

# DUST RIDES THE WINDS OUT OF THE WEST: A PICTURE OF LAND AND PEOPLE ...

BY HARLAN MILLER OF MOINES.

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Blotting Out the Sun—A Dust Storm Settles on Wichita, Kansas.

International.

## DUST RIDES THE WINDS OUT OF THE WEST

BY HARLAN MILLER  
OF MOINES.

### A Picture of Land and People Under the Pall, as Soil Is Stripped From the Parched Earth and Borne Away

ONCE again the cities taste the bitter dust of the plains. Pitiless winds skim the precious powdered soil from the lean States beyond the Missouri River and sweep it by the millions of tons across the land. Impartially it settles on bungalow and penthouse, dropping from skies obscured by a baleful dun or orange glow as the sun's rays filter strangely through the billowing microscopic particles flung eastward from the knees of the Rocky Mountains.

Nature, in one of her idiotic frenzies, takes the earth away from those who have not and peppers it thickly on the fertile farmlands of the central valleys, spatters volcanic granules across state papers at the White House, dusts Manhattan skyscrapers and Long Island estates with fugitive real estate from Texas and New Mexico, and reminds an urban generation divorced from the soil of man's old struggle for food. In this time of flux the solid earth becomes less solid, flows with the winds of chance. Powdered gumbo from the Dakotas and white chalk from Colorado mingle in a timely symbolism with the sands of the Atlantic beaches.

Those who have flown across the vast, meagrely watered area between Western Nebraska and the slopes of the Pacific, over the sterile grays and browns of the near deserts, without seeing a verdant landscape until their eyes welcome the green valleys of California, know and never forget the thousand-mile slice of the continent where rain is a rarity—where the dust-storms are born.

Plowed recklessly during the World War and since, denuded of the vegetation which knits the earth against the onslaught of the winds, powdered by drought for years, these arid lands have taken wing. The adventurous dry farmers who plow deeply so that their land, converted into a kind of dust bed, may hold what little water descends upon it, have watched their precious soil blown away by the billions of tons.

THERE is no escape, no shelter from the dust during one of these storms. Dust is on the tongue, in the teeth; it irritates the eyes and stings the tender membranes of nostrils and throat. Windows are clamped shut, but the dust sifts through to cover everything with a brown film. Cracks are stuffed with damp rags and paper; still it enters. Wet sheets and blankets are hung over doors

and windows, but the dust sifts in. To the millions in the path of the dust billowing three miles high, a thousand miles wide, traveling 2,000 miles, the dark storm is an assault by nature more pervasive than any other, a bombardment which can be seen, felt, tasted and smelled.

The dust invades the surgical wards of hospitals; operations must be postponed. It obscures the light bulbs in schoolrooms; classes must be dismissed. Headlights of automobiles barely penetrate the haze; officials halt traffic. So thick and intense is the storm that for the first time dust brings a railroad train to a halt. Mills must close, for dust is mingling with the flour. Grocers cover their counters; only their tinned and boxed goods are safe.

Families awaken long after daylight and find darkness still upon them, and lights burn all day long indoors. Long-distance telephone conversations are faint, for the dust particles are charged with

static electricity and affect the circuits. Women and children, remaining indoors, receive electric shocks when they touch metal dishes or door handles, and wrap them with cloth. Nerves are on edge, as housewives bemoan the need of taking in their washing and doing it over again. "You can write your name in the dust on the wallpaper and woodwork," they tell each other over the telephone. The rugs and carpets must be cleaned again, the chairs are filled with grit.

"How can we ever clean them so we can sit on them again in white clothes?" they ask, despairingly. They remember with bitterness that last year they were forced to repeat their Spring housecleaning in May, June and July, and resolve to postpone the task this year. But habit is strong, probably they will clean their houses as usual and pray for rain.

Those who go to work in the cities become grimy and dirty in a

few minutes. There is no attempt to keep collars clean; girl stenographers are as dusty as their employers. The unfortunate postmen, compelled to walk the streets, wrap damp cloths around their faces and wear goggles.

THE plains are like trampled playgrounds or schoolyards, and the dust blows off them as it does off an ill-kept tennis court. At the snow fences near the main highways which lead toward the Rockies the dust has drifted three feet deep; elsewhere the drifts are as high as a man's head, against houses and farm buildings. Miniature sand dunes roll across the roadside ditches.

