



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

April 1978

## *The Plow That Broke The Plains*

by Michael W. Schuyler

To understand the experience of farmers and ranchers in Buffalo County during the "dirty thirties" it is necessary to emphasize that their problems resulted not only from the collapse of the farm economy following the stock market crash in 1929, but also from long standing cyclical patterns which were deeply rooted in the history of the region. The farm crisis of the 1930's was part of a recurring cycle of hope and despair, boom and bust, prosperity and poverty, which had characterized the history of farming in Nebraska for more than a half century.

Farmers in the West had suffered from devastating droughts from 1894 to 1896, and again in the period from 1910 to 1913, but the widespread fear that the Great Plains might become a "great American desert" was quickly forgotten with the outbreak of the First World War. In Nebraska, and in other Plains states, plows broke the virgin, semi-arid land west of the one hundredth meridian as farmers increased their acreage and expanded their production to record levels to provide food and clothing for the war effort. With high prices guaranteed by the government, good weather, and a seemingly unlimited foreign market, land values soared and farmers looked forward to a bright and prosperous future. After the War, however, as foreign demand for American agricultural products declined and the government abandoned its program of artificial price supports, the agricultural boom soon turned into depression.

By 1925 farm prices had generally recovered to near pre-war levels but farmers still did not enjoy prosperity. Farmers in Buffalo County, many of whom had gone heavily in debt during the War, now faced high fixed costs, glutted markets, and costly technological changes. To compensate farmers produced even more, creating a vicious cycle which kept prices from rising to the high levels needed to survive. New combines and tractors, which made it possible for four men to do the work which had previously required six hundred, further reduced the number of farmers who were needed to supply the market. In Buffalo County some farmers, swept along by the inexorable forces of change, lost their farms, others became tenant farmers, and still others abandoned agriculture entirely and moved to the cities to claim their fair share of the highly publicized prosperity of the 1920's. Farmers throughout the Great Plains who remained on the land continued to expand their farming operations, frequently into unstable regions, to overstock the range, and to exploit the water resources of the Plains. Wheat acreage in the Great Plains tripled during the decade while corn production, in the five year period between 1925 and 1930, nearly doubled.

The first major shock waves of the depression did not strike the farm belt until 1931 but, by 1932, had destroyed nearly all that was left of the farmers' foreign

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Buffalo Tales is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Editor . . . . . Gene E. Hamaker

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:  
Individual membership . . \$ 2.00  
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Sustaining membership . . 25.00+  
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**WITH THE SOCIETY**

The April meeting of the Society will be held on Thursday, April 27, at 7:30 p.m. at the Kearney Public Library. Dr. Michael W. Schuyler will give the program on 20th Century agriculture, transformation of farming, and the Dust Bowl Days. This is the second of the series of four lecture-discussion programs on the development of agriculture and industry as a result of the trails, rails and highways in the county.

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The Annual Meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held at the depot museum in Kearney on Sunday, May 7, at 2:30 p.m. Officers will be elected, reports given of the year's activities, and certificates of appreciation presented. Some of the slides from our picture collection at Denny's Photography earlier this year will be shown.

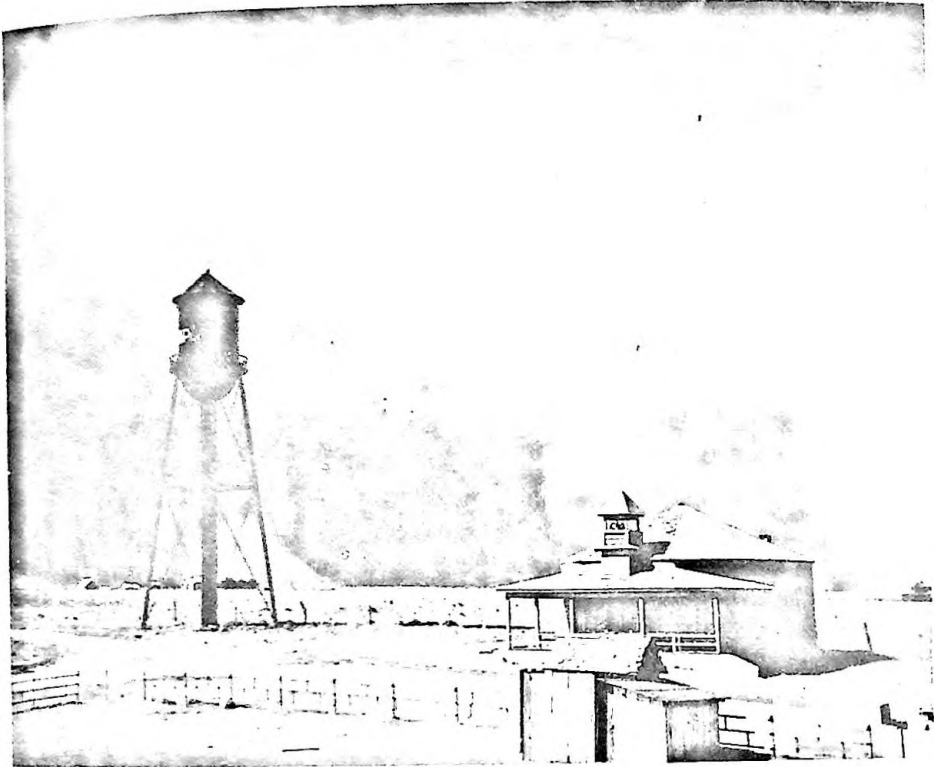
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The spring meeting of the State Historical Society will be held in Kearney on Saturday, June 10. Circle this date and plan to attend.

