Land Where Our Children Die

By Walter Davenport

IFOR THOMAS

A desert in which nothing can survive. This huge sandbank near LaMar, Colorado, was blown onto land that only a month before was level with the foreground

Drugstores used to run out of sedatives after a dust storm. They don't any more; they keep an extra large supply. But sedatives aren't always enough. Some minds give way permanently under the repeated strain of a world turned suddenly into a black and gritty nightmare. Then the sufferer is likely to try to fix things up with an ax. Mr. Davenport takes you to see what combined avarice, irresponsibility and greed have done to our Western plains

FORTY minutes after the dust storm hit us we were able to see the nose of our own car again. Doc said that the best thing to do after sitting out a dust storm was to eat something and drink something. It didn't matter much what you ate but the doc said that beer was the thing to drink. Beer gave dissolving battle to the dust, didn't dash with affinity swiftness into partnership, like water or milk, to make a mud which stuck to your vitals.

So we had a Poor Boy and warm beer at the Blue Ribbon, the clay-complexioned waitress, Willie May Something, explaining that the refrigerator wasn't working. The dust had got into its gadgets the day before and the only man who knew how to fix it was laid up with "dust pneumonia." A Poor Boy is a whole loaf of bread, like French bread, split lengthwise with a slab of barbecue sandwiched in.

Anyway, we ate all the Poor Boy we could and drank the warm beer. If you're a native of the Dust Bowl and resigned to the dismal things it does to you, little things like warm beer and Poor Boy are pretty minor.

The doc said he guessed he'd go no farther with us. This was his home town and our destination was Denver. When we had arrived in Denver we would have driven about six hundred miles through the Bowl. And that was plenty.

We had started out from Amarillo, Texas. We had seen pictures, still and movies, of dust storms, and we had read about them—Black Blizzards. Pictures and literature had impressed us, of course, but not too deeply. Taking beatings from outraged nature gone amok was nothing new in our life. Hadn't we bobbed around in floods which made chips of whole villages, singed our hair and fried our hide in forest fires which made charcoal of forty counties, weathered cyclones which made fine-cut of the trees we had clung to? Sure—we had boxed calamity from ocean to ocean and had begun to look upon it as a brother act. How about the day our car froze in the front yard of the Arctic Circle, the thermometer at sixty below?

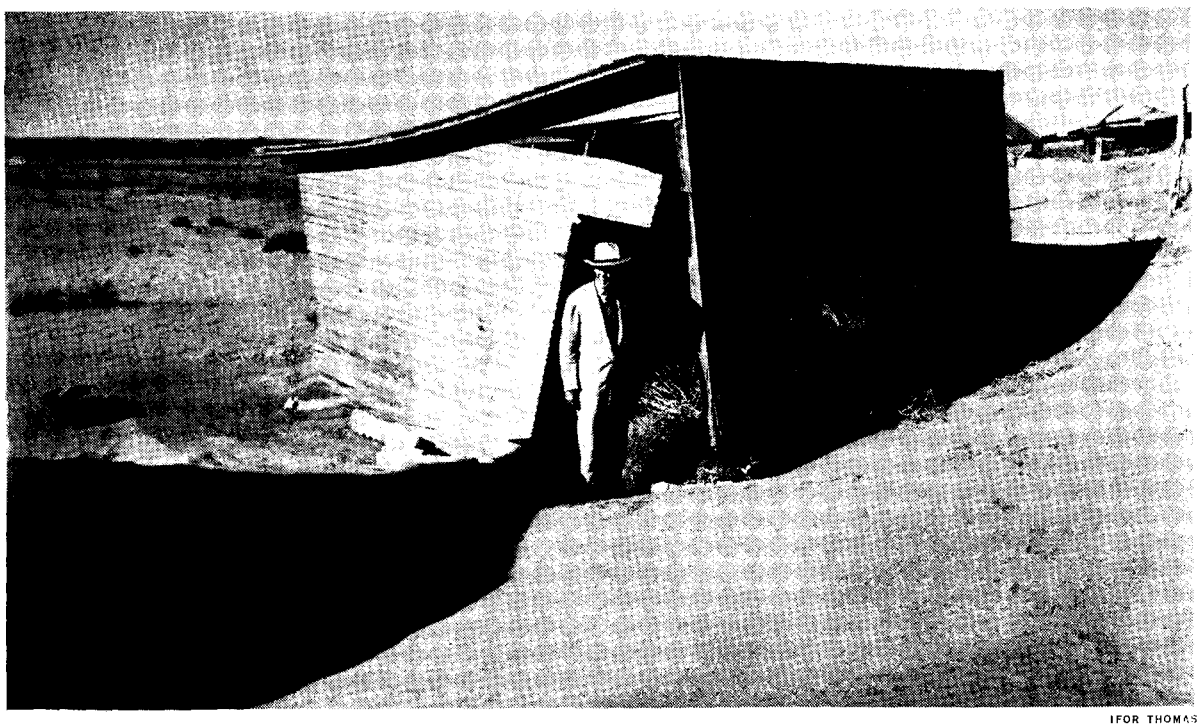
But we hadn't tasted a dust storm. We hadn't had our eyes bloodied and puffed up until they looked like dirty Brussels sprouts by a storm of emery slammed into our faces by a forty-mile gale. We hadn't inhaled a dust storm until closed nostrils forced our mouth open, after which we gulped it until we felt like old John Normans must have felt when the Indians launched him on his tortured way to Kingdom Come. The Indians pegged John Normans to the ground and slowly trickled alkali dust into his mouth—slowly so they could watch him swallow and choke until suffocation ended the fun.

