



“The Dust Bowl...has been ranked as one of the worst ecological blunders in history...” This dust storm hit Hill City, Kansas April 14, 1935. Photo courtesy of Kay Ellen Weller.

PERCEPTIONS OF AN ERA: NORTHWEST KANSAS WOMEN REMEMBER THE DUST BOWL

by
Kay Ellen Weller

Perceptions of the environment of a region have long been a concern of geography.¹ Geographers agree that human response to landscape is shaped by personality, life stage, religion, class, and politics. It is further shaped by the sources of information available to us, and the circumstances of our encounter with the landscape. For example, it matters a great deal whether people encounter a landscape as tourists or as residents.² Visitors and natives when viewing the landscape focus on very different aspects of the environment. Visitors open their eyes to compose pictures while the native has a complex attitude derived from immersion in the totality of the environment. The complex attitude of women who chose to remain in western Kansas during some of its darkest days is the focus of this article.³

The Dust Bowl, the darkest moment in the southern plains during the twentieth century, has been ranked as one of the worst ecological blunders in history and it occurred because the culture was operating exactly as it was supposed to. Americans were encouraged to settle the richly endowed continent by the offer of free or very inexpensive land in return for establishing homesteads. People arriving on the plains spoke of "busting" and "breaking" the land. The process of land degradation to Dust Bowl conditions took only fifty years.⁴ It was the inevitable result of people intentionally dominating and exploiting the land to the fullest extent. As a consequence the term Dust Bowl has become part of the colloquial language of the Great Plains.⁵

Most people who lived our country's history remain unknown⁶ and there are few written records from which to derive the rural woman's past.⁷ Therefore, this study focuses on those women, who although unknown, were active participants in this event.

This study examines the perceptions of ordinary northwest Kansas women. In addition, it is intended to lead to a better understanding of women's perceptions of place and their role in the human characteristics that comprise the plains.

This article is qualitative in nature using oral histories to record their perceptions and memories. Five women were interviewed ranging in age from 73 to 87. All five

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women were born in northwest Kansas and resided there during the Dust Bowl. They lived on farms and in small towns. They told me that sometimes families moved to farms during the spring and summer and moved back to town during the winter. The women varied in educational background--one woman had completed the tenth grade, two had graduated from high school, and two had completed college.

Out of necessity and the will to survive, several of the women in this study worked outside the home. Occupations varied from teaching school, to working as a case worker in the social welfare office, to helping in the family cafe. Without exception, the women worked for very low salaries.

The geographer D. W. Meinig identifies landscape as

"an intimate intermingling of physical, biological, and cultural features." Edward C. Relph defines it even more broadly as "everything I see and sense when I am outdoors," including not only visible forms but also "the smell of gasoline fumes, the feel of the wind, and remembered experiences." Landscape provides the necessary context and background for life. Further, in creating landscapes we express our social and personal identities so that landscapes come to reveal our "tastes, values, aspirations, and even our fears." Yet landscape is more than an object to manipulate or a passive environment; it talks back to us and influences our behavior. This aspect of landscape is particularly critical when we study cultures or historical periods in which human, natural, and spirit worlds are blended in ways not conceptualized in the scientific industrialized community.⁸

Topophilia combines sentiment with place. It is all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan states that environment provides the sensory stimuli providing an indirect cause of topophilia. Being aware of the past is an important element in the love of place. When cultures have strongly differentiated sex roles, men and women look at different aspects of the environment and acquire different attitudes toward them.⁹ This was evident during the interviews as the women discussed the impact of the physical environment on their housekeeping duties.

Black blizzards and sand blows were common in Kansas. However, the subjects mentioned only black blizzards and dust storms that were red. For example one woman said "We had lots and lots of red dirt from Oklahoma, and it was red!"¹⁰

Weather bureaus have reported a few small dust storms as early as 1932.¹¹ However, these women remember the Dust Bowl beginning in about 1934 or 1935 in their locale. Most of the women interviewed for this article remember the first one as being the worst. This may be because they did not know what was happening.

What follows are some of these five women's most vivid memories.

