Shared Stories of the Kansas Land
Reader's Theater Project

Dry Kansas Washed Away

Dust storms. Drought. Hunger. Unemployment. During the "Dirty Thirties," Kansans faced a lack of jobs, money, and food to sustain themselves and their families. Although the dust storm persists as an iconic symbol, the story of the 1930s has much more to offer.

The *Dry Kansas Washed Away* reader's theater script was created using excerpts from historical letters, oral histories, reports, government documents, and newspaper articles. Following the reading, participants will have the opportunity to discuss the experiences of Kansans during the 1930s and the role of government in times of crisis.

Please Note: Regional historians have reviewed the source materials used, the script, and the list of citations for accuracy.

For More Information:
Kansas Humanities Council www.kansashumanities.org

Introduction

Instructions: The facilitator can either read the entire introduction out loud or summarize key points.

Dust storms. Drought. Hunger. Unemployment. During the "Dirty Thirties," Kansans faced a lack of jobs, money, and food to sustain themselves and their families. Although the dust storm persists as an iconic symbol, the story of the 1930s has much more to offer.

At the start, Americans were still reeling from the 1929 stock market crash. In Kansas, wheat prices were down, and farmers were unable to make ends meet. In addition, severe drought and topsoil erosion contributed to a lack of crops. Small rural towns, which included shopkeepers, bankers, and other professionals, depended on farming success. Low prices, and eventually, failing crops, affected everyone.

But what led to this environmental disaster? The Great Plains Committee in 1936 noted that assuming natural resources, particularly water, were inexhaustible was a root cause for farmers' problems throughout the decade. Furthermore, soil erosion helped create the conditions that led to dust storms, and when rain fell, it could not replenish the land. In response, government stepped in with federal and state aid and conservation programs.

Through all of this, however, not all of Kansas remained dry. In 1935, the Arkansas and Republican Rivers flooded, causing widespread damage in Western Kansas and Eastern Colorado. Goodland and surrounding towns were inundated with water. People drowned. Property was destroyed.

This script will revolve around the lives of Kansans in the 1930s, with a particular focus on drought conditions, government aid programs, and the flood of 1935 in order to highlight the relationship between Kansans and their shared environmental heritage.

Shared Stories of the Kansas Land brings to life the voices of the people who lived through events that altered the land and the environment.

Group Discussion Questions

Instructions: The facilitator should pose one or more of these questions in advance of the reading of the script. At the conclusion of the reading, participants can return to the questions for consideration.

1. How did Kansans in the 1930s use the environmental resources available to them to the best of their ability? How are Kansans resourceful today?

2. How do times of need and natural disaster affect the ways communities work?

3. How did the Dust Bowl influence attitudes toward land and water use? Do any of those attitudes persist today?

Script

Instructions: Each part will be read out loud by an assigned reader. Readers should stand and speak into a microphone when it's their turn. The source of the quote should also be read out loud (this is the information bolded beneath each quote).

NARRATOR *Episode One—Dusty Stormy Kansas*

READER 1 "The Dust Storm"

I see the dust storm speed across
The barren soil.
High driven clouds their streamers toss,
Torn by the wind in swift recoil,
Casting their shadows far and near
Over the fields so brown and were,
In wild turmoil.

A choking haze is in the air,
Its course begun.
A yellow mantle of despair,
A cloak around a skeleton.
I see in the mist vast formless things:
Ghosts of famine with spreading wings,
Hiding the sun.

Poem by I.R. Sherwin in *Dust Storm Collection*, published by the Kansas Authors Club, 1934.

