

**Champions or Victims in the “Dirty Thirties”:
An analysis of *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan**

In the quintessential novel of the Dust Bowl 1930s, *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck uses a turtle as an analogy for the uprooted farmers of Oklahoma during the Great Depression. With his home and all his worldly possessions on his back, the turtle claws his way toward something, or more likely, away from something. In a similar fashion, the threadbare and destitute farmers of Dust Bowl America loaded cars, trucks and wagons with their meager possessions and set out west, away from the clouds of dust. But Steinbeck’s novel tells only part of the story, one third of the story actually. Timothy Egan’s *The Worst Hard Time* explores the rest. It is the story of the two-thirds of the population that stayed behind.

Egan begins his ode to the High Plains of the United States by describing its emptiness of anything other than the sky and the ever-present wind. More than seventy years after the “Dirty Thirties,” Egan found these plains dotted with fence posts buried in the soil, homes suffocated by mounds of dust and tumbleweeds, rusted windmills and abandoned towns. But he also found survivors. People like Ike Osteen, who still lives near his childhood home, a dugout that housed a family of eleven during the dust storms of the 1930s. Or like Jeanne Clark, attached to an oxygen tank because of the damage to her lungs from “dust pneumonia”, her mother having moved to the Plains for the clean air. And like Melt White, a weathered cowboy whose father stayed in the “No Man’s Land” of the Plains when his team of horses died on the way to Texas. Whether out of stubbornness or hopelessness, wisdom or ignorance, their

families and hundreds of others eked out an existence during what American meteorologists deemed the worst weather event of the twentieth century, and lived long enough to tell about it.

Most students of history have seen images and heard stories of Black Sunday, the day in 1935 when a layer of dust coated everything from the Plains to the East Coast and more than two hundred miles out to sea. What Egan's work shares with the reader is the daily struggle to survive over the course of an entire decade, not just the one day that America experienced what its western farmers were up against. The bed sheets stretched over windows, rinsed out daily, only to be full of mud the next day. The dust that caked the eyes and intestines of livestock and humans, to the point of blindness and death. The ever-present shovel to dig the car out of a drift, or to clear the kitchen floor before preparing breakfast. The static electricity generated by the walls of dust that made it painful to touch anything and shorted out car ignitions. And all of this happened against the backdrop of the Great Depression, when the economy collapsed and a quarter of the population was out of work.

While Egan excels in his description of the pervasive desperation of life on the High Plains, he is equally adept in exploring what caused the land to blow away in wave after wave. The destruction of the land did not happen overnight, nor was there one guilty party. Egan explains that the natural inhabitants (bison, coyotes, rodents, snakes, birds, and insects) of the Plains had adapted over the millennia to the arid conditions amid the sea of grass. The grass, itself adapted to survive the extended periods of drought that were commonplace. However, western expansion, with its homesteaders and railroads, overturned nature's balance along with the soil. But, Egan points out, early settlers survived decades of drought in the 1870s and

1890s. What made for the Dirty Thirties was the decade of greed and frenzied speculation that preceded it.

In the 1920s, stimulated by the destruction of crops and farms throughout Europe during World War I, the Great Plains became the 'bread basket' for the world. The demand for wheat was staggering and the Plains had thousands of acres of grasslands that could be plowed under and put into production. Banks offered credit on the new technologies that made harvesting this land possible and highly profitable: mechanical plows replaced horse teams, reapers and combines replaced laborers. As long as the price of wheat remained high, this system worked. However, demand weakened as Europeans rebuilt their farms and produced their own crops. Unfortunately, the American farmers were in debt and needed to keep making money.

As Egan points out, even at this juncture, the dust storms might have been averted. However, instead of decreasing production to meet level of demand and thereby stabilizing prices, the debt-burdened farmers plowed under more acres and produced more wheat. Even as the stock market came crashing down in late 1929, farmers had record harvests. Stacks of wheat, piled high, sat at railroad depots with nowhere to go. And then came the drought, with year after year of little rain and scorching temperatures. Desperate farmers continued to plant crops, hoping in vain that 'this year would be different.' In a final blow, clouds of grasshoppers swept the Plains looking for any available food source, from young plants to wooden tool handles. Nothing edible was left behind the swarm. The soil, used up, dried up and with nothing to hold it down, rose into the ubiquitous wind and began to blow across the Plains. The proud residents of No Man's Land gave in and begged for help.

Egan makes it clear that after Black Sunday, relief efforts for the farmers and family affected by the dust storms became a priority for President Roosevelt and his New Deal administrators. Government teams were dispatched to pay cash for dying livestock, food for the hungry and funds for relocation. Many people left, but most stayed on their land. The land was all they had to show for generations of hard work. Why leave with nothing, hitting the road west, only to find they weren't welcome and there were no jobs? It was better to stay within their supportive communities, even in a land that threatened to defeat them.

Roosevelt, a man devoted to planting trees and conservation since his childhood in the Hudson River Valley, created the Soil Conservation Service. Enlisting the men of the Civilian Conservation Corps and led by soil scientist Hugh Bennett, the service began an ambitious planting and reclamation project. The No Man's Land farmers were taught to plant in soil-saving furrows. Districts were created of farms that agreed to cooperate and practice the new conservation techniques. And millions of trees were planted across the Great Plains to serve as wind blocks.

Interestingly, the one time that Roosevelt came out to view the success of his projects in No Man's Land, the heavens opened up and the rain poured down during his entire visit. It was not the beginning of the wet spell so long hoped for, but the weary farmers took it as a sign that they had finally turned a corner in their struggles against a merciless nature. Roosevelt had not forgotten about them and neither had nature. Egan ends his narrative with this story about Roosevelt's visit. The hard times were not over in the Dust Bowl, nor in the rest of the country, but perhaps the worst hard times were over.

The Worst Hard Time in the classroom.

Timothy Egan's thoughtful exploration of the Dust Bowl survivors lends itself to use in the classroom. His subjects shared intimate stories of miserable deaths and triumphs of will. He devotes three chapters to the diary entrees of a man from Nebraska named Don Hartwell. Simple and direct, these entries will appeal to students. Through them, students will catch a glimpse of an unimaginable time and one man's unwillingness to quit. Hartwell often states that he does not know what the next month or year will bring, but he refuses to stop trying to take care of his home, his land, his only possession. With the inclusion of so much personal detail, Egan's narrative provides any student of history with startlingly compelling contrasts to the prevailing images of 1930s America, contrasts that should be welcome in any classroom.