We hadn't known that for two days after our first major dust storm we would be spitting red, scared to our heels because we thought it was blood. And a dust storm tastes just as bad coming up as it does going down.

The doc, after two warm beers, said he'd let us go on without him because he was going to be busy. Other doctors told us that too. After every dust storm their telephones, like their patients, become hysterical. So do their doorbells, because much less than half the Dust Bowl farmers can afford to have telephones.

"Listen, Doctor, this here's Twell Murfick—you know, where you been comin'. It's my wife again. It's like you said—she's bad this time. We got her in her room tied up. Listen, kin you hurry?"

Or, "Doc, kin you come quick? Ackel's gone and done it this time. This here's Jere Hullomon over to Ackel's telephonin' from a fillin' station. Ackel's got



IFOR THOMAS

HEEMAN H. DAVIS

the ax. You can hear 'em screamin'. Sure, I'll tell the police. Kin you hurry?"

Sure, the doc will be busy, like all the other doctors. The police too, and the visiting nurses, the preachers, the hospitals, the undertakers. It gets progressively worse after every dust storm, starting in March with the strong spring winds and the futile spring plowing, and carrying on through June and July until the land is as bare and hard as that table except where the dust has drifted. They've perverted Nature until she too has gone crazy. They've outraged her until she has forgotten that she's their mother. And in her mad rage she is destroying them like Ackel with his ax.

But we'll come back to all that. The story itself is a dust storm. Let's start in the clear, under the high, piercing sun which before each protesting blast from a brutalized nature, as if to warn of the terror to come, turns sullen and dull as if drugged. Let's locate ourselves before the midday darkness covers us.

The Dust Bowl lies on the knees of the Great Plains region. Roughly, its center is the hundred and three counties clustered where five states meet—Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma. There is little gained by measuring the Dust Bowl. It is larger today than it was yesterday. And it will be larger tomorrow.

Relief That Doesn't Relieve

As long as men and machines pulverize dry range land to plant wheat, the Dust Bowl will grow deeper and wider. As long as heedless greed (which will not be rewarded anyway) is pitted against the natural laws we shall have more and bigger dust storms with all their miserable train—famine, violent death, private and public futility, insanity and lost generations.

Standing before a ruined building in a ruined land is Roy I. Kimmel, whom the federal government has drafted to co-ordinate the many and sometimes conflicting agencies for relief in the dust-devastated areas. Below is a typical dust storm as it approaches Springfield, Colorado

Fifty federal agencies and half that many state bureaus have puttered around the Dust Bowl for nearly four years, spending nearly three hundred million dollars to encourage hapless farmers to go on farming hardpan farms which wouldn't and don't support lizards. All that talking, dreaming, exhorting and political hookworming has bought us just more and bigger dust storms, less and lower morale and only one net gain. And that increase is in the number of acreage owners whose only possible crops are federal bounties, state subsidies, emergency legislation and an abiding conviction that it is no longer their privilege but their right to "farm the government."

We set out from Amarillo on a parched morning, the mounting sun behazed by the stinging tail of last night's dust storm. Our nerves were a bit tight, our throat was raw and our nostrils were stuffy. We were to see the wretched, naked desert the winds had left behind; the ghost villages, once the silvery ballyhoo of real-estate racketeers; the abandoned farmhouses, buried to their eaves in eddying dust; the corroded tops of farm machinery, deserted in what had been fields and now buried in sand with only levers and rods protruding from their graves, like pitiful arms thrust upward, beckoning for help.