NARRATOR *Dust storms, which had always been a part of life for Kansans, grew in intensity in the 1930s. Upon the storm's approach, the sky turned red, then black. People could not see far enough to walk, let alone drive. Ways of life changed. Kansans had to seek shelter and wait out each storm. Afterward, families tackled the never-ending task of cleaning and sealing their homes from the next storm. Meetings and gatherings could be postponed at any minute due to an approaching dust storm. People could get hurt.*

READER 2 *Esbon, Kansas*. The couple, who had gone to Mankato without extra wraps in the warm afternoon, were caught near Otego by the dust storm on their return. As the storm struck, their car was forced off the highway into a ditch filled with drifted Russian thistles and rapidly filling with dust. The dust and thistles, with the air being threshed by suction, made the air stifling, and to keep from choking to death Mr. and Mrs. Modlin left the car. The thistles soon cut Mrs. Modlin's hose into shreds.

They started on foot, following a barbed wire fence in the hope of getting into Otego where Mr. Modlin's father resides. They stumbled and fell repeatedly in the blinding dust and soon were lost in a wheatfield. Mrs. Modlin was suffering from the cold and the husband took off his shirt and wrapped it about her. On they went and by chance came upon a deserted farm house where they found some shelter in a cave until next morning when the storm had subsided.

***Topeka Capital* newspaper, March 18, 1935.**

READER 3 There seemed to be no way that we could keep the dirt out of the houses without caulking all of the windows shut and sometimes we didn't care what it looked like and we caulked around the window frames and around the baseboards. We hung wet sheets up over the doors. Maybe the windows when the dirt was at its worst because there was such a vacuum I suppose on the inside of our places that the dirt just came in every conceivable crack. Even the shingles on the roofs couldn't keep it out.

Mrs. Olive Kramer of Hugoton, Stevens County, interviewed in 1979.

NARRATOR *Kansans were virtually helpless in the face of these dust storms. All anyone could do was wait out the storm and hope for the best. Travel became unpredictable.*

READER 4 All we could do about it was just sit in our dusty chairs, gaze at each other through the fog that filled the room and watch that fog settle slowly and silently, covering everything—including ourselves—in a thick, brownish gray blanket. When we opened the door swirling whirlwinds of soil beat against us unmercifully and we were thankful to sit, choking in the fog.

The doors and windows were all shut tightly, yet those tiny particles seemed to seep through the very walls. It got into cupboards and clothes closets; our faces were as dirty as if we had rolled in the dirt; our hair was gray and stiff and we ground dirt between our teeth.

Mrs. Vendia Walton of Garden City, in the *Kansas City Times*, March 20, 1935.

READER 1 [The dust storms] were seemingly several hundred feet high and yet you could see clear air, even sunlight above them. Most of them came in from the northwest moving slowly probably two, three, four, five miles an hour. A lot of times they were kind of moving against a southerly breeze and with these heavy dark storms they weren't moving awfully fast

although some of them seemed to sweep in on you. People on the highway were in trouble. I recall trips to Ulysses or to other towns on business and they'd come up seemingly fast and you thought you were going to beat them and get home in time to get away from them but a lot of times you didn't do that.

Gus Kramer of Hugoton, interviewed in 1979.

READER 4 We went to Meade one day, my wife and the two boys to get some supplies and didn't get home until night. The back porch wasn't screened in. When we stepped in on the back porch it felt just like there was a nice soft rug on the floor. There was just about that much had come through the screen down on the floor on the porch. A nice pile of dirt all over the floor.

John Stadler of Hugoton, interviewed in 1979.

NARRATOR *Some storms were worse than others, as chronicled in accounts of storms on "Black Friday," "Black Sunday," and storms that surpassed those in 1935, a particularly bad year.*

READER 3 But while the southwest corner of the state was taking its weather straight, the dust was adulterated in other sections of the state with drops of rain and flakes of snow to break the monotony. Rain had started falling through an intense dust cloud at Hutchinson at 2:15 o'clock, forming mud balls, according to a report received over the private wire of Goffe and Carkener, grain dealers of corn.

At Goodland, according to the Associated Press, snow mixed with dust was driven in on a high north wind. Old timers said it was one of the worst storms of its kind ever recalled there. Activity of all kinds had virtually been suspended. Highway travel was halted and train schedules hampered.

***Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 10, 1935.**

NARRATOR *A housewife in Meade County recounted her experience of "Black Sunday" in vivid detail.*

READER 2 It was as though the sky was divided into two opposite worlds. On the south there was blue sky, golden sunlight and tranquility; on the north, there was a menacing curtain of boiling black dust that appeared to reach a thousand or more feet into the air. It had the appearance of a mammoth waterfall in reverse—color as well as form. The apex of the

cloud was plumed and curling, seething and tumbling over itself from north to south and whipping trash, paper, sticks, and cardboard cartons before it. Even the birds were helpless in the turbulent onslaught and dipped and dived without benefit of wings as the wind propelled them.

As the wall of dust and sand struck our house the sun was instantly blotted out completely. Gravel particles clattered against the windows and pounded down on the roof. The floor shook with the impact of the wind, and the rafters creaked threateningly. We stood in our living room in pitch blackness. We were stunned. Never had we been in such all-enveloping blackness before, such impenetrable gloom. Finally, we groped our way to the wall switch and turned on the light.

Pauline Winkler Grey, in the article "The Black Sunday of April 15, 1935," published in *Pioneer Stories of Meade County*, 1950.

NARRATOR *These dust storms stirred up dry, powdery topsoil that had been under duress from drought, which persisted throughout the decade.*

NARRATOR *Episode Two—Extremes in Kansas*

READER 1 Kansas is suffering from the worst drought in its climatic history: acute water shortages, pastures burning up, feed for stock at a minimum, low corn yield, intense and protracted heat, high evaporation rates and the worst grasshopper plague in a decade, are the contributing factors. The cumulative effect of several years of deficient rainfall has made the water problem most serious. The entire state has now been classified under the emergency drought rating by the federal government.

Ogden Jones, Geologist for State Board of Agriculture, in a drought report to Governor Landon, August 28, 1936.

READER 3 There is a terrible monotony about any drought. Day after day is the same. The sun comes up hot. There are no cool mornings. Sky is as pretty a blue as you would want and always a few lazy white clouds float around. You get so mad at those clouds you forget how pretty they are. What you want to see is some real thunderheads. The stars at night twinkle with a bold brassy glare—not friendly-like as usual.

Mary Francis McKinney in *Kansas Magazine*, 1935.

NARRATOR *Tenant farmers tried to make the best of the drought conditions, but often faced other natural obstacles they were unable to overcome.*

READER 4

Well I sure hate to write you this letter, but Friday about 2:30 we were hailed on. We have pushed in for a total loss. We will send you the policy as soon as we can. We are sure hoping we get the full amount. Bill was so blue, I doubt if we have 500 bushels on the 400 acres.

Had three inches of rain in a few minutes and a most terrible wind.

One man told us that he cut 20 acres and got 100 bushels. It rained so hard Friday he could not get in the field till today and said he feared there would be nothing to cut.

Edna Heim of Kensington, in a letter to Miss Clarice Snoddy of Topeka, July 4, 1938.

NARRATOR

Rain was needed desperately, but it often came without warning and in forms that were not desirable for crops. But Kansans still celebrated the return of rain, which could offer much-needed relief.

READER 2

It rained today.
And the little new leaves
Clapped their hands for joy;
The dusty grass
Laughed bright green laughter.

It rained today,
And all the planted seeds
Split their brown jackets wide open
In their eagerness to grow.
The drowsy jonquils opened their eyes wide
And smiled.

It rained today;
A robin sang a hymn of praise
And the little sparrows
Said “Amen!”

Rain fell today
Upon my thankful heart.

Poem by Edna Becker in *Dust Storm Collection*, published by the Kansas Authors Club, 1934.

NARRATOR *That rain, in uncontrolled amounts, could spell disaster for Kansans. In 1935, the same year of drought and dust storms, the Republican River, which flows from Nebraska into the Smoky Hills region of Kansas, flooded on Memorial Day of 1935, causing destruction in the Republican Valley.*

READER 4 By flashes of lightning we could see our house was surrounded by a sea of water. We knew the water would come in our house. There was no dodging it.

