

**Dust Bowl
LEAD**

Date: 31 March 2015

SUGGESTED LEAD-IN:

Despite autumn rains...most of Kansas is still facing drought conditions that rival the Dust Bowl Days of the 1930s. University of Kansas Journalism Professor David Guth has been traveling in the region and conducting interviews for a book about communities facing declining populations. In this report, Guth says there's a question looming in the back of people's minds: Will the Dust Bowl return?

SFX:

Wind (UP AND UNDER)

NARRATOR:

It's a typical windy summer day on the Southern Plains, with gusts rolling in from the west at more than 50 miles per hour. The sky has a brown hue as a thin veil of loose dry dirt spreads toward the horizon. It's reminiscent of a day 80 years ago. April 14, 1935 – the day this region remembers as Black Sunday...

SFX:

Wind (FADE)

ELLSAESSER:

When that old thing rolled over – by God! I took my family – I had two girls, my wife and two daughters – down in that cave with a lantern. And when that hit, you couldn't see nothing. (13 seconds)

NARRATOR:

That's how Raymond Ellsaesser (ell-SAYS-ser) of Haskell County remembered Black Sunday. He was interviewed in September 1977 by University of Kansas Dust Bowl Historian Donald Worster. He also interviewed Ed Phillips of Boise City (BOYCE City) in the Oklahoma panhandle...who said the dust cloud that day rolled in so quickly that it soon became a question of survival...

PHILLIPS

The thing that we thought of – or I did anyhow – I didn't think of being in a tornado or anything like that. But I thought whether or not we wouldn't be smothered in it because the dust was just that black. (14 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

It's now 80 years later and the weather has been as dry – if not drier – than it was in the Dirty Thirties. It begs the question: Could there be another Dust Bowl? Boise City, Oklahoma, newspaper editor C-F David says no...

DAVID:

Not like the Thirties, I don't think because they learned quite a bit. And the government's come in and bought up a lot of the land here. We have a lot of state land here and federal land that's been turned to grass. We farm differently. (18 seconds)

NARRATOR:

David's opinion is typical of many of the region's farmers and community leaders. However...about a mile down the road from the *Boise City News*...Jody Risley says the area can expect more dust storms...

RISLEY-DUST:

Yes we can. We had some this year. I mean we've had the dirt storms this year. We've been in this; it's like a nine-year drought now. And, yeah – we're drier these past nine years than we ever were during the Dust Bowl. (17 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Risley is the Director of the Cimarron Heritage Cultural Museum. Her museum provided much of the source material used in the Ken Burns Dust Bowl documentary...

RISLEY-HEARTY:

They were hearty people. And I guess it is why some of us second and third generations are hearty people. It's because we have to be to be able to stay here and, you know, keep surviving.

NARRATOR:

Despite the Recession and drought...the people of the Southern Plains remain optimistic – just as they have during other hard times. Ann Miner is with the Prairie Museum of Art and History in Colby. She says she sees evidence of this optimism in the older sections of her town...

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MINER:

You think about some of these buildings that went up during the 1930's, one of the grimmest periods in this region's history. But yet, you know there was still hope and looking towards the future while we need these things. (18 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Optimism is one thing. Facts are another. Mary Knapp is a climatologist with the Kansas State University Weather Data Library. She says drought isn't the only threat to the High Plains. Grasshopper infestations and wildfires have also been known to create dust storms...

MARY KNAPP:

When you get those kinds of conditions the soils out in the western High Plains are so vulnerable to blowing that you could have a dust storm simply because the vegetation that had been in place has been wiped out by one of these natural factors. (17 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Knapp also notes that droughts are cyclical...averaging one every 22 years. The intervals between droughts and their duration may vary. But they are inevitable.

The population of the 39 western-most counties of Kansas dropped more than 4 percent in the last decade. Some regional centers – such as Garden City – have seen modest growth. But there's been a steady decline in the more rural counties. Dust Bowl historian Donald Worster says that...too...is inevitable.

WORSTER:

Well, it's hard – especially when you are you are obsessed by the image of infinite possibilities. When you don't accept the fact that there are natural limits that we have to understand and deal with; sometimes those limits change. (17 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Whether it's an image of infinite possibilities or an optimism born from harsh experience. The drought...the dwindling supplies of surface and groundwater....

SFX:

Wind (UP AND UNDER)

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NARRATOR:

...and gale-force winds scrapping dirt from the land are constant reminders to the people of the Southern Plains of what has been...and of the dusty, dry days that may come again.

SFX:

Wind (FADE OUT)

NARRATOR:

For Kansas Public Radio News...I'm David Guth