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### The Dust Bowl

In *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*, Timothy Egan explores the effect that the environmental disaster had on the nation. Egan covers the region most affected by the dust bowl, that area including Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and New Mexico. This land area has been an abused one and experienced the nation's worst prolonged environmental disaster. Egan tells the story of the Dust Bowl from the perspective of those that experienced it, those people that remained either because of circumstance or stubbornness. The experiences and stories serve as a warning to future populations of the consequences of human ignorance and greed.

Egan constructs his retrospective from interviews, journals, and newspaper accounts. In addition, he incorporates information regarding agricultural and settlement policies to create the narrative. Egan traces the effects the Depression had on individual families, transporting readers into the towns and homes of families. For example, one family, the Osteens, went from being prosperous to failing after the stock market crashed and the rain stopped. Throughout the book, readers follow the Osteen family, along with other families and individuals, and learn of what becomes of them.

During the 1920s, the United States, and specifically the Great Plains region, was flourishing. People flocked to the Midwest, lured by cheap land and rising crop prices. During the wet years, crops and towns grew and farmers became rich. This ended with

the stock market crash in 1929 and a decade-long drought. Less than a foot of rain per year fell and soil temperatures rose to the mid-100s Fahrenheit. Grasshopper, spider, and centipede populations exploded. Winds carried topsoil for thousands of miles, dropping it onto Chicago, New York City, and Washington DC and ships hundreds of miles offshore. A quarter of a million people fled the dust storms in the 1930s, but most people remained. One interviewee “was sickened by the rabbit drives, the plagues of hoppers, a town of random death and no comfort in the sky. The land was broken” (Egan 9). He goes on to say, “God didn’t create this land around here to be plowed up...he created it for Indians and buffalo. Folks raped this land. Raped it bad” (Egan 9). Because of human activity, this land area suffered, along with its people.

The Dust Bowl had a deadly effect on the health of people and animals. People suffered and died from dust pneumonia. One survivor remembers her sister who “came up with the fever and powerful body aches and had trouble breathing, as if her air passages had been cut off. Came up with the coughing all night and day till she broke three ribs. Fever shot up, and then she died before she could find her way to one of the emergency hospitals” (Egan 179). Most vegetation was destroyed thus leaving no food for livestock. Animals also went blind and suffocated from the dust clouds and storms. One person “cut open the stomach of one dead cow...his autopsy found the stomach packed so solidly with dust that it blocked food from getting any further” (Egan 234). The dust scared parents and children but families could do little about it.

Egan provides great details of the dust clouds and storms. Dust and dirt seeped into the homes; everything could be done to keep it out but it never worked completely. The worst was Black Sunday. The skies turned black, with the duster appearing to be two

thousand feet high with winds clocked at sixty-five miles per hour (Egan 204). People frantically sought shelter once one began to approach the town. Sometimes people were caught off-guard when one approached.

The difficult times caused people behave and think differently. One woman in Kansas said she thought of killing her child to spare the baby the cruelty of Armageddon (204). Egan disturbingly describes the rabbit drives. People directed their anger and blame on the rabbits. Rabbits were viewed as a scourge, and their population needed to be decreased. Some parents would not allow children to go to the slaughter. One boy slipped away and watched. The boy “cringed at the sounds: swinging clubs, whoops and hollers, and the anguished howls- he told his mama he heard the rabbits cry- as they died. He ran to his house with the tarpaper roof and carried with him nightmares that never left” (Egan 116). People’s mindsets often change in dire times.

Currently, I do not teach the United States History II course, which includes the topics of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. The topic of the Dust Bowl is often overlooked in high school textbooks so Egan’s book could supplement what is lacking in textbooks. Egan’s book is directed towards more of a popular audience rather than an academic audience, a quality that would appeal to high school students. The book could be assigned in its entirety, and teachers might require students to follow a particular family throughout the book. Sections of this book could be used when teaching since the writing style and primary source accounts would appeal to teenagers. Sections could also be used alongside historical fiction and fictional books, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*. Reading about the experiences of individuals would be more engaging for students, rather than reading just facts and statistics in a textbook. It is important for students to learn

about what and how the people survived. Egan is able to include facts and statistics while also engaging readers with stories of individuals who experienced the Dust Bowl.