

DUST IN THE DISTANCE

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SUBJECTS: Social Studies

OBJECTIVE: The student will label the states surrounding Oklahoma and the Oklahoma counties that were part of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s and research their climatic conditions.

BACKGROUND

The Dust Bowl covered 150,000 square acres in the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles, southeastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico and southwestern Kansas. The worst of the dust storms swept over southwestern Kansas. Yet many people think only of Oklahoma when they think of the Dust Bowl. In fact, only a small part of Oklahoma—the Panhandle—was affected by the Dust Bowl. In southeastern Oklahoma during the early 1930s, rainfall actually increased.

The Oklahoma Panhandle is the driest part of Oklahoma. The average rainfall is about 20 inches per year, although in some years it gets as little as 12 inches. The average rainfall in the state is 34 inches, with an average of 50 inches in the southeastern part of the state. Farming in the Panhandle is only possible under irrigation and by using fallow farming and residue management systems. The soil is sandy, and high winds are common.

The entire Southern Plains region has always been subject to periodic drought. As long as the land was covered with short sod-forming native grasses, the dry spells did little damage. The first European settlers didn't even try to farm the Southern Plains. They ran cattle on the native grasses that held the fragile soil in place.

In 1889, the Oklahoma territory was opened for homesteading, and the number of settlers increased from a few thousand to 60,000. Thousands of acres of protective grass were plowed under for farmland. This took place during a period of abundant rainfall, and by 1900 the rich fertile soils of Oklahoma supported 390,000 persons. In 1910 a dry spell occurred, but by 1914 the soils were, once again, back in full production.

MATERIALS

map pencils or
crayons



VOCABULARY

Dust Bowl

irrigation

fallow farming

residue
management
native grassesP.A.S.S

In 1924 there was a prolonged drought. World War I had just ended a few years before and had disrupted agricultural production in Europe. To make up for food shortages caused by the war, the US government encouraged farmers all over the United States to plant crops “from fence to fence.” The shortages also caused the price of wheat to go up, so planting wheat became a very profitable business. Landowners in the Oklahoma Panhandle and all over the Southern Plains plowed up the ground cover and planted winter wheat. With large areas of plowed land having no grassroot system to anchor it, the topsoil of the Oklahoma Panhandle simply blew away. The dust storms and sand storms buried roads and houses. Clouds of dust reached as far east as Washington, DC.

Farmers in the US learned valuable lessons about soil conservation from the Dust Bowl. One of the most important lessons was that sandy, fragile soils must be covered with some kind of vegetation. In some areas landowners keep some kind of ground cover on their land at all times. In other areas farmers use plowing techniques that prevent the soils from blowing away. Some farmers keep the native grass cover on their land and simply allow cattle to graze there rather than remove the ground cover for planting.

In response to the Dust Bowl the US government created agencies like the Civilian Conservation Corps to replant grasses, plant trees and teach farmers scientific techniques for protecting the soil. These agencies were the forerunners of today’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. Through the efforts of these agencies, farmers over the years have learned to respect the special characteristics of the former Dust Bowl lands and to work with them to keep the land productive.

ACTIVITY

1. Share background material.
2. Hand out student worksheets. Have students label the Oklahoma counties and surrounding states that were part of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.
3. Direct students to make a legend in the box provided that explains the information found on the map. Have students use map pencils or color lightly with crayons the three Dust Bowl regions shown on the map.
4. Have students research weather patterns, soil types, vegetation and agriculture in the Oklahoma counties and the regions of each state that was involved.

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5. After research is complete, lead a discussion in which students discuss their findings and suggest reasons why this area was so hard hit by the Dust Bowl. What do all parts of this region have in common? Compare the common perception—that the Dust Bowl took place only in Oklahoma and that all of Oklahoma was affected—with the facts. Lead the discussion toward the need for citizens to be well-informed and not assume the common perception is fact.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Have students draw a time line of factors leading up to the Dust Bowl, using information found in paragraphs four and five of the background information.
2. Severe dust storms occurred in Kazakhstan (in the former Soviet Union) 20 years after the American Dust Bowl. Have students locate Kazakhstan on a world map and research to discover its climate, soil type, vegetation and agricultural practices. How is this region similar and different from the Southern Plains?
3. Bring in topographical maps and elevation maps of the Plains region so students can see how this area is different from the surrounding areas.

EXTRA READING

Andryszewski, Tricia, *The Dust Bowl: Disaster on the Plains*, Millbrook, 1993.

Brandenburg, Jim, *An American Safari: Adventures on the North American Prairie*, Walker & Co., 1996.

Hesse, Karen, *Out of the Dust*, Scholastic, 1999.

Lawlor, Laurie, *Addie's Long Summer*, Whitman, 1992.

Stanley, Jerry, *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*, Crown, 1992.

