that sonofabitch is going to keep on until he cuts this county’s throat forever!”

He knew they all were. “Thieves, liars, and sonsabitches! All of them! The kings, the dukes, and the czars! The NRA and WPA. The VFW, CCC, AF of L, and the CIA! The god-damned Army and Navy and all the militarists. All the damn lodges and churches, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, and the Uniformed Pullman Car Conductors. John D. Rockefeller, the Fords, the Mellons, the Carnegies, John Jacob Astor, the Pope, and the Great I Am. The Teapot Dome and Tammany Hall! The trusts and monopolies! The Wall Street Gang and the Pendergast Gang, the War Gang and the Three Straws Drawin Gang! Greater thieves never had a gut!” His enemies were an array as far-flung as the eye could sweep and deeper than intelligence could reach. 19

Thompson’s novel is extreme throughout, and later in the plot becomes pornographic and meandering. But the sections about what it is like to be in Wichita during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression are heartfelt, sensitive, and well worth noting as a real contribution to Kansas literature.

And extremism might be part of our radical response to forces outside our control. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, who published two books, The High Plains (1938) and No Rain From These Clouds (1946), understood this Kansas mistrust. One short poem, from the beginning of the economic hard times, serves as an example:

Dark Saying
In Kansas the farmers have raised so much wheat
that in some of their homes is nothing to eat.
Rest easy, food-gamblers, for you have not seen,
as have I, the dark corners where Winchesters lean. 20

Kenneth Wiggins Porter is the quintessential Kansas poet of the Dust Bowl. His Kansas work, collected by the Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, brings together all the themes important to the poetry of this era: the environmental conditions, the humor, the biblical allusions, the mistrust of outside solutions, and the survivability of Kansans. Porter, as a historian, also gives Kansans the best account of what led up to the Dust Bowl. His history lesson, in a series of poems entitled “Ad Astra per Aspera,” includes the gamble of settling the Great Plains in the first place; then the years of buffalo slaughter and railroad building; then the years of hardships so well described in books like Sod and Siubble—grasshoppers, blizzards, prairie

On a dull wind-hard day in March, they watched a brown cloud grow in the southwest, rise towering over them, brown and denser brown. The sun yellowed and went out. The town was lost under a night of dust.

—Julia Ferguson Siebel

are your own, in whole or in part, the names of your children.29

In the final poem, “The Laying of the Ghosts,” after history, and disaster, and wonderful humor in between, Porter teaches an environmental lesson:

But there was a new note
in the grim humorous hopelessness:
We know what’s wrong . . .
we know the reasons . . .
we ought to be able
to do something . . .
Hesitant, bunglingly, half-scoffing,
at last they did:
dark buffalo-ghosts [Porter’s metaphor for dust]
check at the trees once alien to the plains;
swerve, confused, lose speed, amid the maze of winding furrows;
pause, bewildered, in the midst of lakes
(not: ‘a lake for every county,’
pledged by Doc Brinkley,
but many lakes, in every furrow!);
groaning, they sink down at last beneath strange grasses;
slowly the buffalo-ghost is being laid.22

Porter’s final image is the opposite of dust, of harsh land:

From a bush aflame with fierce white fire
we saw a heron tower and spire.
Against the sky we saw him loom
phoenix-like; . . .

Oh curving breast, strong slender legs,
proud arching neck and poniard-bill,
your wings lift up from smoking dregs
the soul of beauty and the will!
Mount to the stars, Oh strong, alive!
Tell Heaven—and us—we still survive!23

Kenneth Wiggins Porter wrote his long Dust Bowl poem, on the request of William Allen White, as part of the dedication of Emporia’s new Munici-

21. Ibid., 1.
22. Ibid., 15.
23. Ibid., 16–17.
The point that the Kansas literature of drought and dust precedes and follows the Dust Bowl mirrors what historians and scientists have researched and written about since James Malin first began advancing theories of "ecological history" as early as the 1940s. As Donald Worster discussed in a 1986 article, "The Dirty Thirties: A Study in Agricultural Capitalism," Malin tried to show that, long before there was white settlement and plowing of the native sod, dust storms had blown across the region. Some of the dust storms in his examples may in fact have been due to drought and others to prairie fires, both events being capable of destroying natural vegetation and freeing the soil to move. Severe, prolonged drought can ruthlessly destroy the grassland ecosystem; it certainly did so in the distant past, might have done so to some degree in the thirties, and undoubtedly will do so again in the future.

Worster disputes Malin's theory that drought alone might account for the disaster of the 1930s. Human interaction with the environment, overplowing, overexploitation, what Worster calls "the human mind and its ill-considered land practices," was a major factor in creating the conditions that made for the black blizzards Kansas writers so eloquently describe. Worster ends up agreeing with the history lesson so well given in Kenneth Wiggins Porter's "Ad Astra per Aspera," also written in the 1940s. That awareness remains up until now, as evidenced in the Bruce Bair memoir quoted at the beginning of this article. His writer/farmer's sense of the issue might serve as a last word to capture the contemporary feelings of our literary tradition:

Drought is the sword hanging over us at all times.... A calamity is always waiting for us. To live on the Plains is to live with the knowledge that drought could wipe us out at any time.

Scientists warn us about it. They take core samples of trees, when they can find them, and carbon-date wood taken from Indian sites, and study annual rings and make estimates. Or they look at pollen composition in sediments, and guess 2000 B.C. was a very dry year. They warn that the whole country sometimes dries up for decades. They don't call the Sandhills of Nebraska and Colorado sand hills for nothing. They're dunes, plastered down with grass so recently there's hardly any topsoil. Three years of rainfalls below ten inches would be enough to wipe out the High Plains. Two years would probably do the job. The cattle would all be gone. What few that were left would be living on stickers, just as happened in 1919 after a single year of drought. Any wheat farmer carrying debt would go under. And the irrigators would pump so frantically they'd lower the water table another ten feet, hastening the day when the Ogallala aquifer is gone. Yet the scientists say sometimes droughts on the High Plains can go on for a hundred years.

We've already had plenty of experience with little dry spells. I mentioned 1919; everyone's heard of the Dirty Thirties; I'm old enough to remember 1956, when the farm received 9.53 inches of rain. The sheep pastures went, and the sheep were sold. The wheat crop failed, and even barley and millet wouldn't grow.

Whether because of environmental disaster, or whether human greed and error, it is no stretch to say that drought and dust, hard economic times, suffering agriculturalists, and harsh landscapes have always been a part of Kansas history and literature. What the Dirty Thirties brought to our literature, in a flurry of words as thick as the dust of those times, was always there in our literary tradition, and probably always will be, as long as there is a farmer to suffer and a writer to chronicle that suffering.


25. Bair, good land, 15-16.