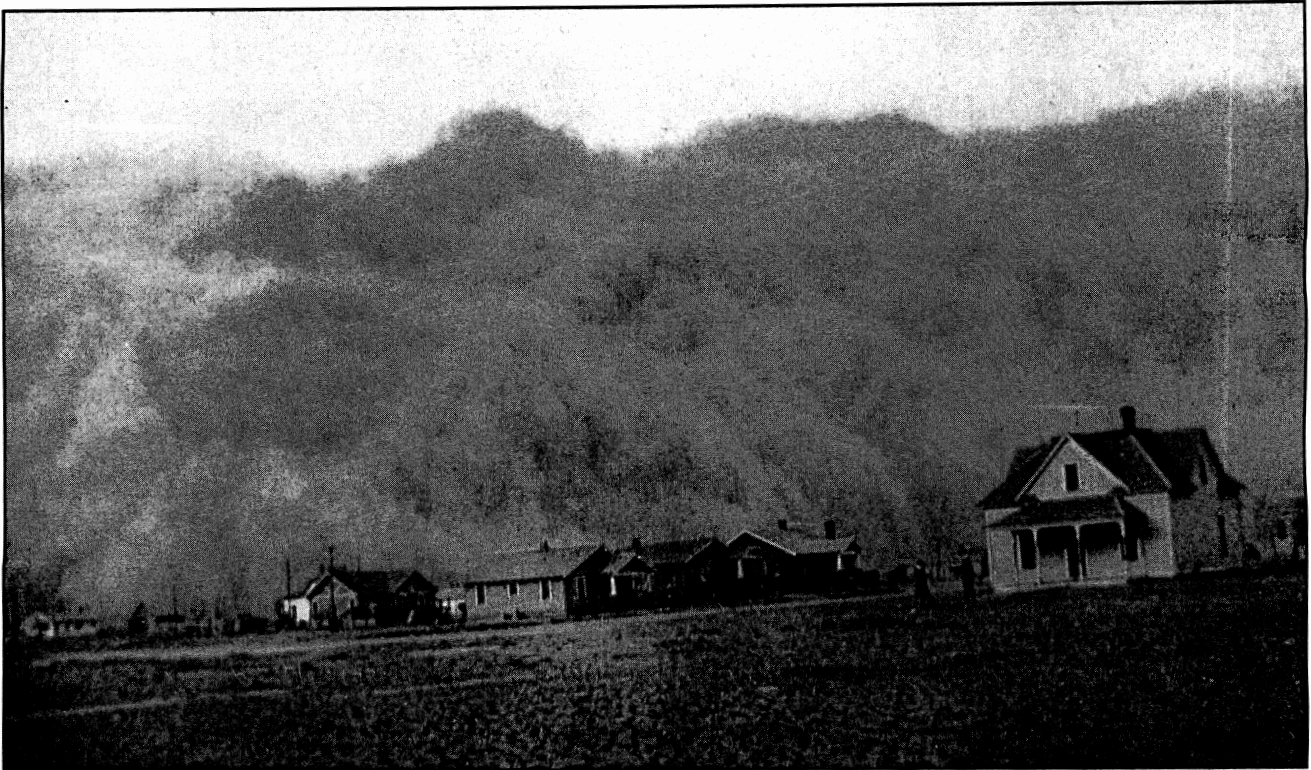

What Caused the Dust Bowl?

EV



Dust storm approaching Stratford, Texas, April 18, 1935. NOAA Photo Library, Historic NWS Collection.

Overview: In the 1930s America was hit by very bad times. These were the years of the Great Depression. In cities and in small towns across the land, banks were failing, businesses were closing, and workers were being fired. But in some ways farmers were hit hardest of all, and few farmers were hit harder than those in the Southern Great Plains. This region has come to be known as the Dust Bowl. The question for this Mini-Q is what caused the Dust Bowl tragedy.

