

## *Surviving the Dust Bowl*

### *Teacher's Guide*

#### **Suggestions for the Classroom**

Lured by the promise of rich, plentiful soil, thousands of settlers came to the Southern Plains, bringing farming techniques that worked well in the North and East. The farmers subsequently plowed millions of acres of grassland, only to have the rains stop in the summer of 1931. The catastrophic eight-year drought that followed led observers to rename the region “The Dust Bowl.”

**Time Period: 1931-1939**

**Themes:** The Dust Bowl, farming techniques and environmental impact, soil conservation, the Great Depression, the New Deal

#### **Before Viewing Discussion**

1. Have students recall everything they think they know about the Dust Bowl. Have they ever heard of it? Who was affected? How and why? What images come to mind when they think about America in the 1930s?
2. Have students identify the five-state region known as the Dust Bowl on a map of the United States and compile information about the terrain, general weather patterns, sources of water, and economic activity (farming, ranching, etc.)

#### **After Viewing Discussion**

1. Read the following quote to your students or write it on the board:  
“I felt I was becoming a slave to the land. But I held on to the thought that this land had to be stopped from blowing. Often I was so full of dust that I drove blind, unable to see even the

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radiator cap on my tractor or hear the roar of the engines. But I kept driving on and on, by guess and instinct. I was making my last stand in the Dust Bowl.”

If you had been part of one of these farm families during the '30s, do you think you would have wanted to stay on your farm or leave? Why or why not? What would you lose by leaving? What would you gain?

2. At the end of the film, farmers are talking together about the future. One is hopeful that people will start taking care of the land differently. Another says, “Don’t fool yourself... It’s just not in our blood to play a safe game.” What does the farmer mean? Why do you think farmers might have been unwilling to change their farming practices once the rains returned?

3. Write a diary entry or letter from one of the following points of view: a farmer who is a member of the “Last Man Club,” a mother nursing a child sick with dust pneumonia, or a healthy child watching the adults cope with the disaster.

4. Have students research the various relief programs offered by the New Deal. What would have happened to people if relief checks and food handouts were not available? Was this an appropriate governmental response?

5. Have students further study the Dust Bowl era through a range of historical, literary, and visual sources, including Carey McWilliam’s *Ill Fares the Land*, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, James Agee and Walker Evan’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Pare Lorentz’s documentaries for the Farm Security Administration *The River* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, and the photographs of Dorothea Lange and others. Students can further investigate how the work of Lange, Agee, Evans, Lorentz, and others reflected American conditions in the 1930s and evaluate their impact on the New Deal. (Visit the website sponsored by the National Archives featuring [Depression-era artwork, interviews, etc..](#))

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6. Compare and contrast other ways humans have affected the natural landscape for survival and economic gain. Divide students into groups and have each group study one of the following: strip mining, logging practices including clear cutting, hydroelectric dams, clearing land in the rain forest for farming and cattle ranching. Each group should research the following: what are the short-term benefits vs. the long-term consequences; who wins, who loses; in what ways has the practice changed and how did those changes come about? Have each group develop a position paper, either supporting the practice or suggesting how it could be modified, and a process for implementing any change. How can they make their proposed changes attractive to the opposition? How will they compensate for perceived losses? Is it possible to design a win-win solution?

7. To learn about some of the challenges facing farmers today, watch [Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern](#) which documents one family's battle to save their farm during the massive foreclosures of family farms in the late '80s. What is similar and what is different about the challenges modern farming families face and the ways they cope compared to Dust Bowl-era farmers? How does the role of government compare?

8. Agriculture involves reducing the diversity of a given ecosystem and therefore must be heavily controlled in order for the system to remain stable. A major change since the 1930s in farming has been the use of agrochemicals (chemical pesticides and fertilizers). In fact, increases in grain production over the past 40 years are attributable primarily to the use of chemical fertilizers. How have changes in farming practices, such as the rise in monocrop farming, encouraged farmers to turn to chemical fertilizers? What are the benefits? What are the costs?

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