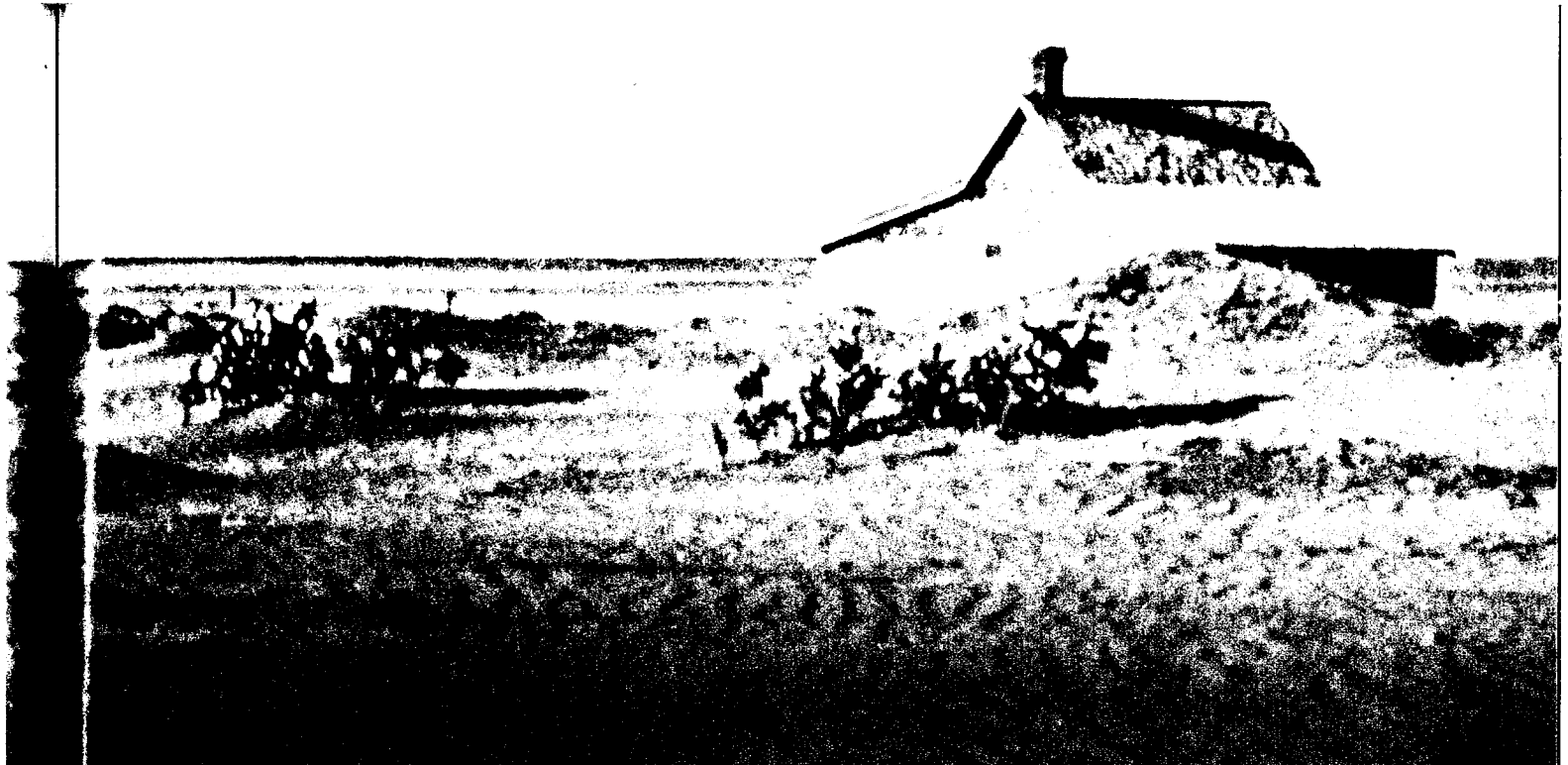




DARKNESS AT NOON

**WIND AND DUST MADE FOR HARD TIMES IN
SASKATCHEWAN IN THE 1930s. *BY BILL WAISER***



"More lies have probably been told about the weather of the dirty thirties than about any other subject except sex," quipped James Gray in his 1967 book *Men Against the Desert*. Yet, he continued, "most of the lies could have been true."

Gray's remark aptly captures the dreadful conditions people faced in southern Saskatchewan during the 1930s. Every conceivable calamity, from unrelenting drought and scorching temperatures to insect plagues and crop diseases, descended on the region.