Staub, Frank, *America's Prairies*, Carolrhoda, 1996.

EVALUATION

Oklahoma counties affected by the Dust Bowl are as follows:

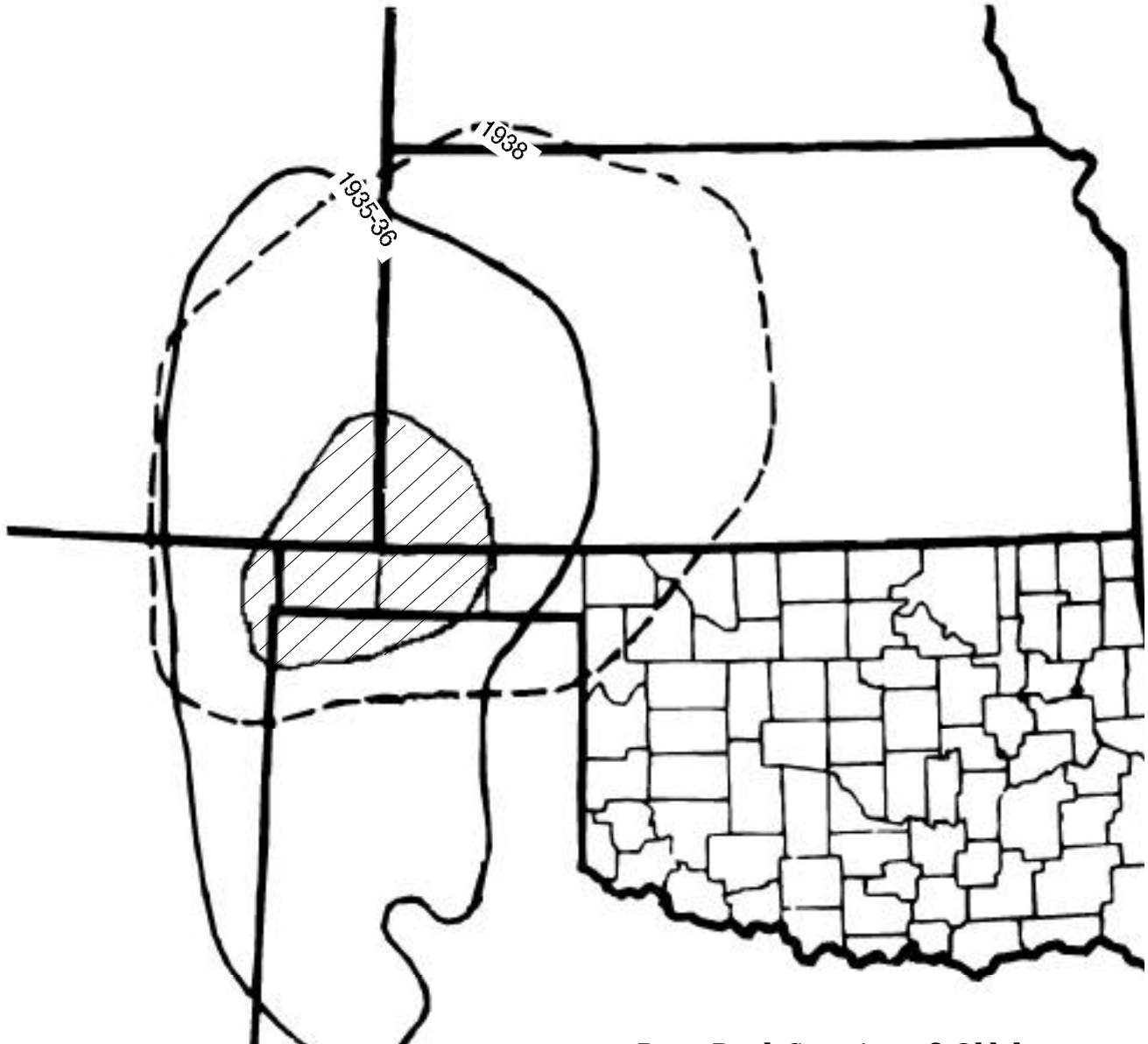
Beaver; Texas; Cimarron; Harper; Woodward; Woods; Ellis.

Students should find in their research that these counties and the surrounding areas have the following characteristics in common: light soils covered by short grasses; high winds; extreme temperatures; low average annual rainfall; and agriculture that includes cattle and irrigated crops like wheat, corn and sorghum.

Name _____

Dust in the Distance

The Dust Bowl covered only the panhandle of Oklahoma but reached much farther into surrounding states. The areas outlined below were the general boundaries of the Dust Bowl from 1935 to 1938. The lined circle in the center is the area that sustained the most severe wind erosion.



Dust Bowl Map Legend

Dust Bowl Counties of Oklahoma

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| Beaver | Harper |
| Texas | Woodward |
| Cimarron | Woods |
| Ellis | |