Opal Jackson remembered that "In 1935 I was working at the Pork Commissioner's office at the courthouse (Graham County), and living with Bessie Morris one block east

of the court-house. My sister lived one block north of Bessie. One night a dust storm came up while I was at my sister's and when I tried to go back to Bessie's, the dirt was blowing so bad I became disoriented and started to go down the east side of the road and I was supposed to be on the west side. Russell Stites had to take me back home which was just catty wampus." When asked if she was frightened she emphatically replied, "Yes, I was scared!"¹²

Leta Bell related this story. "The one (storm) I remember so well, we had a Mother sow that was to have pigs. And so Poppa thought he would shut her up to be sure she wasn't out in the hog lot. He fixed her a pen. Well, the dust storm come up not too long after dinner and it was still a blowin' when we went to bed. Mother had wet sheets and blankets and hung up (to the windows). She took down the curtains. Our house looked like just a vacant house except we had our blinds up. But she hung blankets or sheets, or whatever she could, over the windows, and we went to bed. The next morning we got up and went down to do some chores. Poppa said, I can't find my sow. He said, "the pen where I shut her up is purt'u near full of dirt." When we finally got it shoveled out of there, she had seven little pigs and she had made a little holler, just like under this table (referring to the coffee table), and we raised all but one of them. He had made this shelter for her so she would be there but she was covered up with dirt. That was the worst one (storm) that I can remember. It was just as black as black could be that night. The dirt rolled in 'til you didn't have any suu."¹³

Belva Jones Ostrum said, "In my case work I traveled the county and if we would see a dirt storm coming up we headed for home very fast because it was very dangerous. You could not see your hand in front of your face. There were several times over this period, '34, '35, and '36, the court house didn't even open. Nobody got out. There were three different times at least (the court house closed) because you couldn't see where to go."¹⁴

My mother, Florence Jones, related her most vivid memory of the Dust Bowl era. "I will never forget the first dust storm that came up. I was teaching in Levant, which is west of Colby (Kansas). When that (storm) rolled in, it was just like clouds. It was just rolly polly as it came out and we were frightened. ... We were afraid that the children would get lost if they were out on the playground, and we tried to get back to the school, and we did. We were wanting to save them (children) too so we called them in and brought them into the building. It looked terrible. You just never would guess how terrible these clouds of dust looked. They just were thick as they could be. ... The soil was picked up by the wind and they would roll along on the ground and well, they would be a good ways up in the air too, but they would be clear down to the ground also. They was frightening because you could not see at all."¹⁵

According to Louise Jones, "The first dirt storm we had (that) I can remember. We looked out the window and there was a great big black cloud coming in from the northwest and you couldn't see through the thing. We didn't know what it was and when it hit it was just black like night and that was about 5:00 in the evening. The wind blew! That dirt was just so bad you couldn't see anything. You had to stay in the house or you'd have choked to death. A lot of people got lost in it....The next morning you would

get up and the sun was shining as bright as could be as clear and as pretty as could be."¹⁶

When the women were asked if they knew of people who became lost in the dust storms Florence Jones responded, "Oh yes. You had to be very careful when you walked. You walked close to the fence and kept the fence (motioning closeness) so that you would see it, otherwise you would get lost."¹⁷

When asked if she knew of anyone that perished during a dust storm she replied, "Yes, I do know of a family but I can't remember their names. They were up from Levant. Levant was a very dusty place. It had very thick dust storms and these people were lost. ...It was just a man and a wife. They couldn't find their way and so they stayed where their horses were. They were booked to the buggy and would stay by them so they wouldn't flounder around and be clear lost."¹⁸

When questioned about the condition of vegetation during the Dust Bowl, Opal Jackson commented, "You couldn't have flowers. You could plant a garden but it wouldn't grow. It is hard to describe. It was more like a desert than it was Kansas, as Kansas is now. There wasn't anything growing. I've been down in Arizona and that's what it looked like here at that time."¹⁹

Leta Bell talked about how the electricity caused by dust storms affected vegetation, "It burned them (crops and vegetation), scorching or kind of shriveled up, but they stood there and gathered more dirt. You could walk in the pastures and the grass would crackle just like well, ...just like you were walking on popcorn."²⁰

When the women were asked to recall other things they remember about life during the Dust Bowl in northwest Kansas, accounts included the following stories by Florence Jones, "We didn't have much money to spend. ...We had chickens that laid eggs. We had several cows and they were milked and we separated the milk each day. There was no refrigeration. I was teaching. In the Dust Bowl days the salaries were very low. The school terms were short. They weren't long like they are now. ...Probably seven months was the longest. The most that I ever did get was \$75 per month for an eight month term, which was probably during World War II. ...In the Dust Bowl days we traveled mostly in the buggy with horses hitched to it. If we had to get a load of things, like coal, for instance, we had to haul it in the wagon."²¹

Opal Jackson (chuckling) talked about family life during the Dust Bowl, "Mostly we lived on what the milk and cream brought in. We lived on about \$12.50 per week. We bought everything that we had, our car gas, and everything. Sometimes you had to put groceries back on the shelf because we didn't have enough money. I raised 300 chickens every year. ...You made your own entertainment. We played cards a lot, all kinds of games with our friends, and baseball. And in the wintertime we played fox and geese. You couldn't afford to go to the show (movie). You entertained your neighbors."²²

Leta Bell added this, "There was five of us kids and we lived on the farm. We had cows and my Dad mowed Russian thistles and stacked 'em to feed our cattle."²³