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Wendell Franz of the State Historical Society visited the depot museum on Tuesday, April 11, and discussed exhibit planning and cataloguing with some of the officers and members who have volunteered to do museum work.

markets and had driven farm prices down to disastrously low levels. By 1933 farm income was less than half of what it had been only a year earlier. Many farmers in the County burned corn for fuel when the price fell to only nine cents per bushel. Farmers who shipped their livestock to market found that the freight bill was often greater than the income received from the sale.



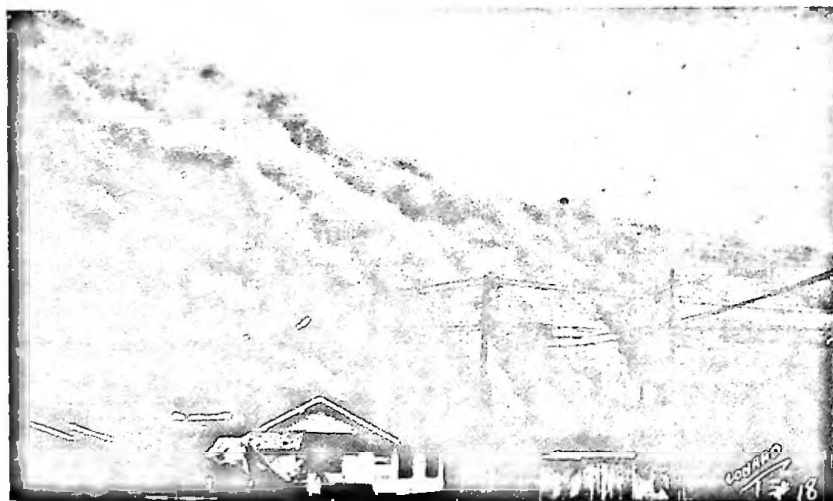
*Dust storm at Naponee, Nebraska on April 26, 1935.*

The already staggering problems facing farm families in Buffalo County were compounded by the droughts which ravaged the Great Plains throughout the decade. Drought was certainly not a new phenomenon to farmers in Nebraska who yearly lived with the fear that the rains might not come, but the dry years of the 1930's, combined with the effects of the depression, presented a crisis of almost indescribable dimensions to the nearly prostrate agricultural community.

A number of farmers in Buffalo County were fortunate to live on irrigated land but the immediate effect of the droughts, especially for dry land farmers, was catastrophic. Many farmers on the Plains suffered from drought in every single year of the depression decade, but the droughts of 1934 and 1936, which effected nearly three-fourths of the land in the United States, were the worst and attracted the most public attention. Day after day the temperature soared about the 100 mark, burning pastures, drying up wells and streams, destroying crops on the parched and thirsty land. The drought also brought a massive invasion of grasshoppers to the Plains which swarmed across the land devouring everything in sight. A few miles west of Kearney farmers reported that the "hoppers" had not only stripped their fields but

had attacked their houses, eating the paint and leaving the wood bare and unprotected. The caprices of nature took an especially heavy toll on small family farmers as the burning blasts of the sun turned the agrarian dream into a horrible nightmare. Even without the droughts many of these farmers, who simply could not afford to modernize their farming operations to compete with the large, efficient, highly mechanized farms which were already widespread in Nebraska by the 1920's, would have been forced off the land by forces of modernization. Still the drought hastened their exodus and depopulated many counties in the western Plains by nearly a third during the decade. Buffalo County fared better, but could not escape the effects of the great dust storms which began in the West in the fall of 1933.