But we left Amarillo, having seen what dust storms do to a city population. On the prairie it is a vast, unbroken wall—a black, ghostly mountain broken from its moorings and scurrying, buffeting, careening crazily along to Mahomet and you. It swallows what it meets just as water, having broken its dam, swallows the valley. And presently it disgorges you, leaving you and similar puny things collapsed and gasping in its wake.

Its rolling, blundering spree lasts just so long—until the wind it rides dies or another, fresher wind hits it head on, carrying its own dust. And then one of two things happens: either the mountains combine and wallow off in another direction or, being evenly matched, they take the easiest course, upward.

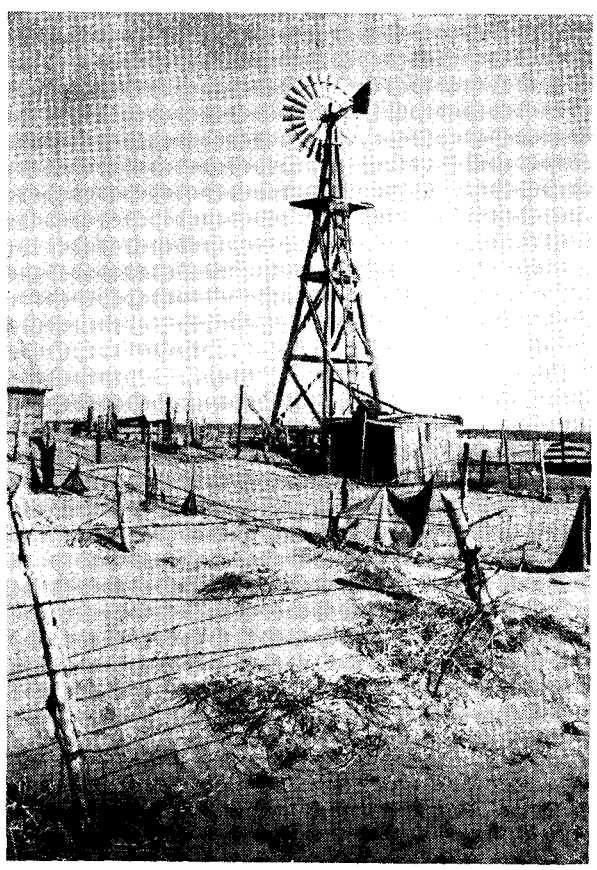
Then it seems that the earth has exploded, hurling an immense bloom of black dust into the skies. If rain falls immediately thereafter, as sometimes it does, you'll think it's raining paint. Or, if the explosion was unusually heavy, mud.

Devastation from the Sky

But where the battle of the dust winds was fought, where the wraith mountains crashed, struggled and departed to fight it out against the sky, the earth will be licked clean—as clean as a polished plate. After the mountain has run you down and passed on you'll likely find your car's carburetor filled with a gasoline porridge. Your head is aching; your throat is hamburger. It has stopped your watch. And don't polish your glasses until you've sluiced them in water; the sand will scratch the lenses. Your body will be gray, though you're buttoned to your chin. You've been sweating, you know, the temperature being a hundred or a hundred and two degrees, and the wind that carries the dust will be a dry sirocco making thirty or forty miles an hour. Where you're sweating most you'll be blackest.

When the booming mountain bucks the city's line it splits. The crazy, strangling mass, accommodating itself to the street canyons, breaks up into columns, each taking a street and running it like Larry Kelley through a petrified backfield. Thus broken, its density is dissipated; you have a murk, a midafternoon twilight, instead of the black blizzard of the outlands. The city's work ceases as the dust surges in.

Windows crash shut. The heat becomes more oppressive. Even metal weather strips find out what it means to meet one's master. In offices the workers leave their desks. If anyone tells you he has got used to dust storms, don't believe *(Continued on page 73)*



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This was once a garden. Note shreds of blankets that failed to save it from dust

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him; he's like the chap who says he wasn't scared under fire in the war. In the city, cooped-up nerves go ajangle quicker than the farmers'. Drugstores used to run out of sedatives; they don't any more; they've learned what the demand will be.

The office building windows are crowded. There is a brave attempt at laughing, but it's involuntary, not real—a mildly hysterical giggle. Voices are shrill. The telephone operators told us that before the dust has gone, before the sun shines again, almost everybody will have called home.