It was the dust storms, though, that spawned all kinds of stories. One of the most popular legends was that a newborn could reach school age before knowing what rain was; another described children

running home in fright when they felt a drop of rain for the first time.

Still another tall tale held that parents decided whether to send their children outside by throwing a gopher up in the air; if the animal dug a burrow, then there was too much dust swirling around.

Then there was the young baseball player who supposedly lost his way while rounding the bases during a dust storm and was later found several miles out on the prairie.

These stories, no matter how exaggerated, help to explain why the Great Depression left such a lasting imprint on Saskatchewan society and why no one who lived through those "ten lost years" was left untouched by the drought and the dust.

The dust storms that regularly plagued southern Saskatchewan throughout the 1930s often left a lasting, surreal impression.

Severe dry spells have always been a feature of prairie life, appearing on average every twenty years or so. In fact, some droughts in the distant past have lasted for decades. In the late-eighteenth century, for example, a series of exceptionally arid years enlarged the area of the Great Sandhills of southwestern Saskatchewan. That was the same period when unusually low water levels made it possible in places to walk across the North Saskatchewan River.

The 1930s were memorable both for the persistence and the extent of the drought. While other provinces, in particular Ontario and Quebec, were recovering from the Great Depression, Saskatchewan experienced its most far-reaching drought in 1937, extending the misery of an unforgiving decade.

It was also a time of extremes. The winter of 1935–36 was one of the coldest on record. It was followed the next summer by one of the longest heat waves in Canadian history, which lasted just shy of two weeks. One year later, on July 5, 1937, the Saskatchewan towns of Midale and Yellow Grass reached forty-five degrees Celsius, the hottest temperature ever recorded in Canada.

The hot, dry weather devastated the province's agriculture industry. The withering heat stunted the wheat crop, preventing the heads from filling out with grain. Some fields were so patchy that the idea of harvesting them seemed a terrible joke.

Soil erosion was the other serious problem, made worse by

the fact that some semi-arid lands should never have been ploughed for grain production in the first place. Millions of hectares of land had either been sucked dry of any moisture or were literally blowing out of control.

Saskatchewan's total wheat production consequently dropped by one third during the 1930s, even though wheat acreage had increased by more than a million acres. More cropped land was actually producing less wheat. The 1937 wheat harvest was a paltry two and a half bushels per acre. A good year, by comparison, would have yielded about twenty bushels per acre.

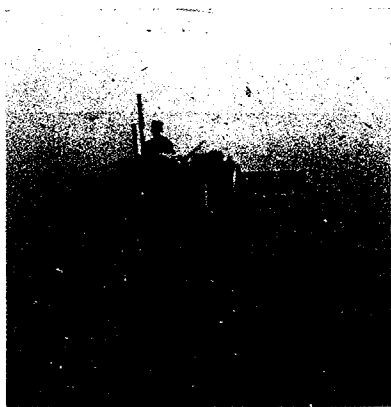
Some farmers scrambled to stabilize their land by "listing" — ploughing row upon row of deep furrows, much like waves on the ocean, in hopes of capturing some of the blowing dirt between the furrows. Others simply abandoned fields to Russian thistle in the hope that the weeds would hold down the loose topsoil.

But it would take emergency intervention by the federal government, in the form of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA), to arrest soil drifting and to promote water conservation.

Liberal Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, who inherited the temporary program from the R.B. Bennett administration, was not initially keen on the idea.

"It is part of the U.S. desert area," he noted in his diary. "I doubt it will be of any use again." But Jimmy Gardiner, the federal minister of agriculture and a former premier of

MILLIONS OF HECTARES OF LAND HAD EITHER BEEN SUCKED DRY OF ANY MOISTURE OR WERE LITERALLY BLOWING OUT OF CONTROL.



Above: Cropped acreage in Saskatchewan actually increased in the early 1930s in the belief that drought would be short-lived. But some fields, like this one near Grey, were so patchy that harvesting was futile.

Right: The Palliser Triangle, shown in light brown, is a drought-prone region first described as unsuitable for agriculture by British Captain John Palliser in 1857.



LEFT: UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS; H.M. AUSTERSON FOLDS, MG 80
RIGHT: MAP ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN TAYLOR

A dust storm in Lethbridge, Alberta, circa 1939-40.



Saskatchewan, embraced the PFRA as the only realistic solution and pushed through an amendment to it in 1937 that empowered Ottawa to take land out of cultivation and to create community pastures.

