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Dust Memories

On the way home from a meeting recently evening, I was tuned to National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." The subject was the lack of rain, not only in Colorado where forest fires are raging but also in Texas and Oklahoma where the drought is serious enough that farmers have already had to plow under failed winter wheat crops and are unable to start summer planting because of the lack of moisture. The speculation was about whether another dust bowl is beginning. The Oklahoma agent being interviewed described the heavy red cloud of dust he saw on the horizon early that morning as he was driving to Enid for an emergency meeting.

The reporter asked about the anti-dust erosion activities that were sponsored by the Federal Government in the early thirties when wind and the lack of rain were threatening not only the current crops but also those of the future as the fertile soil was swept into the sky and blown far away. He described some of the successful activities such as strip crop protectors in the form of rows of trees planted every mile or so on the southern perimeters of farm acreage. In the fifty to sixty years since the planting of those strips, the trees have grown to forty or fifty feet in height and have served well to protect newly planted fields from the prevailing hard southern winds. However, with the success of the strips and the passage of time during which the climate has been kinder to farming in the form of better rainfall, even floods at times, farmers have begun to cut down some of the trees in order to increase the acreage of their successful crops. And some of the other conservation projects have been abandoned.



I whiled away the rush-hour traffic delays by trying to recall the dust storms of my childhood. I remembered them vividly, or thought I did: the breath-choking air which drove us inside where we closed all the windows and doors and placed damp sheets across them; the stunted cotton and corn plants with roots exposed by the relentless wind; the old pick-up trucks loaded with forlorn looking families and a few pathetic sticks of furniture headed for California; the drifts of bone-dry sand heaped against abandoned barns and deserted houses. The memories were indeed vivid, but I realized that they must

have been based on the newsreel pictures we saw during those terrible days reinforced by book collections of black and white photographs of Dust Bowl displaced Okies, a collective term for all the farmers and their families whether from Oklahoma, Texas, or Kansas. Then, my reading of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in the late thirties had made those visions indelible and very real. I do remember that when I was a child and we frequently were driving from Dallas to Gainesville, Texas, or Ardmore, Oklahoma, where my aunts and uncles lived, we saw run-down, unpainted farm buildings, sadly neglected but still inhabited by struggling farmers, but the scenery was not as desolate as the Dust Bowl pictures. The land looked vigorous and productive, with some new farm buildings and sparkling paint on old ones, no longer resembling the newsreel pictures of the thirties.

One thing that was not mentioned was the thirties' efforts to cause rain. In addition to the traditional Indian rain-dances there were numerous other efforts to generate rain. I was fascinated with those efforts. Among them were speculations, at least in our house, of the connection of the muddy, rain-soaked fields during battles in World War I and the heavy bombardments of the battles. I recall newspaper accounts of the serious shooting of cannons in West Texas any time a cloud appeared on the horizon, especially if it came from a direction that usually brought rain. Such bombardment brought no more rain than the rain dances did. Those efforts were followed by more expensive experimentation with seeding clouds in order to cause rain. Whenever a minimally promising cloud appeared, some counties in West Texas had funds to pay for an airplane to fly into the cloud and disperse tons of pulverized dry ice. These experiments were repeated over and over with grim desperation in seeking the rain that the parched countryside needed. I think I remember that Dallas County financed such an experiment over the county in vain hope of causing a cooling shower. There were also elaborate generators of iodine vapor that would rise into potential clouds and precipitate the rain, it was hoped; evidences of success were at best equivocal. At any rate, the optimistic die-hards persisted until finally Mother Nature brought us the rains we needed.



I also vividly recall trying to breathe in the red-tinged air, not in the thirties during the historic Dust Bowl Era, but in the early fifties when West Texas suffered a number of mammoth sand storms which affected Dallas. As a youngster in the thirties I was doubtless occupied enough with daily living, growing up, going to school, and other

normal activities that the discomfort of the dust storms faded from my memory until it was reinforced by family talk and the public media of literature, the radio, newsreel, and newspaper. Then, of course those memories were further nourished by the recurrence of dust storms when I had a house to keep clean and children's health to worry about. Then they became very real.

I remember living on Airline Road in Dallas and looking west to see the blue sky swallowed by a moving dense red cloud that soon engulfed us. The damp sheets helped a little, but all the flat surfaces of the furniture and the floors were soon coated in a thickening film of fine dust. We could only wonder about our lungs. We washed our faces and hands often and drank a great deal of water. We were rescued by the fact that these dust storms were finite; they lasted a full day at the most, and there might be a week or more before the next west wind brought more of West Texas into our East Texas territory.

The experience gave me more insight into the plights of the Dust Bowl sufferers in the thirties. The volumes of black and white photographs of gaunt, discouraged-looking men and women, of lifeless children with lackluster eyes, of devastated fields with abandoned plows, wagons, and farm structures - those had reality of a particularly affecting kind and they reappear often enough to keep my memories alive. Moreover, in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, as well as his other volumes of the dispossessed farmers and their families, there was a stark reality that made an occasional stifling dust storm somewhat bearable for those of us who had only read about the bad ones.

Let us hope that another dust bowl is not developing despite the pessimistic predictions of that agriculture agent on the radio. The relentless floods in the Middle West and California during the last two years make me wish that there were some way to save some of that unwanted moisture for the fields that need it, but I'm afraid seeding or bombarding clouds isn't what the dry country needs.