"Howya, Ma—everything okay? See the dust storm? Howya? Everything okay? Oh, sure, we're okay. Everything okay at home? Ah, Ma, don't worry about a little dust. What? The vacuum cleaner clogged up? Whaddeya know about that? Vacuum cleaner. What? Oh, just twenty minutes of four. Why? No! Clock stopped again? Whaddeya know? Oh, sure, we're okay. What? No, nobody 'cept Mildred. Yeah—fainted. N-o-o-o, she's okay. Just hi-strikes. Y'know how she is. Ah, Ma, don't worry about the house. Sure, you just cleaned it and now— Now don't take on, I'll be home soon and I'll help. Some storm, wasn't it? Now listen, Ma—"

For all this there are easily isolated, man-created reasons. On our six-hundred-mile ramble from Amarillo to Denver, keeping mostly to the dusty back roads that we might see the bald clay, the dust dunes, the drifted houses, the abandoned farms and the government subsidy farmers, we heard all of the inevitable shifting of responsibility. Preachers hurled Scripture and the Gospels at us.

Farmers, too many of whom have no more talent for agriculture than we have, told us old wives' tales of changes in the world's weather, in the earth's interior, in the deterioration of grain seed—that all these fabulous factors contributed to their woe. None admitted that he had plowed the land to death, that he was in any way responsible. We heard the radio blamed. Airplanes too. They told us that the mountains had moved, changing the climate, and showed us leaflets from a mysterious, mantle-wrapped Third Lord Blake, the Right Prince Beloved, to prove it. Long before we reached Denver we began to think the whole Bowl hexed.

Fifty Years in the Making

Prior to 1866, man had not damaged that section of the country. Herds of buffalo, as numerous as the white man's cows which supplanted them, grazed and flourished there. The white man, not nature, slaughtered the buffalo.

When the railroads were laid and a procession of grab-and-run homestead laws passed by Congress the spoilage began. The change came swiftly. Until 1886 immense herds were grazed on the Great Plains, which was virtually one great open pasture. By 1886 there were signs of overgrazing. What are called the first of the modern droughts began. Unintelligent use of the land and overgrazing were much more responsible than natural dry years for what was happening.

In those lonesome cowboy days it required between fifteen and thirty acres of what is now our Dust Bowl to graze a contented cow for twelve months. And usually it was nearer the fifteen-acre mark. Today where a cow can graze at all (and the beast needs one of the Agriculture Department's charts to find the place) it takes from a hundred and fifty to a whole section, six hundred and forty acres, to keep a single animal grassed for a year. And even so she looks like a hatrack all year long.

Too few were warned by these signs. By 1920 more than 12,082,000 cattle roamed these prairies. As the great natural pastures declined under punishment, the herds dwindled. Yet in 1935 there still were 10,195,000 cows on the diminishing grass of the Great Plains. And that, the agronomists tell us, was one hundred per cent overgrazing. We saw pictures of the discouraged brutes. Having run out of grass, they were spending their time disconsolately scanning the frying horizon.

A New Crop—of Suckers

As pasturage failed, the real-estate ballyhoo, the professional land boomers and the supercharged chambers of commerce took over. To land already on the verge of starvation came thousands of farmers and persons who either thought they were farmers or hoped to be farmers. Now and then the United States Department of Agriculture tut-tutted and issued dull little bulletins warning the suckers of disasters to come. Too few listened to the government's timid whispers and the bulletins were as hard to read then as they are today. Besides, there was the inevitable political angle—and it was a sharp one.

Towns had long since sprung up—cow towns. When the cows left, seeking fresh pastures, the towns couldn't follow. New towns would arise where the cows settled down. The old cow towns, minus cows, had to become some other kind of towns. Somebody had to pay the costs of county governments which had grown with the herds and now were, like the grass, threatened with extinction. These towns and counties had elected men to Congress, too, and in Washington the voices of these statesmen shook the Capitol's cupola with their star-spangled blurbings of new frontiers for the Eastern farmer who had got down to hardpan at home.

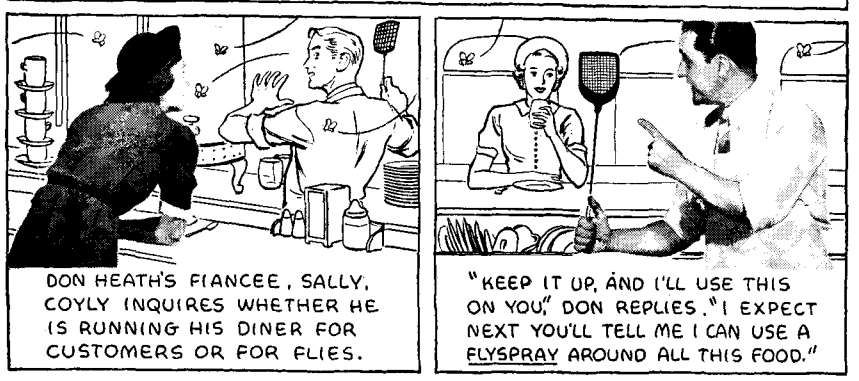
As there were local governments to think about so were there merchants to save, landowners of considerable political potency to be nice to. And some of the latter were important men in Washington. There were lobbies too, to see that Congress did not get too sensible and that the Agriculture Department didn't go Bolshevik.