Two years later, the PFRA was made permanent, a recognition that ongoing management was necessary to ensure the ecological integrity of the region.

It did not take long for the abnormally dry conditions to spawn towering dust storms across southern Saskatchewan. The first struck in January 1931. Shocked residents of Moose Jaw reported that it was impossible to see across the street during the “black” blizzard. The next major storm coincided with spring seeding. It blanketed roads with drifting soil, sometimes even creating impassable dunes.

By the summer of 1934, town fairs had to be cancelled because of the dirt in the air.

The swirling dust was an unfortunate fact of life for much of the decade, an unwelcome visitor that appeared at the worst possible times, such as Moose Jaw’s annual spring cleanup day in 1939.

During the storms, mothers were known to put lamps by windows so that children could find their way home from school.

Housekeepers also faced a frustrating battle trying to keep the dust out of their homes, setting wet rags on windowsills and hanging wet sheets over doorways. But still the dust managed to seep through, depositing a thick film on everything. Tables were often set with the cups and bowls upside down, a temporary response that became a lifelong habit for some.

The memory of the drought and the dust-laden winds

would haunt people for years to come. “It is a despairing thing,” remarked Etha Munro four decades later, “to watch your farm and pasture land die a slow death over a period of several years, each year getting drier and more hopeless than the year before.”

Another dust bowl survivor recalled, “The wind had a moaning sound, sometimes a high piercing sound. It made my head ache. The wind blew day and night for, I am sure, five years.”

There were widespread health consequences of living with the omnipresent dust. Of the nearly thirty-five thousand students examined as part of a 1931 provincial health survey, about one in five had an unhealthy throat, most probably from the inhalation of dust. It is quite likely that some children developed lifelong health problems.

In September 1934, D.B. MacRae of the *Regina Leader-Post* and R.M. Scott of the *Winnipeg Free Press* drove through the so-called “burnt-out” area of Saskatchewan and filed daily stories along the way. They wanted to see first-hand the impact of the drought on the land and how it had affected daily life. Their fifteen articles were later reprinted in a small booklet, *In the South Country*.

No matter where the reporters went, they were constantly assured by farmers that “the land is still all right. All it needs is rain.” But this faith in the land’s future was not matched by reality. As they drove through Cadillac, Kincaid, and Gravelbourg in southwestern Saskatchewan, MacRae and Scott wrote that six years of drought had reduced life “to the lowest common denominator.”

LEFT: UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS; RIGHT: GLENBOW ARCHIVES



What had once been cultivated fields had been transformed in places to sand dunes. Pasture land had also “been knocked out by soil drifting,” leaving farmers with no feed for their cattle.

From Tribune, south of Weyburn, MacRae and Scott reported, “Today many of the stores and shops are vacant, windows nailed up, people gone. There is scarcely a scrap of crop in the country.”

The community of Minton was especially hard-hit. “It was a town that was just getting started in 1930,” they half-jokingly observed, “and withered before noon.” Perhaps the most sweeping assessment of how bad things were was provided by the Chinese cook at the Fillmore restaurant.

“No crop,” he bluntly asserted. “No garden, no oats, no potatoes, no feed. Nothing of everything.”

Thousands of people responded to the harrowing conditions by seeking a new beginning in other parts of the province. As early as 1930, the news of normal rainfall in districts north of the North Saskatchewan River encouraged farmers to abandon their land in favour of starting over again in areas where there was at least the chance of growing a decent crop. This trickle of migrants became a flood once it became apparent that the drought had a stranglehold on southern Saskatchewan.

But leaving was never easy. Mrs. A. W. Bailey, who traded the family farm south of Regina for a new home in the Bjorkdale

A dust storm engulfs Pearce,
Alberta, in April 1942.