We watched the door and finally all of our family saw the black water come creeping in under the door then slowly raise in the room. The water got six inches deep in our house. There was nothing we could do but wait.

It is awfully hard to wait when the water starts lapping at the legs of your piano.

Mrs. Walter Joy of St. Francis, in a newspaper article by Francis H. Bishop, 1935

READER 3 Frank and Nora had some forewarning of the flood on May 30. That night at 11 o'clock the water was up around their house. Later it entered the house to about the depth of the mop-boards, and then it began receding somewhat. They thought the worst was over but early in the morning it came on again in recurring waves that just gave them no time to do anything; got arm-pit deep to Frank very quickly. Nora was perched on the table, wrapped in a Navajo rug. They decided to climb out and Nora reached for a coat, slipped and fell off and submerged. Frank succeeded in grabbing her by the hair, and bringing her up. In the meantime, Frank had gone to the bedroom window and kicked it out in order to crawl out that way. Just as they started out the window, the house walls collapsed outwardly and the roof came down, but they were swept outward under it. They really clung to the roof more than anything else as they were swept downstream.

O.J. Ferguson of St. Francis, in a letter to family and friends, June 17, 1935

READER 1 As far as the Republican River is concerned, it was by far the largest within the memory of man. Our records show that this flood had a maximum discharge of 300,000 cu. ft. per second at Scandia and 210,000 cu. ft. per second at Clay Center. Valley storage, as the waters overflowed the valley, acted to reduce the maximum discharge and increased the duration of overflow as the flood progressed down the valley. While I do not have figures available, I would not be surprised if

this flood reached a maximum of around 400,000 sec. feet at McCook, Nebraska. This flood was by far the greatest in magnitude and destructiveness of anything which man has knowledge of in the Republican Valley.

Geo S. Knapp, Chief Engineer for the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, in a letter to Mr. A.Q. Miller of Salina, Topeka, July 1, 1935.

NARRATOR *How could Kansans deal with these conditions? How had these conditions that spawned enormous, roiling dust storms been created? Why was the drought so severe? Scientists, farmers, and government officials began to work together to seek the cause of the problem and potential solutions.*

NARRATOR *Episode Three—Relief?*

READER 2 Kansas is rapidly washing away. Soil is being carried by flood waters down to the streams, into the rivers and finally into the Gulf of Mexico.

Take the word of the Kansas State College for it—in some of the eastern counties more than 90 percent of the productive soil has been washed away in the 50 or more years the land has been farmed. Every time a plow is set into the soil, it is an invitation for a good heavy rain to come along and skim off a portion of the loose soil. …

The college authorities are endeavoring to induce many farmers to terrace their land during the winter months to prevent slow destruction of a good farming state. While the hills are being reduced to the level of the valleys, erosion is spoiling productivity of the farms. No man now alive will live to see all the hills flattened out and new soil built upon the shales and rocks. And to quote a professor: “A deed to the farm won’t hold the soil.”

***Topeka Capital*, in the article “Day by day Kansas is rapidly washing away,” December 4, 1932.**

NARRATOR *These reports led to a New Deal-funded search for solutions. With its citizens suffering, and with state and local government bereft of funds, the federal government had to take action. In 1932, Kansas Governor Harry Hines Woodring created the Kansas Emergency Relief Commission (KERC) and then borrowed funds from the federal government to support the commission. The KERC worked to mitigate drought conditions and provide Kansans with employment opportunities.*

READER 3 The Kansas Emergency Relief Commission has put into operation what it believes is a comprehensive far-sighted program, designed not only to take care of the present water shortage, but to build and conserve for the future.

John G. Stutz, Executive Director of the KERC, Topeka, August 27, 1934.

READER 4 Where water shortage for human and live stock needs exists owing to conditions produced by the drought, either on privately or municipally owned property, we will undertake to give aid in locating suitable water supplies through the services of geologists. Work relief labor may be used in putting down the tests.