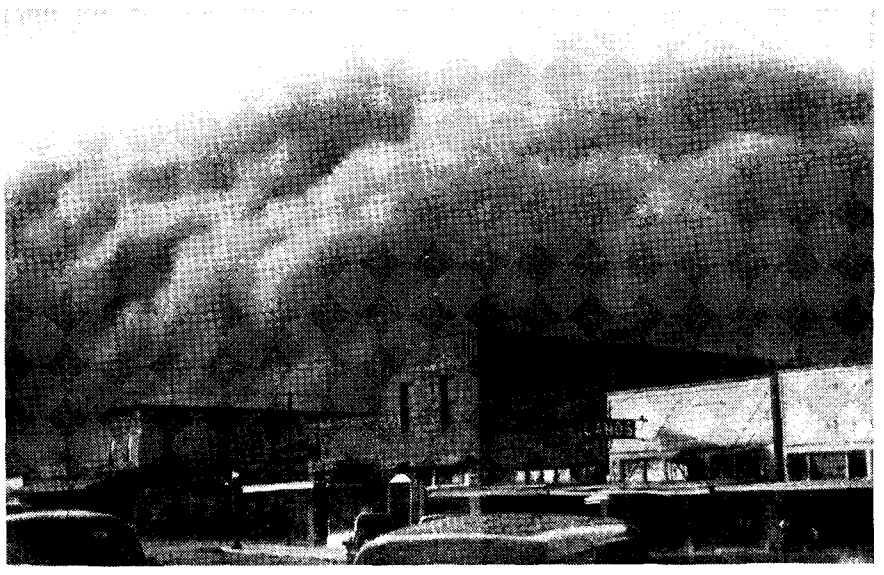
While we were working on that Poor Boy and drinking warm beer in the Blue Ribbon, somebody handed us a large, dizzily illustrated example of the come-on literature which had bedazzled the Eastern farmer.

The book, bearing no sponsoring names, bade all and sundry to "come to the homeseekers' and investors' Paradise." Beneath this there was a picture of the town of Boyero, Colorado. Perhaps in those days Boyero was on its way to become one of Paradise's loveliest subdivisions. Anyway, it photographed well. Today it is one of the ever-widening Dust Bowl's ghost towns.

The literature went on, throwing the whole book at a cockeyed world: "Come you also where health, wealth and prosperity abound and where nothing knocks but opportunity. We offer the new settler success in business, productive farms with land at low prices. Healthful, vigorous climate. Model towns. Best moral atmosphere. Best educational facilities. Come. Buy. Invest. Come, be happy, be carefree, be debtless, be a man." Everything but "be

YES SIR, SHE GOT HER HUG!





U. S. RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION

These three photographs, made less than a minute apart, show the progress of a dust storm as it approaches and envelops the town of Elkhart, Kansas

damned." And note that call to invest. We shall tell you about that.

In large but innocent numbers the open-mouths listened and were lost. They descended upon the southern Great Plains on everything except roller skates. They tell us that one family came from Arkansas in a wheelbarrow—Paw, Maw and two babies. When Paw got tired wheeling Maw and the younguns, which was not heroically infrequent, Maw trundled him and the brats.

Land cost anywhere from twenty to sixty dollars an acre, and if you didn't have the money you merely signed over your first two or three wheat crops to the land company or the private owner. You can buy that land today for a dollar and a half an acre—dust thrown in. Hurry, folks, hurry.

Anyway, the first year or so was fairly auspicious. For some forgotten reason Europe was at war and we, being disastrously inquisitive, had horned in. Europe was fighting in her wheat fields but America begged her not to worry. So we began to plant wheat in our back yards, including the Dust Bowl. And luck of a dubious sort was with us.

It costs a farmer very little to plant an acre of wheat. Likewise it exacts of him a minimum of labor. You plant wheat, then step back and watch it grow—if it grows. The wheat farmer's year is three months of labor and nine months of worry. But that was a year of years for wheat. It produced thirty-five, forty and forty-five bushels to the acre and the Dust Bowl settler, raking in anywhere from a dollar and a quar-

ter to two dollars a bushel, proceeded to go economically gaga, going at times to the extreme of chasing honest county agents and other unsubsidized farm authorities out of the state for daring to prophesy that calamity was just around the corner.