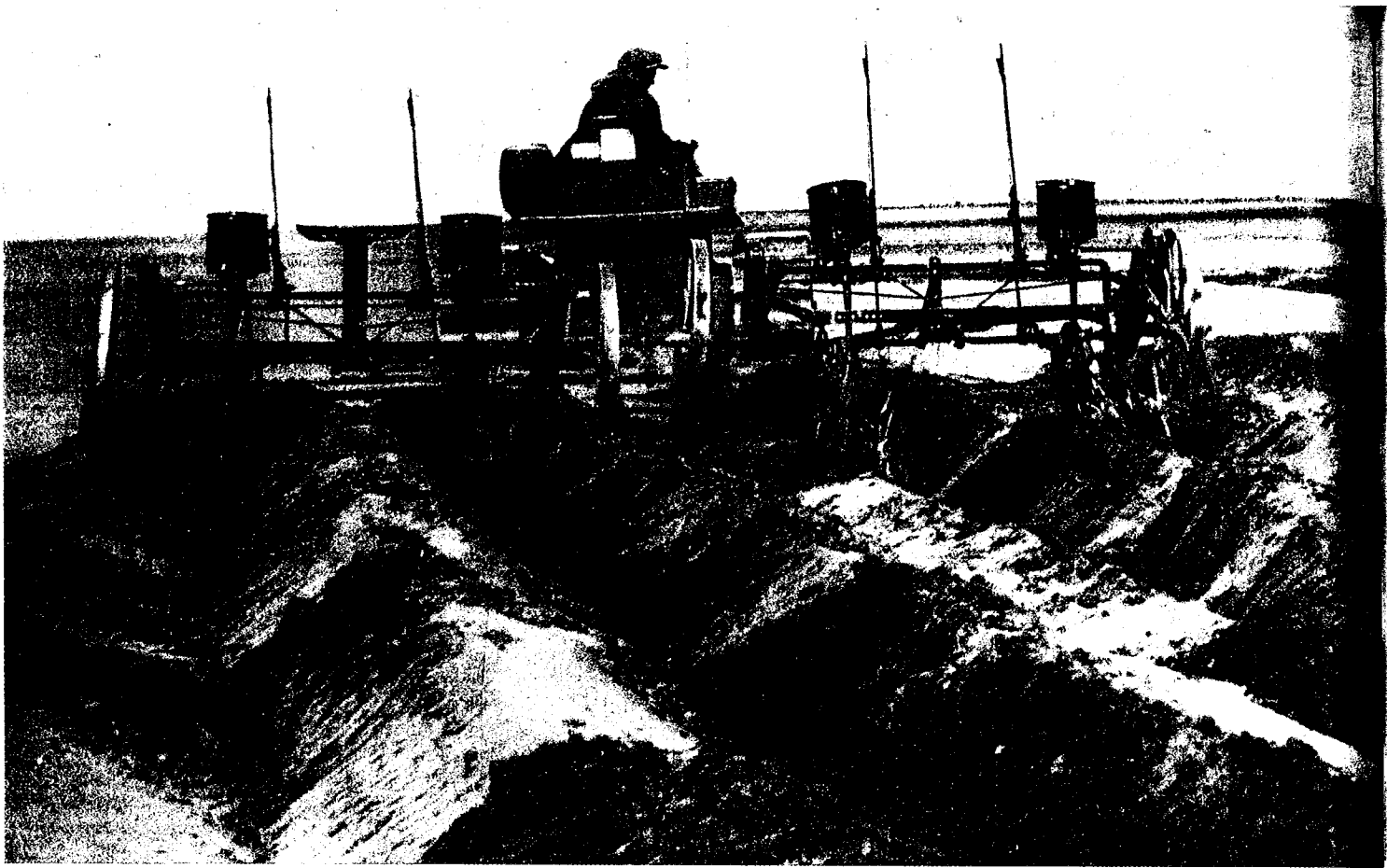
district, recalled asking her husband to stop the truck before her former house passed out of sight. "In those few moments," she later wrote in an article, "I got a lasting mental picture of the little home where my first babies were born. The house that had sheltered us from the snow and wind and dust storms would stand lonely and silent now, with the mice playing in the rooms and the frost cracking the flowered wallpaper I closed my eyes and said a silent little prayer."

The drought-weary farm families headed north with their worldly possessions in all kinds of conveyances, from heavily loaded trucks and horse-drawn Bennett buggies (cars with the motors removed) pulling small trailers, converted hay racks,

or specially built cabooses, often trailing a few cows behind. At night, there would be a string of campfires along the highways heading north, as families prepared meals and talked about their new homes and the future.

MacRae and Scott wondered if these dispossessed people would ever come back. Would the abandoned farms ever be occupied again?

Those who remained in southern Saskatchewan carried on as best they could. "It wasn't this way before," acknowledged Edna Jaques in a soul-baring article she wrote for *Chatelaine* magazine in November 1937. But, after nine consecutive



Above: A farmer plows deep furrows in his field (a technique known as listing) to try to capture blowing dirt near Cadillac, Saskatchewan, in April 1933.

Centre right: A threshing machine during the Depression years in southern Saskatchewan.

Below left: A woman braves a dust storm near Rosetown, Saskatchewan.

Below right: An example of the Bennett buggy, a car with its engine removed, as named after Prime Minister R.B. Bennett.