Governor Alf M. Landon has secured the promise of the loan of several hundred pumping units, both gas and motor driven, together with the necessary pipes. These can be used to pump a large stream … in order to place the water in a storage tank on the bank from which the farmers and stockmen may draw water for their livestock.

Kansas Emergency Relief Commission, "The Water Conservation Program," Topeka, July 14, 1934.

NARRATOR *In addition to the KERC, President Franklin Roosevelt's federal New Deal programs offered employment opportunities for all U.S. citizens, including Kansans. Political infighting was discouraged, as evidenced by Kansas Senator Arthur Capper's words.*

READER 2 The Republicans cannot afford to block the President's program merely for partisan advantage.

After all, the best kind of politics usually is forgetting all about politics and doing what one thinks is the right thing.

When I went to Washington a year ago the farmers were disheartened, laboring men in despair. Businessmen generally had the jitters. I decided to support any program in Congress that held promise of alleviating these conditions.

I worked and voted for the program which makes it possible for the administration at Washington to spend $500,000 a month building lakes and ponds in Kansas. The money is now available and if this program is carried out for any considerable length of time it will be one of the most constructive things desired for the benefit of the state. A lake in every county and a pond on every farm would in a large measure solve our

drought and flood troubles and perhaps modify our climate somewhat. It is a vast undertaking, but I am glad to know that the state is going to take full advantage of the Government's offer.

Senator Arthur Capper, Draft of New Deal speech, 1934.

NARRATOR *As the government worked to provide aid, it also sought to determine the causes of the Dust Bowl conditions and to find solutions. Newspaper and government reports outlined some of the underlying reasons for crop failures and drought.*

READER 1 Diminishing soil moisture in the western one-third of Kansas is causing great concern to soil experts and farmers alike. Records kept at the Hays experiment station indicate the territory is rapidly approaching the same conditions that now exist in the upper basin of the Yellow river in China where all the top soil has been blown or washed away and where the ashy subsoil shifts with the changing winds just as the "Black Blizzards" rage in the dust bowl.

Farming trends since the World war are blamed for the impending disaster by the soil specialists. Continued cropping of the land has driven the water table down steadily until the soil no longer can sustain crops, but even the wells are going dry. Research at the Hays station laboratory shows that subsoil of western Kansas cannot be distinguished from samples of the Yellow river earth.

However, it is pointed out, reforms in farming conditions can halt the steady march of destruction and that it may be possible to restore the once ample soil moisture. Terracing to prevent soil washing and to hold water on the land until it has time to be absorbed is stressed. Summer fallowing allows the soil moisture to be built up. These, however, are largely surface remedies. The water table problem must be dealt with in a different way.

J.R. Hubbard, in the article "Dust Bowl soil is now same as Chinese desert," *Topeka Capital*, August 9, 1936.

NARRATOR *Government programs then offered solutions for farmers to implement.*

READER 4 WPA engineers…have reached the conclusion that a series of "charging" ponds may hold the best solution. "Charging" ponds are designed to catch runoff water and hold it for long enough to be absorbed into the subsoil. They are not designed as reservoirs to hold water, but to check it long enough for absorption. They act on the same principle as terraces do for farm lands.

Hundreds of these ponds are being planned.

Engineers said: “When the plains were first plowed up they had a natural moisture that had been stored up for years. Naturally, when it was first plowed it yielded tremendous crops. At first the decaying roots and humus in the soil held it together so it did not erode badly. Now this humus is gone into wheat crops and the land is ashy. Experts at the Hays station contend that within the lifetime of people today, the western Kansas plains will become as desolate and dreary as the wornout fields of China unless drastic steps are taken to conserve both soil and water.”

J.R. Hubbard, “Dust Bowl soil is now same as Chinese desert,” *Topeka Capital*, August 9, 1936.