Louise Jones told this story, "People had to sell all their cattle. My folks kept enough cattle so we had milk. Of course we had horses to farm with. There were very,

very few tractors, I think. Feed (for livestock) was very scarce. Like Leta said, I can remember farmers cutting thistles and they cut 'em green and they stacked 'em just like you stack alfalfa. Cattle and horses were glad to get it. They (livestock) would not have eaten them at all if it had been normal years."²⁴

When asked how dust storms affected automobiles, Opal Jackson said, "We used a chain on our car. We kept a chain hanging from the back end of the car to keep the car running. If you didn't have the chain you couldn't keep the car running and it would conk out and wouldn't run."²⁵

Illness associated with dust storms was common. The women knew people who contracted dust pneumonia and know people who still suffer the residual effects sixty years later. Examples remembered concerning dust pneumonia included the following account by Opal Jackson, "Jeanette, my oldest daughter, I caused her to almost have pneumonia because I was putting wet sheets over her crib. Her breathing that damp air almost caused pneumonia. Then we had to find another way to keep the dirt out. A wet gunny sack at the door or window would work."²⁶

Florence Jones knew of one man who died of dust pneumonia. When asked if she knew if there was a way to treat it, she said, "Not to my knowledge. Of course you would protect yourself with cloth over your nostrils when you were out in the dust."²⁷ When questioned further she confirmed that the cloth was usually wet.

Many farmers normally had livestock that included, cattle, hogs, and chickens. I asked the ladies how dust storms affected the livestock. Opal Jackson remembered things this way, "The livestock had quite a time surviving on account of eating so much dust that was on the food. It (dust) would suffocate 'em. ...they just kind of wheezed and laid down and died."²⁸

Historically there have been differentiated sex roles. Housekeeping was usually the responsibility of women. When asked to recall how they coped with the house cleaning responsibilities, Opal Jackson related this, "If you saw a storm coming and you were washing (laundry) you ran out to get the clothes right quick because if the dust got in the material it was awful hard to get it out. We tried to never let the dust get in our clothes if they were wet. They'd (dust storms) come up and you maybe would be out hanging up the clothes and you would see a big black cloud and boy I mean you left whatever you were doing and gathered it (clothing) in and it would just get dark. And, like if you had your table set for supper and one of these clouds would come up it would just get black and you'd have to light a light."²⁹

Florence Jones remembered housekeeping stories this way, "The dust would come in so thick that our plates were turned upside down so that we would not get dust on the food. When we would go to bed the pillow would have a clean pillowcase on it but in the morning we would get up and the place where your head had been, if you laid still, would be clear but the place you didn't roll over to, it would be covered with dirt."³⁰

Belva Jones Ostrum said, "You did not use a dust cloth. We had to use a scoop it get dust out of the windows. A little breeze is all it took to stir up the dirt. It would be all over the house."³¹

Recollections included this account by Leta Bell, "Every morning we would get up and there would be an inch of dirt in every window. And it was as fine as flour. And if you went like that (blowing softly) it scattered like flour."³²

Referring to the dust and how to cope with it Louise Jones said, "We didn't have vacuum cleaners with attachments. Our houses were not built sturdy like they are now. They (houses) had lots of cracks and the windows were more or less open, not tight at all."³³

Despite hardships most of the women had some humorous anecdotes to recall. Laughingly, Jackson recalled that, "The fence posts would be covered and Melvin (her husband) always said it was the first time he'd ever had to pull up a fence post instead of burying it. He had a lift on the back end of the tractor and he fastened the end of the post on the tractor and pulled it up to keep the cows in. Melvin started out one time with the car and he hit a pile of dust, you'll see in the pictures. He came to the house to get a team (of horses) to pull his car out. By the time he got back the dirt was all gone. That was the way it (dirt) shifted."³⁴

Belva Jones Ostrum noticed that as she traveled from Hill City, Kansas, to Hays, Kansas, that the dust storms became progressively less severe. She attributes that to the rolling hills around Hill City and the flatness closer to Hays. She said that the worst thing about the Dust Bowl for her was the lack of rain. She remembers that it was at least six months without rain and thinks it may have been more.