Technically the "dust bowl" was limited to southeastern Colorado, the Oklahoma panhandle, the western one-third of Kansas and most of the Texas panhandle, but the problem of blowing dust and soil erosion was common throughout the County. The worst storms struck Nebraska in May, 1934, and again in April, 1935, as the entire West seemed to explode. During the storms, as the dust blotted out the sun, it was frequently as dark as night at midday. During the great "black blizzard" of 1935 the government estimated that twice as much top soil had been carried off the land as had been dug out of the Panama Canal Zone in seven years by men and machines. The dust, carried at times by one hundred mile an hour winds, drifted across the Eastern States out into the Atlantic Ocean. Sailors, three hundred miles at sea, reported that the dust even settled on the decks of their ships.



#### *Approaching Dust Storm In Middle West.*

Farmers who ventured out into the storms covered their faces with wet handkerchieves, but they still coughed up black. Thousands of deaths were reported in the Plains states from heat and dust pneumonia. Women, hovering inside their homes, stuffed soaked sheets, towels, and rags around the windows and doors in a vain attempt to keep out the dust but found their floors covered at times with an inch of dirt when the wind finally stopped blowing. Before serving meals many farm women began to set their tables with plates, cups, and glasses turned upside down to keep them clean but the filtering dust was everywhere. At night people slept with wet

towels covering their faces to soothe cracked lips and in some places the Red Cross distributed surplus gas masks, left over from World War I, for children to prevent them from suffocating while sleeping. Still the storms took their toll. Frequently, drifting like snow, the dust buried everything in its path. Even farmers who lived on good, protected land too often found, when the storms subsided, that the dust had smothered their carefully tended crops.

Farmers, who perpetually faced the threat of drought, hail, blizzards, and prairie fires, had long before developed a sense of humor which would help them to survive the hard times of the 1930's. While many farmers became bitter and disillusioned and believed that the droughts were a punishment from God because of Roosevelt's New Deal, most retained a grim sense of humor about their plight. Farmers joked about the man who went to his banker for a loan, looked up, and saw his farm blowing by the window. Others told of the bachelor who, instead of washing his dirty dishes, just put them up to the keyhole to be sandblasted clean by the howling wind. Tall tales circulated about the rancher who took a load of gravel to his house and then at night, threw it on the roof to teach his children the sound of rain-fall; or the farmer who, when hit in the face by a raindrop, was so shocked that he fainted and had to have three buckets of dirt thrown on him to bring him to.

Behind the humor there was a growing realization, however, that if farmers wanted to find a permanent solution to their problems it was necessary for them to learn to live more harmoniously with the land. Farmers in Buffalo County resented speculations in the East that the Great Plains had already become "an empire of dust," but as swirling dust filled the air and blackened the sky, farmers were forced to concede that misplaced settlement, especially in the World War I period, unsound farming techniques, the general exploitation of the land for generations, and not just the droughts, had caused the fundamental maladjustments between man and nature in the Plains region.

The realization that the historic pattern of searching for windfall profits in the West had contributed to the farmers' dilemma in the 1930's led to a massive campaign by the Roosevelt administration to convince farmers and ranchers to return much of the land which had been plowed under after World War I to grassland, to



*Dust West of Campbell on Highway No. 4 in 1937.*

(Photos courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society)

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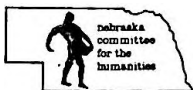
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control overproduction, to regulate overgrazing, and to introduce sound soil management techniques. In May, 1936, as an important part of that campaign, the Roosevelt administration released the film, "The Plow that Broke the Plains."

In 1935 Rexford Tugwell, the urbane head of the Resettlement Administration, recruited Pare Lorentz, a thirty year old movie critic, to produce a three reel film to dramatize what had happened to the grasslands of North America. The film, with a musical score by Virgil Thomson, was narrated by Thomas Chalmers and was produced at a cost of \$20,000. Although Lorentz's indictment of farmers for their careless neglect of the soil and their selfishness for exploiting the resources of the West to their own advantage was subdued, the film stirred an immediate controversy because it reflected "unfavorably" on life in the West. Many communities banned the film because they feared that it would hasten migration from the Plains and would discourage outside financial investments. Still the picture, which was shown in independent theatres, school auditoriums, and other public meeting places, became one of the most widely viewed films in American history and was seen by 10 million people in 1937 alone.

The film increased public understanding of the role of agriculture in the nation's future, but the battle to restore the nation's badly neglected and damaged farm land would prove to be a long and costly one. By 1939, in spite of the efforts of a wide variety of New Deal agencies, the government estimated that the land was still wearing out faster than it was being restored and that only an estimated 75,000 farm families in the entire nation were working on fully protected farm land. In 1940 the Great Plains Committee, which had been created in 1936 to study the problems of the area, issued its final report, titled, *The Northern Great Plains*. It concluded, "The problem of land-use adjustment on an enduring basis in the Great Plains, in the Northern Plains and Southern Plains alike, still remains the most difficult agricultural problem of its kind in the United States."

*(Photos courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society)*



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