As the land was killed for grazing by overgrazing, so was doom hastened by overfarming. That and the "investors" —the speculators—the suitcase boys.

The suitcase boys, sometimes called satchel farmers, differ from the common variety of real-estate investors or speculators in that they do not hold their land for a price rise, although doubtless many of them would now sell if anyone with a fat purse and a thin mind entered their market. All they looked for were a few cash crops of wheat, after which the land they had bought cheap and held cheaply could go to hell—which of course it proceeded with abandon to do.

The suitcase boys are nonresident owners. They live in the towns and cities, from Amarillo to New York, from Dalhart to Chicago, from Dodge City to Washington. They are lawyers, clergymen, schoolteachers, bankers, merchants, journalists, congressmen and liquor dealers—anything. They own more than half the acreage of the Dust Bowl.

They seldom or never see their land unless it has produced a crop. On such rare occasions they appear, satchel in hand, to collect their half of the proceeds. Between these excursions they kill time by writing steamful letters to Congress, demanding that farm and farmer subsidies be continued and increased. Tenant farmers work their land.

The Era of the Cream Skimmer

Rarely does the satchel farmer cooperate voluntarily with state or federal government in the interest of land conservation. Seldom will he listen with sympathy to the resident farmer's plea that he take simple measures to combat aridity and dust storms. Largely the absentee landlord, the suitcase boy, leaves his tenant to do what he can to raise a crop, firmly declining to do more than buy seed, pay taxes and make down payments on farm implements and machinery. During the past three years it has not been necessary for the satchel farmer to make any investment at all. He has only to apply to the government for loans, sometimes made in the name of the tenant or even a conveniently created corporation, there being quite as many loopholes in the farm-loan laws as there are in the income-tax statutes.

The suitcase farmer's formula is beautifully simple. When presently his land holds forth no further possibilities of a crop, when the topsoil has blown away or has become too thin to cover seed, he merely forgets it. He pays no more taxes. If the state wishes to take title (which it doesn't) in lieu of taxes, let it. The land has more than paid for itself if it has produced a couple of wheat crops.

At the moment, Kansas, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas and Colorado are in the process of adopting laws which would, they hope, compel the satchel farmer to co-operate with the resident farmer in giving scientific battle to wind erosion (dust storms). These laws, in the main, fine the suitcase boy for failure to cooperate, adding the fine to his tax bill. But if he chooses to pay no attention to that tax bill, letting his land go by default, there isn't much the state can do about it. But a vast number of such farms are beyond restoration, nothing left to conserve. The suitcase boy's answer to the state is silence—with a thumb to his nose.

It is usually at this point that the situation within the county, within the state, becomes painfully complicated. If the suitcase boy refuses to pay further taxes, the local government's income is impaired. If the resident farmer takes his cue from the suitcaser, local statesmen face famine. If the state takes over the tax-delinquent property, its only hope of gain is in resale. Few except the federal government are honorable in their intentions toward defunct land.

But the federal government offers only a dollar and a half or two dollars an acre. This acreage price, as anybody can see, is better than nothing. Furthermore, it is more than much of the land is worth.

A Nice Crop of Subsidies

Yet local governments decline to accept the bid unless Congress is willing to appropriate a couple of billion dollars to support them. In other words, the counties demand that Washington pay them amounts equal to what their incomes would be were prosperity reigning in the Dust Bowl and taxes being paid. Mr. Roosevelt's Great Plains Committee in its voluminous and scholarly report frankly advocates such subsidies to local governments.

All of which, you see, is pretty wonderful. While Uncle Government seeks to buy the Dust Bowl at a dollar and a half an acre and not injure anyone's political or personal feelings by exercising his right of eminent domain (condemnation at a set price), enterprising individuals, including quite a scattering of politicians of assorted statures, rabbit-in-the-hat land companies and swift syndicates chase each other around the courthouse trying to buy tax-delinquent land at the price of the unpaid tax bill.

Having done that, they propose to badger the government into handsomer prices while the hapless farmer who honestly but futilely tried to make the land pay for itself looks on in angry admiration and joins some trick association organized by some ambitious politician.

And if the government declines to up its acreage price even the new speculators will unite in wrath, although a dollar and a half or two dollars an acre is a Santa Claus bid. Some of the new owners of this defunct land have already got together, proposing to hold on for oil and natural gas developments. Not that they are any too sanguine of seeing gas and oil arise from their forlorn acres; but they seem to have reason to suspect that the country is not completely shorn of investors who will buy land on the chance of oil and gas being found there one day. Oil royalties, you know.