The Documents:

[REDACTED]
Document B: Grass

[REDACTED]
Document D: Acreage Under Plow (chart)

Document E: Rainfall on the Plains in the 1930s

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

1 What Caused the Dust Bowl?

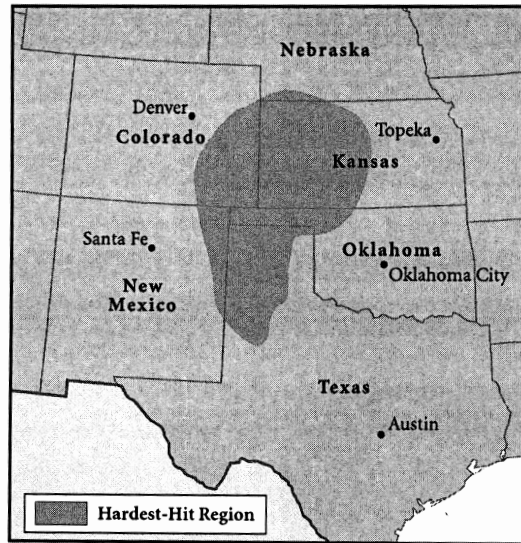
On Thursday, April 18, 1935, a huge, black, billowing cloud piled up on the western horizon. For Stratford, Texas, and thousands of farms and small towns, it was the arrival of another dust storm, one of more than 300 that would make an unwelcome visit to the Southern Great Plains during the 1930s.

2 For thousands of years the Southern Plains were covered by **shortgrass prairie** and home to vast herds of twenty or thirty million buffalo. In more recent times, people arrived. First came the Apache, the Comanche, and the Kiowa. Shortly after the Civil War, there came a few thousand cowboys and several million cattle. Then came the farmer.

3 The first farmers arrived in the 1880s. Word had gotten out back East that the Southern Great Plains was good for wheat. Yes, rainfall was a bit spotty, but the land was cheaper than farmland in Arkansas or Illinois. Besides, it was said that rain would follow the plow. Grow crops and clouds would form.

4 With few trees for lumber, many of these early farmers lived in **soddies**, houses made of earth and grass. Soddies were soon replaced by wood frame houses. A severe drought in the 1890s caused some farmers to move away, but then the federal government sweetened the pot.

5 A new **Enlarged Homestead Act** passed in 1909 offered 320 acres of land to anyone who could hang on for three years. Thousands of new farm families took up the offer. In addition, the giant XIT ranch on the Texas **panhandle** sold off much of its three million acre spread to wanna-be farmers. Wheat would replace cattle as the new king of the Southern Plains.



6 Wheat fever was in the air. The railroad sent out branch lines to small towns, and more wheat could get to market. World War I, which brought so much pain to Europe, was good for Plains farmers. A hungry Europe bought Kansas wheat. Wheat that sold for 93 cents a bushel in 1914 was close to \$2.50 in 1919. More families moved in. Small towns popped up like spring flowers. Boise City out near the end of the

Oklahoma panhandle sported a theater, a newspaper, a furniture store, a bank, and several cafes.

7 But then trouble came. The Great Depression of the 1930s was the first blow.

Unemployment back East made it harder to sell wheat. Sadly, the

Depression did not come alone. What made life on the Southern Plains almost unbearable were the dust

storms. In the middle thirties these wind-driven **dusters** darkened the midday sky and carried off millions of tons of precious topsoil as far as

Washington DC and New York City.

8 During the 1930s more than three million plains settlers left their farms – some for town, some for a neighboring state, some for California. Many more, however, stayed put, covering their windows with a water-soaked sheet, eating jackrabbit stew at a kitchen table where an “eating” cloth covered all the plates and drinking cups.

Children died from breathing in dust. They called it “dust pneumonia.” Writer Timothy Egan has titled his book on Dust Bowl history as *The Worst Hard Time*.

10 But exactly what happened to cause this worst hard time? Examine the documents that follow and do your best to answer the question before us: *What caused the Dust Bowl?*

EV

Background Essay Questions

1. What two states in the Dust Bowl region have panhandles?
2. Could a child born in a soddy in the 1880s have been a farmer during the Dust Bowl years? Explain your thinking.

3. Define or explain each of these terms:

shortgrass prairie

soddies

Enlarged Homestead Act

panhandle

dusters

4. What economic effect did World War I have on Plains wheat farmers? Explain.
5. List three pieces of evidence that support the idea that the Dust Bowl was “the worst hard time.”
6. Did most people leave the Southern Plains during the Dust Bowl years?

1929 – US unemployment is 1.6 million

1932 – US unemployment is 12.1 million

1933 – Prohibition is repealed

1934 – Rainfall in Dalhart, Texas under 10 inches

1935 – Soil Conservation Service created to stop erosion in Dust Bowl

1936 – Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in Olympics in Nazi Berlin

1939 – John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* is published

3

Document B

Source: Texas sheepherder, in Stuart Chase, *Rich Land, Poor Land*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1936.