NARRATOR *Researchers continued to cry out for conservation measures. One of the main obstacles facing farmers—topsoil erosion—needed to be addressed immediately if Kansas were to once again become a leading agricultural state. The Kansas State Board of Agriculture outlined what had created these conditions and what needed to be done to reduce further damage.*

READER 3 The topsoil over most of the plains area is not deep and every effort should be made to preserve it.

Land which shows a tendency to blow cannot safely be farmed by the suitcase farmer, the city agriculturalist, or the shiftless tenant. When light, sandy soils or the finely pulverized soil form the so-called hard land areas begins to pick up due to high wind, it needs attention immediately and if proper tillage is not given at once a disaster next in importance to the old time prairie fire may be in the making. The famous paint slogan, “Save the surface and you save all,” applies just as effectively to the topsoil of the agricultural land of the nation, whether it is subject to loss by wind or by water.

Intelligent community action is essential in the prevention of soil blowing.

L. C. Aicher, Superintendent of Fort Hays Experiment Station, in a report to the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1935.

NARRATOR *As the report noted, “intelligent community action” was necessary. The community and government at all levels needed to work together in order to begin moving toward land and water rehabilitation.*

READER 1 To date we have put out 56 pumps and 25 miles of water line. The water lines serve the pasture areas. Municipalities depending on surface water supplies in the valleys of the Walnut, Neosho, Verdigris, and Marais des Cygne [in Southeast Kansas] are faced with a critical water crisis due to the fact that most of the streams have ceased to flow, and inadequate impounding reservoirs have gone dry. The Arkansas River is still carrying considerable water from rains in southeastern Colorado.

Several municipalities are shipping water in by tank car, the railroad rate of which has been reduced by half with a minimum of $10.00 per car to cover switching costs. Greater Kansas City, through Manager McElroy, is sending free of cost several tank cars of water per day to the cities of Lenexa and Gardner, and are advertising the fact rather freely.

Ogden Jones, Geologist for State Board of Agriculture, Drought report to Governor Landon, August 28, 1936.

NARRATOR *Kansans witnessed how this aid from both the private and public sector changed their lives in this time of drought.*

READER 2 Soon after the water situation really became serious the governor sent in pumps loaned by oil companies. A relief worker was furnished to run the pump and engine. If you have never dipped water until your back ached and it seemed you could not lift another drop you cannot fully appreciate those pumps. All we had to do was drive up on the bank and a loose hose put the water right in the barrels.

1934 was the first year under the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration). All the farmers were skittish of contracts to reduce acreage of wheat and corn and number of hogs. They were ready to tar and feather Alexander Legge some years before when he came out and suggested that they plow up part of their wheat. But in 1934 most of us had our backs to the wall. Besides, the New Deal offered a little cash compensation. And brother that helped. The contracts were voluntary and some individuals did not sign. When that drought came along and there wasn't 100 bushels of corn picked in the whole county those farmers were mighty glad they had signed up and had a little something coming in.

Mary Francis McKinney, in the article "The drought of '34: A Farm Woman's Account," *Kansas Magazine*, 1935.

NARRATOR *While the government and private businesses certainly did relieve economic depression and drought, only so much could be done. Not all Kansans received the aid they believed they deserved. Not all issues could be resolved.*

READER 3 I give the New Deal credit for saving their farms for many farmers. I give the New Deal credit for sincerely trying to solve the farm problem. I give the New Deal credit for greatly improving the farmer's credit faculties, through the Farm Credit Administration. I give the New Deal credit for effort in attempting to balance production to market demand—there are good points as well as bad points in the AAA [Agricultural Adjustment Administration] program.

But I say it has not given the farmer parity prices. It has not given the farmer cost of production plus a fair profit. It has taken good land out of production and at the same time attempted to bring poorer land into production through wasteful reclamation projects.

Senator Arthur Capper, Hutchinson, October 29, 1938.

NARRATOR *Despite these misgivings, the combined effort of conservation measures, New Deal programs, and the economic boom during World War II pushed Kansas out of its desperate circumstances and into more prosperous times.*

—End—