Opposite page: A demonstration by unemployed people in Edmonton, Alberta, in December 1932.



LEFT PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, J.M. AUSTENSON FOLIOS, MG 180, GLENBOW ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, MG 247, SASKATCHEWAN WHEAT POOL FOLIOS, SERIES 10, BOX 149, SLIDE 27, ROSETOWN CENTENNIAL LIBRARY ARCHIVES, RIGHT PAGE: GLENBOW ARCHIVES

years of unrelenting drought, the poet from Briercrest found herself “whipped” and “not ashamed any more” to admit it. Her words encapsulated what so many had experienced but had not expressed publicly, capturing the viciousness of the dust and its effects.

Jaques, who was eleven when her family homesteaded in the Moose Jaw area in 1902, had never known the land to be so desolate. Drought had reduced Briercrest to “gray ashy wastes that once were fields, white alkali flats that once were blue simmering lakes.” She scanned the heavens daily in search of the promise of rain, but it never came — only a few scattered drops.

“Today the sky was almost a black blue,” she wrote in frustration. “You would think a million tons of water would be held in its inky depths, but it was only dust and wind.”

That was Jaques’s other lament: “Drought never comes alone.” Hot, drying winds scooped up loose topsoil and unleashed dust blizzards. “The air was murky and thick ... that made it hard to breathe,” Jaques recalled after one such storm struck the community. “Your heart pounded against your ribs in a sickening thud.”

Darkness at noon was not uncommon, she wrote. The churning dirt piled up in drifts along buildings, fence lines, or ridges. The “driven soil” was a temporary visitor, Jaques observed, “nesting for a few days until another wind comes up to move it somewhere else.”

She saw clear evidence of the ever-present dust on people’s health. At one town meeting she attended, half the women were suffering from “dust fever.”

“Their faces were swollen and red and broken out,” she reported, “but they’d blow their noses in unison, in duets and trios and choruses and laugh about it.” They all knew, though, that their brave front was a public mask — a way of consoling each other and finding comfort in the belief that next year would be better.

Behind closed doors, it was a different story. “They cry at home,” Jaques commiserated, “cry over shabby children and poor food and dead gardens.”

Children continued to play on the street, seemingly oblivious to how Briercrest had been staggered by depression and drought. But, as Jaques noted, the children, especially the younger ones, had known nothing else.

The dust bowl was never forgotten. “We’ll pull through,” Jaques bravely affirmed. “But we’ll never be the same again — the price of it had been too high.”

Her poetry bore the imprint of what she lived through. Edna Jaques published more than three thousand poems during her lifetime, many noted for their unvarnished realism. Indeed, her verse found a receptive audience in newspapers and magazines in the 1930s and 1940s.

“The Farmer’s Wife in the Drought Area” was one of her more popular Depression poems: “The garden is a dreary blighted waste/ The air is gritty to my taste.” The lines may not have been elegant, but that was Jaques’s appeal. There was nothing elegant about a Saskatchewan dust storm. 🐾



THE LEGACY OF DUST

It is almost impossible to imagine the catastrophic impact of the dust bowl on the lives of the Canadians caught up in it. Years of natural disasters, particularly unprecedented drought, and historically low wheat prices pushed two thirds of Saskatchewan residents onto government relief. Clearly, traditional church and community charity was not enough to assuage the misery of so many destitute families.

Even as the Great Depression widened and deepened, governments were reluctant to help, given that many national programs we now take for granted — such as crop insurance, social welfare, medicare, unemployment insurance, and job-creation initiatives — not only didn’t exist at the time but were seen as little better than communism. What public aid there was often came with a large serving of humiliation.

Out of the misery of so many — at one point one third of the population was out of work — came acceptance that there must be a better way. The 1930s saw the birth of political movements such as the social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Social Credit Party in the West, as well as the Union Nationale in Quebec.

Ordinary Canadians and their governments came to see that government intervention was essential to pulling the country out of its long nightmare. In 1930, the government of R.B. Bennett started to give money to the provinces to provide relief to the unemployed. Economic agencies such as the Bank of Canada and the Canadian Wheat Board were created in the 1930s, and through the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration the federal government promoted techniques to help farmers conserve soil and water. A national unemployment insurance program arrived in 1940, with social assistance, old-age-security measures, medical insurance, and more in the decades following the Second World War.

If even a hint of good can be said to have come from so many people’s devastated lives, health, and sense of self-worth, it can be found in the reality that out of their pain emerged help for millions who came after them. — Nancy Payne