If and when the government acquires enough of the Dust Bowl to make restoration worth the effort, it proposes to revive the land-binding vegetation which the cows depleted and which the wheat seekers finished with their plows. That, as perhaps you've heard, is why we have dust storms. The grass and roots which bound the land together have been eliminated by the thundering herds and the ruthless plow. Presently there are no binding roots. Then the sun bakes the binderless soil to a cake. Then the plow pulverizes the cake. Then the winds come. Then your farm takes off in a dust storm, returning to earth after a while in the next county or the next state.

And when it returns to earth it covers the growing crops of some other farmer, provided he has any. Whereat he is as woebegone as you are, there being absolutely no way for him to scrape your farm off his and disinter his crops.

To prepare the dead lands of the Dust Bowl for the revival of binding grasses, the government proposes to follow methods to which the Dust Bowl farmer, for

dust-minded reasons, has objected so hotly that his beard has caught fire.

"Nawsir, not me. No slick-hair college squirt is agoin' to tell me how to plow. Nawsir. My father beat the pants offa me if I didn't plow a straight furrer. My father and his father before him were farmers, by damn, and they plowed furrers so straight that they looked like they was drawed on paper with a pencil and a school ruler. No slick-hair college squirt is goin' to tell me to plow in circles. My father and his father before him never told me no nonsense like listin' land, contour plowin' and fancy terracin'. And I say the hell with it even if the gov'ment is offerin' me 25 and 50 cents an acre to do it."

A Drop in the Bucket

Nevertheless, the government proposes to list the land it buys. Listing means plowing with the contour of your land. Thus you avoid the straight furrow which makes a lovely bowling alley for the wind and a perfect run-off sluice for such water as may fall. The government proposes, too, to terrace eroded land so that it may hold the water once the listed land has caught it. We asked the government engineers how long it would take to restore this rickety-orphan land to pasturage. They told us it would take at least twenty years. Some of it, fifty. In the meantime they are holding fast to the conviction that the worst thing that could happen to the Dust Bowl farmer is the miracle of a crop in the next three years. Not that there is much such danger.

For what the government has expended in the Bowl in the past three years, with nothing but dust and uncollectible paper to show for it, it might have bought the thing and erected a nice wire fence around it. It has bought a million and a half acres—here a thousand and yonder a thousand—which sounds like quite a real-estate transaction. But a million and a half acres have only a back-yard relationship to the whole Dust Bowl, which comprises nearly 90,000,000 acres, about 30,000,000 of which are under cultivation.

As we've said somewhere above, about $300,000,000 of federal funds have been sowed in the Dust Bowl area. It has been in the form of loans, grants, relief and all the other dispersal methods we have. Yet nearly a quarter of the Dust Bowl families have abandoned the choking place since 1935, when, according to the farm census, 95,000 families, rural and urban, inhabited the doomed place. Where they've gone nobody seems to know.

As far as the government has been able to learn, 7,000 farmhouses have been abandoned. Today they stand like haunted shacks, sagging and twisted beneath the weight of sand and dust heaped to their eaves. Even the paths the farmers cut through the dust drifts to their doors are filled in. In addition nearly two thousand houses have disappeared—gone with the dust drifts heaped high above the place where they used to stand. Perhaps their ruins will be dug out some day.

In this abandoned land we saw what once were schoolhouses built to accommodate surrounding populations of two thousand. The dust has battered in the doors, smashed the windows, filled the rooms to the bench tops. We passed through an area of East Colorado where, they told us, 934 families lived in choking poverty. In that area there was not one doctor, nothing suggestive of a hospital or infirmary, not even a visiting nurse.

Perhaps we became a bit emotional at this point, but somehow the kids we saw didn't look real. We spoke to a fellow who was plowing dust, sixty miles from a railroad. He talked about raising beans. We asked him how he was going to get to the markets. He hadn't figured that out yet. You see, he'd only been working that dust pocket three years. And it was thirty miles from the nearest school. He had four children, two of them deaf mutes.

Do those figures bore you?

It is fair to presume that a large percentage of those who remain in the Dust Bowl envy those who fled the place. But where are they going to go? They'll tell you quite candidly that they'll stay where they are and eat their dust so long as they can farm the government, as long as the government gives them food and money. The government calls these gifts loans.

Here you shake hands with a farmer who borrowed $700, pledging twenty chickens as collateral. The government can't take mortgaged property as security. The chickens were the only unmortgaged things on the place. They're gone now—eaten.