It is estimated that approximately one million people migrated from the southern plains during the Dust Bowl.³⁵ When asked about emigration, the women recall that many people moved from the area to such places as Kansas City. None really knew what percentage of the population were involved, however, one woman thought it to be only about two percent. When asked whether or not they considered leaving their home area or if they knew people who did Opal Jackson replied, "A lot of people left, but a lot of them came back too. It was mostly people who weren't very stable here. A lot of them were just renters. But people like me, I just felt like I just had to stay. I was born here and have never lived anyplace else."³⁶

Florence remembered the emigration in these words, "I don't think many people did (emigrate). There were some who were not so tied to a piece of ground or they didn't have a farm would leave. If you had a farm you wanted to save it, and salvage it."³⁷

When asked how farming practices contributed to the Dust Bowl conditions, Opal Jackson replied, "People were farming just as much as they possibly could and weren't leaving growth on the fields as they should have. If they had left the growth on the fields they wouldn't have blown quite so much."³⁸

Leta Bell recalled that, "A lot of the farmers didn't have that much ground and they didn't use summer fallowing. Maybe they'd rotate their crops but they used it (soil) every year continuous farming. The dirt blew so bad it covered the fences just like snow.and the wheat fields in the fall was as clean as any table top you ever saw. It (wheat) just blew out by the roots."³⁹

Clearly these women perceived farming practices as contributors to the erosion. Their perceptions agree with Donald Worster who says that the deliberate actions of the

culture caused this ecological disaster.⁴⁰ When asked about soil conservation, Opal Jackson said, "That's the good that came of it (Dust Bowl). That's the part that made us all survive."⁴¹

The women believe that had it not been for the Dust Bowl soil conservation may not have become a priority for this country. According to Michael Lewis national grasslands and other land use reform measures were established in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas as an experiment to restore severely eroded grasslands and to stabilize agriculture in the Dust Bowl.⁴²

Sometimes the women when talking about the Dust Bowl reflected on their memories as though they were painful and at other times they seemed to focus on the humorous incidents. It was a period of tough times for these women, but at the same time, a period of joy and satisfaction. For example, Louise Jones said, "It (Dust Bowl) was very depressing."⁴³ Opal Jackson related this, "We had a lot of fun. It wasn't too bad. We had a good life. People were poor but most of them very seldom talked about it. You made the best of whatever you had. ...I wouldn't want to go through it again but it was fun at the time."⁴⁴

These women expressed some of the same feelings and experiences related by Ann Marie Low in writing about her experiences during the Dust Bowl in North Dakota.⁴⁵ Although times were rough these women survived life on the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl. They remained cheerful and succeeded in preserving what few resources they had. The most important results of their experiences were the belief that they were integral contributors to the survival of their family and the pride they could take in what they did during this era. The Kansas plains were, and are, important to these women. Gender, life stage, and personality no doubt contributed to their perception of this place as "home" to these women. There was a thread running throughout the interviews that people had a quality of life not measurable by material possessions but rather by satisfaction in a job well done. Landscapes can reveal one's tastes, values, aspirations, and even fears. The landscape of the Dust Bowl, though frightening to these women at times, also shaped their values and gave them a reason to strive for a better life. Perhaps topophilia, or the combination of sentiment and place as defined by Tuan, has served to make the experiences of these women a source of pride and contentment.

NOTES

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2. Vera Norwood, and Janice Monk, ed. *The Desert Is No Lady*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 4.
3. Yi-Fu Tuan. *Topophilia*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 63.
4. Donald Worster. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 4.
5. Michael E. Lewis, "National Grasslands in the Dust Bowl." *Geographical Review*, 79, No. 4, (October 1989), 161.

6. Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 11.
7. Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land*. (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press 1981), xvi.
8. Norwood and Monk, *The Desert*, 3.
9. Tuan, *Topophilia*, 113, 61.
10. Louise Jones, interview by author, video recording. Hill City, Kansas., 21 August 1993.
11. Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 15.
12. Opal Jackson, interview by author, video recording. Hill City, Kansas., 21 August 1993.
13. Leta Bell, interview by author, video recording. Hill City, Kansas., 20 August 1993.
14. Belva Jones Ostrum, interview by author, video recording. Hill City, Kansas., 21 August 1993.
15. Florence Jones, interview by author, video recording. Lewisville, Texas., 13 August 1993.
16. L. Jones, interview.
17. F. Jones, interview.
18. F. Jones, interview.
19. Jackson, interview.
20. Bell, interview.
21. F. Jones, interview.
22. Jackson, interview.
23. Bell, interview.
24. L. Jones, interview.
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33. L. Jones, interview.
34. Jackson, interview.
35. Stanley, Jerry, *Children of the Dust Bowl*. (Crown Publishers, Inc.: New York, 1992), 12.
36. Jackson, interview.
37. F. Jones, interview.
38. Jackson, interview.
39. Bell, interview.
40. Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 4.

41. Jackson, interview.
42. Lewis, National Grasslands, 161.
43. L. Jones, interview.
44. Jackson, interview.
45. Low, Ann Marie. 1984. *Dust Bowl Diary*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, Neb. On page 94 the author refers to how she dealt with the dirt on dishes and clothes. Low refers to daily chores on pages 96-98. On pages 98-101 Low describes the landscape.