

Some of the most gifted photographers of the 20th century worked for the FSA, recording what people were enduring even as they endured it. These photographs

Now an abridged version of Ganzel's original show has been organized by Humanities Texas under the title *The Dust Bowl*, to reflect both vastness of the Dust



Arthur Rothstein. Grant County, ND, 1936

provoke questions: What became of these people? Did they weather the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression? Where are they now? What did they make of themselves? How did the Dust Bowl affect their view of America, of life, of society in general?

In the 1970s, Nebraska photographer Bill Ganzel decided to seek answers. Guided by the limited annotations made by FSA photographers, he went in search of people who were festered in Dust Bowl sectors of the File. Upon finding them, or their descendants, he photographed them in poses similar to the originals and tape recorded their recollections. These comparative photographs and memories were presented as an exhibition and a booth, both entitled *Dust Bowl Descent*.

Bowl region and the particular impact upon Texans.

The Dust Bowl exacerbated some of the worst tendencies of human nature, and through its role in redistributing the population, it accelerated the alienation of people from their natural environment.

To an unfortunate degree, the alienation continues, even though southern plains have turned green by means of water pumped from the great Ogallala Aquifer. Scientists caution that at the current rate of pumping, the Aquifer will run dry in less than fifty years—and the Dust Bowl will return. Though it is tempting to “historicize” the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, to leave it safely situation in the past, it better serves as a present reminder that nature and people cannot long endure aliens and enemies.



Arthur Rothstein. Near Dalhart, TX, 1936

# The Dust Bowl

This exhibition is abridged from  
**Dust Bowl Descent**  
by Bill Ganzel

and it is presented through collaboration of  
Humanities Nebraska and Humanities Texas



This exhibition is supported by  
Humanities Texas  
and the National Endowment for the  
Humanities

If there is a single experience that unites senior Texans in a community of shared memory. It is the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. This is the common denominator of Texas life during the Great Depression, not only for farm people, whose livelihood was driven before the winds, but also for town folk hundreds of miles to the east, where black or yellow skies rained

was further removed from the reach of families who wanted to live on farms. Family farms vanished, and farm families became migrants.

In this condition, Texans of the High Plains suffered in common with fellow residents of the Great Plains northward from Oklahoma through the Dakotas. Victims of the drought and depression, they were also victims, at times, of



Arthur Rothstein. Cimarron County, OK, 1936

dirt through streets, yards, and house, and deposited grit into food served at tables. The devastation of the High Plains turned noonday so dark that people could see only by lamplight. But for Texans on the High Plains, at the southern reach of the Great Plains, grit and ultimately darkness were of less significance than the destruction of their way of life. Tenant farmers and share croppers, unable to pay rent, were turned out by landlords. Landowners, unable to meet their mortgage payments, were dispossessed by the banks. Land rich and cash-poor, the banks failed, and ownership of the land

public opinion, viewed as somehow having brought their failure entirely upon themselves. If they joined the flow of families to the west coast, they were detested “Okies.” If they moved to town looking for work, they were hicks and hayseeds.



Dorothea Lange, Dalhart, TX. 1938.

Historians are in general agreement that although the Dust Bowl occurred in the mid-1930s, its basis was laid in 1914 when the Turkish Navy blocked the Dardanelles and cut off the flow of Russian wheat to the rest of the world. To meet the sudden increase in demand, farmers on the Great Plains plowed under land that they had not previously considered worthy of cultivation, taking out loans to purchase the equipment needed to expand their work. When the price of wheat fell after the war, they planted more and more acres, racing desperately to stay ahead of their debts. Rainfall was irregular in the 1920s. When the rains stopped altogether in 1932, the native ground-cover was gone. There was nothing to hold the soil in place.

In his book *Great Plains*, Ian Frazier describes the first great storm, which occurred in mid-April 1934: A giant cloud:

“black at the base and tan at the top, rose from the fields of eastern Colorado and western Kansas and began to move south. Inside the cloud darkness was total... . People in the cloud’s path thought the end of the world had come...”

In May another dust storm came up and blew all the way to the east coast, blocking out the noonday sun in New York City. As other storms arose, dust from the Great Plains settled on President Roosevelt’s desk in the White House and on the decks on the ocean liners at sea. Not until rain resumed in 1941 and World War II

created a new demand for grain did the Plains begin to recover.

The disaster was ecological. It was also economic, social, and cultural. Agriculture was the linchpin of America’s economy. T.H. Watkins, historian of the Great Depression, points out that agriculture was also the source of America’s self-image even in the 1930s. But as many as 2.5 million persons were forced off their land in the 1930s, and they had to find other places and other ways to support themselves. Most of these people became “irretrievably urban,” as Watkins puts it, although some joined the “constantly moving and nearly invisible” army of migrant workers who

“cut cane in Florida and dug potatoes in Maine, picked peaches in Georgia and apples in Pennsylvania, plucked strawberries in Louisiana and dug sugar beets in Michigan, and harvested wheat from central Texas to northern Montana.”



Dorothea Lange, Nipomo, CA, 1936



Arthur Rothstein. Near Missoula, MT, 1936

In the long run, we measure the true significance of an event by its impact on the collective imagination of the nation, and the Dust Bowl has exerted a greater influence than many other events that were hailed for a moment as “definitive.” The Dust Bowl brought us John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, which continues to hold us in thrall as a book and as a classic movie. It also propelled Woody Guthrie into international fame as a singer of American hopes and grim reality. Ian Frazier reports that in April 14, 1935,

“a black dust storm from western Kansas blew down into the Texas Panhandle. ...Guthrie, who was living in Pampa, Texas, took a look at the approaching storm and wrote *So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You.*”

Another classic of the Dust Bowl origins is the documentary film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. T.H. Watkins points out that to a large degree, the images that

Americans saw of themselves in the novels, newsreels, and photo magazines of the 1930s are what we now take for truth.

Some victims of the Dust Bowl recorded their experience in memories and letters that now are collected in local history archives; many more handed down stories to children and grandchildren. These are stories that need to be preserved and shared, as expressions of human perseverance despite almost inhuman odds. If they are not now the subject of oral history projects across a great part of the nation, certainly they ought to be.

For later generations of Americans, the Dust Bowl is documented merely by historical narrative, but by visual images, photographs taken for the historical section of the Farm Security Administration, one of the New Deal programs designed to help farmers during the Great Depression.