And farther on you meet a fellow who got a thousand dollars from the government, pledging several emaciated hogs and a couple of outhouses. They hadn't been mortgaged—doubtless an oversight. We met a man who "didn't quite rightly remember" what he had given the government as security for a five-hundred-dollar loan. And everybody cheered when the next Dust Bowl castaway said that he had got "some seed money and a couple hundred dollars from the next government feller to come along" and after talking it over with the wife decided it was "plumb heathenish to squander it on somethin' everybody knew wasn't goin' to grow nothin'."

So he bought a radio, which he has never used because he has no electricity; an overcoat, which he sent to his brother in Massachusetts; a rug, that serves pretty well as a dust screen nailed across the front door, and, among other things, a half-dozen straw hats. He guessed that maybe them fellers down in Washington was scratchin' their heads right smart.

All a Waste of Time

This is but a sketch of life and death in the Dust Bowl. Fifty government agencies have stalked it, walked it, brooded, planned, wrangled and doled it for three years—from the Bureau of Public Health to the Resettlement Administration, Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Farm Credit Administration, the Federal Farm Mortgage Corporation, the Works Progress Administration and the National Youth Administration. A dozen government engineers, conservationists, chemists and agronomists told us that what they were doing was folly—that there is no cure for the Dust Bowl as long as men continue to farm it, or try to farm it. Wryly they told us that we could spend ten or a hundred times three hundred millions and not abate a single dust storm a spoonful so long as men sought to crop land turned to powder.

Their repeated appeals to Washington, their flood of reports, have awakened a government which realizes that ungoverned largess cannot go on. To co-ordinate the efforts of the fifty rescue agencies, most of which have been working along individual lines with a minimum of regard for what the next agency is doing, the Department of Agriculture has appointed Mr. Roy I. Kimmel, drafting him from the Resettlement Administration. Mr. Kimmel is a completely civilized gentleman, with idealism, courage, experience and stamina. He will need all these qualities and several more. He is a native of New Mexico, a graduate of Yale, served a term in Connecticut's legislature and for four years was assistant director of the School of Public Affairs at Princeton. Although he is one of those government

emissaries to the Dust Bowl referred to by the intractable farmer and the speculator as one of the "slick-hair college squirts," he is, in the main and deservedly, well liked—a purposeful, convincing, non-chafing diplomat who believes wholeheartedly in what he is doing. We wish him luck.

Black Horrors

He was with us when we met our first Colorado dust storm. Straight ahead we saw what looked at first to be a half-grown twister—a small cyclone. Then off to the left another reared itself, like a dirty geyser. After that they began to rise all along the forward horizon—a closely gathered company of black giants assembling to raid. Momentarily they grew in width and height, seeming somehow to stand still as our car sped toward them. Then their ranks closed, forming a solid wall.

Then with a hollow thumping like distant artillery, the outriders, the vanguard of blooms, gusts and searching shafts of grit, attacked. We had just time to close the car's windows before the onrushing wall enclosed us.

We turned on our headlights—sort of involuntarily. Anyway, we threw the light switch. You couldn't see whether the lights were on or off. A paper match would have served as well. You couldn't see through the windshield. It was as if we had been buried beneath an avalanche of blankets. Felt that hot too. You couldn't see heaven or earth. We lit the lights inside the car. Every opening was closed, but the dust had filled the car too. The lights inside were dimly visible.

Pretty soon we had to open one window a little, with handkerchiefs over our noses and mouths. It helped some. Had to do something.

The storm lasted about forty minutes. When at last we could see something of the road we relaxed. Perhaps we were stonily rigid during it all; but when we could see again we realized suddenly that we were very tired—physically and nervously exhausted.

We realized too that we had been scared. It was the same silly, unwarranted terror we felt the evening we got halfway up the stairs of that "haunted house" in Nova Scotia. We were afraid because suddenly the lights had gone out—afraid of the unknown, of the impenetrable darkness — because we couldn't see. We're not particularly heroic but we weren't nearly as frightened with forest fire on all sides or when the waters were out of control. Because then we could see our enemy.

Perhaps it all sounds foolish to you. But try a dust storm sometime. The doc laughed at us. He said there was nothing to be scared of, that everybody else on the road had pulled over to the side and was sitting it out like us. Nevertheless we were scared. We couldn't see. We couldn't breathe.

When we got going again, after that Poor Boy and warm beer, we met two others who were scared. A mile up the road two kids, a boy and a girl, ten or twelve years old we'd say, were sitting against what had been a fence. Now it was a dust dune. The girl was retching her soul out. The boy was pounding her back, crying hard and dry, but noiselessly. We asked them where they lived, who they were. They couldn't answer. We tried to coax them into our car. We said we'd take them back to the village. But they wouldn't move. They were still too full of terror.