

# Taking No Prisoners

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## [The Dust Bowl: America's Greatest Ecological Disaster](#)

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**By Roger Witherspoon**

*“A decade-long natural catastrophe of biblical proportions ensued, with swarms of grasshoppers and hordes of rabbits descended on the fields. The land itself that they had counted on for their prosperity turned on them with a lethal vengeance.”*

The scenes are stark. The understated narrator is grim. The music provides the mournful undercurrent of the lone violin, tuning up for a dance that never comes. The setting befits a world coming to an end.

This is “The Dust Bowl”, the latest in the string of gripping documentaries by now legendary film maker Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan, his long-time co-producer, historian, and writer. The two-part, four-hour documentary begins airing on Public Broadcasting Stations Sunday night.



It is a subject that nearly everyone in America has heard of. But the details and the personal triumph and tragedy of that epoch are wholly unknown to many. It was premiered before a stunned group of about 500 members of the Society of Environmental Journalists last month, a fitting setting for what the film bills in its opening sequence as “the worst manmade ecological disaster in American history. The heedless actions of thousands of farmers, encouraged by their government, resulted in a collective tragedy that nearly swept away the breadbasket of the nation.

And it is different from Burns’ previous documentaries such as “The Civil War” in one significant way: the tale is largely told by living survivors, instead of actors reading the letters of participants long since dead. In that regard, Burns and Duncan have crafted and brilliantly meshed together two companion features.

The first is the stark tale of the creation of the conditions that resulted in the environmental disaster that is the title of the documentary, and shows how close America came to creating a permanent Sahara Desert in what was its breadbasket.

The second, as the narrator intones, “Is a story of heroic perseverance, of a resilient people who somehow managed to endure of unimaginable hardship after another, to hold onto their lives, their land, and the ones they loved.”

And that perseverance occurred in “a place where children couldn’t go outside, where the air could kill you, where the dirt could blacken out the sky at midday.”

*“We saw this cloud coming in. Black, black dirt. And I’ll never forget my grandmother. She said ‘you kids run and get together. The end of the world’s coming.’ It came like a black wall, choking the life out of everything in its path...”*

*–Pauline Robinson, Union, New Mexico*

The Dust Bowl evolved from the utter destruction of the western prairies, flatlands running from Nebraska to Texas that were anchored by endless miles of prairie grasses. Donald

Worster, an environmental historian at the University of Kansas who is quoted extensively in the film, said the grasses evolved over the millennial for the particular western environment. Their roots extended down to five feet or more, holding the soil in a region which rarely got 20 inches of rainfall annually and nourishing the vast herds of buffalo in a land with few trees.

In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the buffalo were slaughtered to near extinction as part of a government program to kill off the main food supply of the Plains Indians and, as a result, destroy most of the regions Native Americans.

Then, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Congress enlarged the Homestead Act, making it possible for Americans who previously had nothing – European immigrants to white southern sharecroppers – to own land and become relatively rich from the newly opened farmland anchored by the nexus of Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas and the Texas Panhandle.

The land was the incentive to aspiring farmers. Then, government experts told the new arrivals that removing the prairie grasses would allow more rain to penetrate the soil, making it more fertile. Further, the government said mechanization was the best way to farm.

As a result, instead of using the single, deep-furrowed plow, the new farmers used tractors with scores of blades which lightly cut through the topsoil in long rows. The film contains vintage footage showing hundreds of tractors in a horizontal conga line turning age old prairie grasslands into endless rows of wheat. The farmers were not oblivious to the environment: they were following pronouncements from government scientists that the soil was “indestructible...and cannot be used up.”

As Caroline Henderson would tell the film makers, “I saw the whole country transformed in a sunset glow. All the brown prairie turned to gold. I could feel once more the lure of this once lonely land.”

That transformation came to be known as “The Great Plow-Up” and, according to historian Worster, lay at the heart of the predictable calamity to follow.

“The Dust Bowl ranks among the top three or five environmental catastrophes in world history,” says Worster in the film. “But those catastrophes took place over hundreds and even thousands of years of deforestation. We created a world class environmental disaster in a matter of 40 or 50 years.”

With the outbreak of World War 1, the government encouraged farmers to plant more wheat in support of the war effort, and set minimum prices which, in turn, encouraged farmers to

plow up more and more thousands of square miles of prairie and supplant them with row upon row of wheat.

As is typical from Burns, the photography is stunning with a deft intermingling of modern scenes of the region with historical footage. Then, there are the people.



Duncan, in an interview, said that “Ken taped appeals that appeared on public television stations in Oklahoma, Amarillo, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas. The appeals said if you or your family have photographs and stories you’d like to tell, please contact this station. The stations then passed the contact names onto us.”

They also went to local historical societies, nursing homes, senior citizens’ centers and held discussions about the Dust Bowl period, and found people who lived through it or knew others who had.

“We also had fliers like the old military recruiting fliers. But these said ‘Ken Burns Wants You and Your Stories about the Dust Bowl.’ And people responded.”

The sight of a roiling wall of dirt 10,000 feet high is stunning enough. These were not simple storms, either. There were the small, localized storms, like land-based water spouts. Then there were the slow lingering ones, which basically created a haze over an entire region. And then there were the monsters that turned day to night and could literally last for weeks.