Occasionally a rising wind carries the dust high above the ground, in a dingy canopy far overhead, vaulting over several counties, to descend again beyond. Again the sand curtain seems to hang almost suspended in midair. At times a strong wind drives it almost horizontally,

with the force of a blizzard. The dust is blown so violently against automobile windshields that they become coated, impenetrable to the eye. Varnish is ripped off as if with a sandbrush. The steering wheel slides uncomfortably in dusty hands. Sometimes even motors are disabled.

Barbed-wire fences have become electrically charged; sparks come from the horns of cattle huddled in the artificial dusk. Rain mingles with the red earth blown from Texas and Oklahoma and falls in sinister "showers of blood," streaking the window panes grotesquely. There is a sprinkle of snow in the red particles and promptly some one coins an ingenious word for the mixture—"snust."

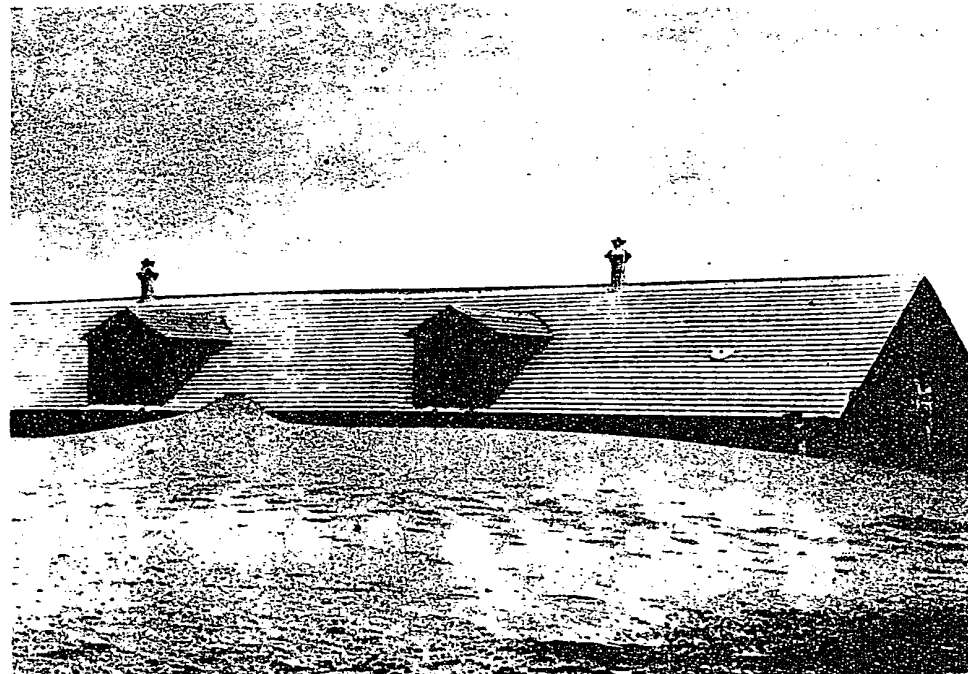
Occasionally the sun vanishes completely, eclipsed by the storm; when it shines through again its color has changed to an unnatural blue. Maelstroms and eddies of dust rise 2,000 feet and whirl madly. Pioneers remember them as "land augurs" and have not seen one for thirty or forty years.

Strangely, the subdued orange or yellow aura of the storm brings to many a sense of impending doom, a theatrical backdrop for uneasiness and insecurity. It is not an impalpable doom that lowers from the skies; it can be ground between the teeth, it dries the tongue, it fills the air thickly. The good earth is afloat, and the air is filled with flying portents, suggestive of star dust and collisions between planets.

SUCH are dust storms to the unfortunate individuals who have to live through them, but they mean far more than discomfort and exasperation. They have been increasing during the last three years, and threaten the whole short-grass section of the country, land that once supported vast herds of buffalo, and now denuded by crop farming.

For these storms are attributable not only to the dwindling water supply, but to methods of agriculture as well. For twenty-five years the rainfall in the section between the Corn Belt and the Rocky Mountains has been diminishing. And during that period farmers have been stripping the protective short grass and other low vegetation from what nature had designed for pasture land. The wind has done the rest, the wind which is as great a factor in land erosion as water, lifting the surface soil and blowing it great distances.

Dust storms are not peculiar to the United States; they are a



Inundated—Dust-Drifts as High as the Roof of a Barn.

