The Drouth of 1860

by

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The year of 1860 is remarkable for an unprecedented drouth, which occasioned what is generally termed the "Kansas famine." The facts in the case are briefly stated. From the 19th of June, 1859, to November, 1860, there was not a shower of rain fell at any one time, to wet the earth two inches in depth. During the intervening winter, there were two slight snows, neither of which concealed the ground from view. The roads were

never muddy, during the whole period, and during the summer, the ground would break open in great cracks, embarrassing the rolling of wagons, while the winds blew with a burning and parching sirocco's blast from the south, and with the hot beams of an unclouded sun, parched the soil and burned up vegetation.

Such was the frightful character of the drouth, which it becomes faithful history to record. The consequence was, that the crops in the Territory were almost an entire failure. Fall wheat, induced by the snow and frost of winter, shot forth in the spring, but withered and died when that moisture was exhausted. Spring wheat, of which there was little sown, fared no better. Out of 4,000 acres ot good land sown in Shawnee county, not five hundred bushels were raised—less than one-eighth of a bushel to the acre. Other counties did some better, but most of them did not harvest a bushel. Esculent vegetables were a perfect failure every-

The "frightful character of the drouth" repeats itself, as evidenced by this ravaged Barber County corn field during the drouth of 1934.

where; not a cabbage, bean, radish, onion or anything of the kind was raised. Potatoes and turnips—the next things to the staff of life— were likewise failures. From the carefully prepared statistics of Shawnee county, it is shown that two hundred and seventy-nine acres of potatoes were planted, and only ten bushels raised; seventy-six acres of beans produced but ten bushels; from two hundred and twenty-four acres of Hungarian grass, only ten tons were mowed; while buckwheat, turnips and

garden vegetables were utter failures. Corn fared some better. The low bottom lands, where properly tilled, averaged almost one-third of a crop, and the high lands and ridges produced no grain whatever—only dry fodder . . . .

The prairie grass furnished the chief support of the people. It grew and flourished nicely until about the middle of June or the 1st of July, when it parched and died on all the uplands. Along the ravines and creeks, and in the "pockets" it remained green still later, furnishing hay for winter. The wild grass, though not so abundant as usual, still was of such a superior quality that it kept the cattle fat all summer and fall. The sap having dried up, left it very nutritive, and stock ate it with as much relish as though it had been green. Some difficulty in places was experienced in procuring hay, there being no grass long enough to mow, except in some of the low lands and along creeks and rivers. Farmers went in a few instances, as far as forty miles to procure hay for their cattle. Stock, which would otherwise have famished, fed upon the spontaneous growth of grass on the prairies during the summer, fall and winter.

Another contemporary scene showing the effects of drouth. These are Cloud County cattle in 1934.

To add to the already distressed condition of the country, the wells, springs and brooks dried up. Very few held out during the year. Families on the prairies were compelled, in many instances, to haul their water several miles, and would even thus procure a very inferior quality. They

had neglected to dig wells, depending on creeks and brooks for water, so that when these were dried up they were left destitute.

The drouth in some localities of Kansas was not as bad as above described. Along the Missouri River and in the north-eastern portion, a sufficient was raised to feed the population of that region. In the Kaw Valley, where properly tilled, the land yielded a two-thirds crop of corn. But elsewhere throughout the Territory the drouth was fully as alarming as we have shown above . . . .

But the people of this Territory were illy prepared for this universal dearth of crops. Their granaries were generally exhausted before the summer months arrived, at which time not one-half the farmers in Kansas had a bushel of corn on hand. It being a good price at the Border towns the fall previous, and the roads being excellent all winter they had sold in market all the surplus corn they supposed they would have after June set in, trusting to the grass from the prairies for feed. So with wheat; all those that had raised more than their own consumption would demand had disposed of it at what they supposed was a good price, and appropriated the money to supply the wants of their families. By the fall of 1860 there was scarcely any corn or wheat in the Territory; not six thousand bushels of either in each county . . . .

The result was that thirty thousand settlers left the Territory and returned to their friends and to provision in the States. It looked at the time as though the whole country would be depopulated and left a barren and uninhabited waste. Claims, with their improvements, houses, fences, etc., were abandoned and stood dreary and alone upon the prairies. Long trains of covered wagons, drawn by lean horses, with woe-begone looking inmates, in mournful procession crossed the Border.

Thirty thousand more would have left, but they had no means with which to get away. They had not a sufficient amount of clothing and provisions to last them half the winter, and Famine, with all his grim and ghastly features, stood sentinel at their doors. It was plain that they must perish from starvation, unless that Father who supplies the birds of the air with food would bring deliverance to their homes. They were the industrious poor of Kansas, who had come here to rear themselves homes upon the wide extended prairies by hard toil, and had no hope of supplies only what they gathered from the fields. They had no rich friends in the East to lend a helping hand; nothing on earth could meet their necessities but the Spirit of Benevolence.

The other forty thousand of the population in Kansas were in a condition to withstand the famine, but could do nothing towards alleviating the wants of others. With the provision and clothing they had, and with that which they had money to procure, together with the assistance of friends from abroad, they could manage to live themselves.

The painful fact stared the people of Kansas in the face, that want and starvation were before them. There was no evading or overcoming it, notwithstanding its admission would militate against the character of the new and growing country. The alarming rumor reached the East, and at once touched the kind and sympathetic hearts of the numerous friends of Kansas. Thadyus Hyatt, of New York, who had always taken an active interest in Kansas, was the first to move in relief of the destitute. He came to the Territory himself, visited numerous counties, acquainted himself with the actual state of affairs, and gathered statistics . . . . Mr. Hyatt returned East, petitioned the President for assistance, in behalf of the destitute in Kansas, and published to the world his statistics and facts of personal observation, with an appeal for an immediate response for the relief of the sufferers.

The movement thus inaugurated, continued its operations until the spring of 1861, and contributed vastly towards the relief of the destitute . . . .