But what brings that picture to life are the people who were there.

There are women like Caroline Henderson, who would eventually own a square mile of land and a two-story home with an indoor bathroom, describing the “almost level prairie, the marvelous glory of its sunrise and its sunsets, the brilliancy of its starlit sky at night...”

Henderson started her homestead in a one-room shack with her two cats that she called “her castle,” and in an era when there wasn’t much electricity. She later added a windmill to bring up water for her flocks of chickens and turkeys and made additional money by writing

about the western plains for the *Atlantic Monthly*.

The farmers thought they were separate from the rest of the country and immune from its problems. The stock market crash of October 1929 triggered a depression, but it was the best year ever for wheat farmers.

But by 1931, the commodities market crashed and the government asked farmers to reduce the amount of wheat they would plant, to help keep supply down and prices up. Instead, farmers stripped more land and grew more wheat, resulting in a bumper crop in 1932. It was a crop no one could afford to buy.

The farmers had a myopic way of thinking. Clarence Beck, who farmed in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, during the period, said “You kept thinking that tomorrow things would change. So you kept doing what you had been doing. That tomorrow there would be some things that we could do that would be a little better than the way they are. You couldn’t live without hoping that things would change for the better.”

It was a common refrain. Wayne Lewis, of Beaver County, Oklahoma, added “We always had hope that next year was going to be better, and even this year was going to be better. We learned slowly, and what didn’t work, you tried it harder the next time. You didn’t try something different; you just tried it harder, the same thing that didn’t work.”

And they plowed up more grassland. And they planted more wheat. And the dust storms grew.



Henderson would recall “of all our losses, the most distressing is the loss of our self-respect. How can we feel that our work has any dignity or importance when the world places so low a value on the product of our toil?”

*“It was a time when the most diligent of mothers was unable to stop the dirt from killing*

*their children. It was a place where children couldn't go outside, where the air could kill you, where the dirt could blacken out the sky in midday."*

Among the haunting images in "The Dust Bowl" are those of children, wrapped from head to toe in rags to keep the sand from scouring them as they headed off to school. And sand makes it hard for adults to breathe, and for children to live.

Robert 'Boots' McCoy of Texas County, Oklahoma, recalled that when the first major dust storm came, "it scared us to death. We didn't know what to think. We was at home and Dad was gone..."

"When it hit in the middle of the day it was just like midnight, with no stars. It scared the heck out of us. Mother was praying and we stayed pretty close to Ma."

His Mother was praying because she was pregnant with twins, who were delivered during the midst of the storm. "They couldn't breathe, though, and died that same day," recalled McCoy. "A neighbor went to the store and got some number 12 shoe boxes and we got some cotton and put the boys in those shoeboxes and that's how they were buried."



And then, there were the Coen brothers, Floyd and Dale, from southwestern Kansas. They sat side by side, talking calmly into the camera about what it was like before and after the storms came.

"When times were good," recalled Dale, "it was so lush that we would sleep outside under the stars."

But then the storms came, said Floyd, "and you felt like it was going to crush you." And he talked about the bed they shared with their little sister Rena, age two, who had more and more troubled breathing in the ever-present dust. They watched as she gasped more and more for air and then, at two and a half, she died.

And they were silent for a minute. And Floyd cried.

"It was an incredible and heartbreaking story," said Duncan. "And it's amazing how they – now in their late 80s and 90s – told the story as if it happened the day before. That's how

raw and vivid the memory was for them.”

It is a raw and vivid and extraordinarily well executed documentary that makes viewers marvel at the overpowering strength of nature unleashed, the arrogance and folly of crafting policies designed to tame the environment rather than live with it, and the resilience of those live through such a preventable disaster and rebuild their lives.

Much of the destruction wrought by Superstorm Sandy resulted from years of over development in low-lying areas without provisions for inevitable floods, and political posturing that ignores ongoing climate change. For nearly a decade, the region has had studies showing that rising sea levels would result in Category 1 hurricanes having the destructive impact of a Category 4 hurricane because they were starting from a higher sea level and the winds would cover a bigger area. A 2004 report from NASA and the Columbia University Earth Institute even predicted flooding of the subways and tunnels from what would become regular, rather than once-in-a-lifetime storms ( <http://rogerwitherspoon.com/pdfs/enviro/risingwater.pdf> ).

The fact that nothing was done about it is all too familiar. “The Dust Bowl” revealed there was a series of droughts followed by dust storms in 1951 and 1952. These weren’t as severe as the earlier storms because about half the farmers had changed their methods. They were planting windbreaks and prairie grass between discreet wheat fields instead of planting nothing but wheat as far as the eye could see. But those who didn’t mend their ways, or didn’t believe the cycle of drought and wind could come again, saw they farms blow away.

“After the ‘50s,” said Duncan, “there is an additional wrinkle. The technology was developed that allows the whole region, from Nebraska to Texas, to dip into the Ogallala Aquifer to irrigate their land. That encouraged many farmers to cultivate corn, which requires more water than does what.

“There are a lot of concerns that they will deplete the Ogallala, and that water is not from last year’s rainfall, but from glaciers that retreated 10,000 years ago. When it’s gone, it’s gone.”