Associated Press.

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# DUST RIDES THE WEST WINDS

## A Picture of People and Land Beneath the Pall Of the Great Soil-Stripping Storms

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caprice of nature in many lands. First-generation Americans settled in the Western States recall that sand and dust from the Sahara have been carried north across the Mediterranean, and that more than once drought in the Balkans has resulted in great dislocations of soil. Once much of the surface of the Ukraine was wafted over to Rumania and Poland. Ships in the Yellow Sea gather dust from the Gobi desert in Mongolia, and dust storms in Australia have reached New Zealand.

Where the American dust storms reach their greatest intensity—in the southern farming States of the Middle West—they are comparable with the heavy sandstorms of the Sahara and Arabian Deserts. They have removed the soil of plowed fields to a depth of a foot or more; they have blown seed and young plants out of the ground in some places and buried crops in others. It is estimated that 850,000,000 tons of dust are moved more than 1,400 miles each year.

When specimens of the dust are examined in laboratories they are found to contain quartz, feldspar, calcite, biotite and volcanic ash; spores of microfungus growths; moss, plant hair, pond sediment, tourmaline, hornblend, zircon, mica and volcanic glass. The dust is not a simple substance; it comes from a dozen States.

ONLY a few of the dust storms, the more violent ones blown by steady winds, reach the Atlantic seaboard. In six months last year fifteen major dust storms swirled out of the West across Iowa, leaving millions of tons of soil the State does not need; for the rich soil of Iowa, blown here by even more titanic storms 50,000 years ago, is more than ten feet thick. Ohio, fertile enough, borrows soil from infertile Montana, and Illinois is thickly coated with the white earth of Utah. One statistician insists that in a violent storm there may be 126,000 tons of earth in a cubic mile of air.

So far this has been the major effect of these storms—the removal of soil from the land of distressed farmers on marginal lands, where the fertility was never great, and irrigation is difficult or impossible. On this land cattle which survived last year's drought will have little or no grazing and less cultivated feed than ever. On the fertile lands the coating of lean soil dropped by the winds is unwelcome, but so far the decrease in fertility from this cause has been negligible, because much of the dust has either been washed away or plowed under.

Victims of these storms are farmers already burdened to the breaking point with problems created by drought, grasshoppers, economic difficulties and impaired morale. The effect of the dust plague is

cumulative and progressive. The storms are expected to be an increasing factor in the marginal farm situation until there is a great deal of rain between the Missouri and the Rockies, and the gigantic plan for returning to grass much of this land which should never have been plowed, can be effected. This will take several years, at least.

In the meantime the storms strike at the precarious livelihood of the plainsmen.

ODDLY enough, the storms have wafted money briskly into the tills of some business men and women. Laundries and clothes cleaners are busier than ever. Window cleaning companies employ extra crews. At the washing racks automobiles are lined up awaiting the removal of crusted grime. Beauty shops and barber shops double the number of shampoos. Rug, furniture and wallpaper cleaners profit.

Some people in the least affected cities seem to a large extent oblivious to this upheaval of earth in particles. Conscious of a certain vague discomfort, they go about with a realization that something unusual is in the air but without ascertaining exactly what it is. They think it is a very cloudy day, and absentmindedly expect rain; perhaps they wear rubbers and carry umbrellas. Only when someone calls their attention to the layers of dust on their desks, on their clothing and skins, do they become aware that they are experiencing one of the subtlest of nature's pranks.

In the wake of the dust storms a new ailment has appeared. It is called "dust pneumonia," and is characterized by an abnormal tendency to colds and other respiratory ills, due to irritated membranes. Nasal symptoms not unlike those accompanying severe colds have been common, but they have not lasted long.

Discomforts attending the dust storms are alleviated considerably by the characteristic American inclination to treat any situation with as much fantastic humor as it permits. A sand-storm mythology is being invented, replete with prairie dogs burrowing 100 feet in the air, housewives cleaning their living rooms with garden hoses, and proposals to cover the plains with concrete and plant seeds in holes in the windproof surface.

Despite all this defensive humor, however, fear rides with the dust storms, dismay at the impact of this new and unexpected blow in a time of insecurity. This fear is, of course, merely an intermittent one, for the dust storms are still comparatively infrequent and of short duration. But each one leaves an aftermath of penalties and annoyances and an increasing dread of more storms to come unless rain returns to the front yard of the Rocky Mountains.