“Grass is what counts. It’s what saves us all – far as we get saved....
Grass is what holds the earth together.”

EV



The most common short grass in the Dust Bowl region was buffalo grass. It only grew about four inches high and produced a tough grassy mat that looked like a well-grazed meadow.

Document Analysis

1. What do you suppose the Texas sheepherder means when he says that grass “saves us all”?
2. The sheepherder also says that grass “holds the earth together.” What does he mean?
3. How does this document help answer the question, “What caused the Dust Bowl?” Explain.
4. The visual above is a typical view of the “grass” described by Chase. What is likely to happen once the grass is removed to plant crops.

4

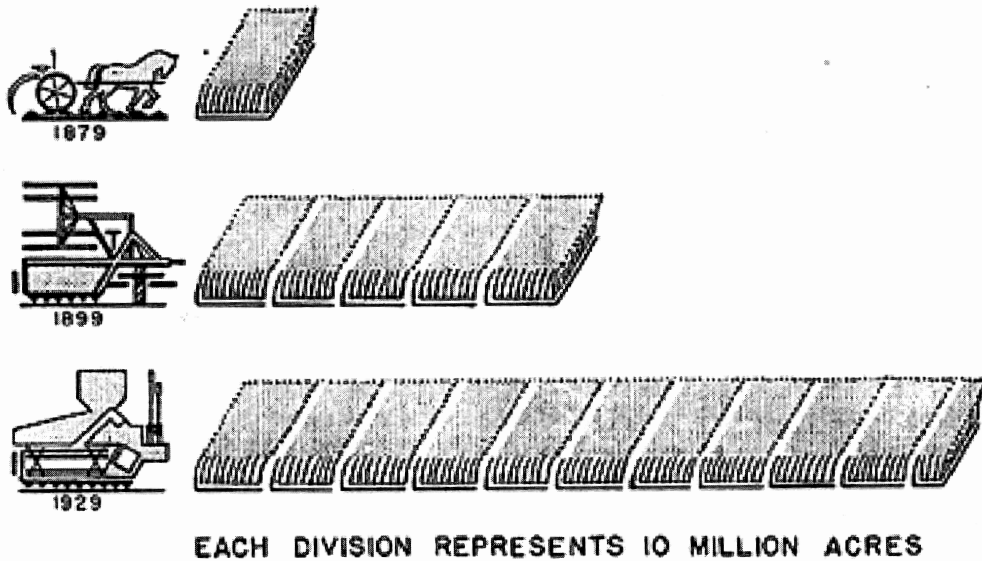
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Document D

Source: *Great Plains Drought Area Committee Report of August 27, 1936*, Washington DC, US Government Printing Office.

Note: This committee was formed at the request of President Franklin Roosevelt.

ACREAGE OF HARVESTED CROPS IN 8 GREAT PLAINS STATES



Document Analysis

1. Is this document a primary or a secondary source? Explain your thinking.

2. How many acres of crops were harvested in the Plains states in 1879?

In 1899?

In 1929?

3. What generalization can you make about the information in this chart?

4. How does this chart help answer the question, "What caused the Dust Bowl?"

Document E

Source: High Plains Regional Climate Center, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Normal Annual Precipitation for Five Dust Bowl Towns

Town	Normal Precipitation (inches)
Clovis, New Mexico	17.64
Boise City, Oklahoma (panhandle)	17.00
Dalhart, Texas (panhandle)	17.87
Burlington, Colorado	16.38
Goodland, Kansas	18.02

Note: John Wesley Powell, the great Western explorer, determined that 20 inches of rain annually was the minimum for successful farming on the Plains. But, he said, "... at 20 inches agriculture will not be uniformly successful from season to season."

Source: From Randy Francis, *The Texas Dust Bowl in Historical Perspective*, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 1998.

Actual Precipitation for Dallam County, Texas
(County Seat, Dalhart)

1923	33.40 inches
1924	15.32
1931	14.66
1932	20.09
1933	10.14
1934	9.78
1935	13.31
1936	9.93
1937	14.48
1938	14.08
1939	14.75
1940	12.74

Document Analysis

1. According to John Wesley Powell, how much annual rainfall was necessary to grow crops in arid regions like the Southern Great Plains?
2. To the nearest inch, what was the average annual rainfall of the five Dust Bowl towns?
3. From 1931 to 1940, how many years was Dalhart's rainfall below normal?
4. How do these charts together help answer the question, "What caused the Dust Bowl?"