

Lesson Plan

Title: Dust and Depression

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This lesson is inspired by the [History Bits](#) video "[Dust and Depression](#)."

Grade Level: 3/4, 5/6, 7/8

Theme(s):

- Arts, Culture & Society
- Environment & Geography
- Settlement & Immigration

Subject Area: Social Studies, History, Language Arts

Lesson Overview: Farmers in southeastern Alberta and southern Saskatchewan were deeply affected by the prolonged drought, insect infestations, and the ultimate economic collapse of rural farms, which took place during the Great Depression. In this lesson, students will watch the [History Bits](#) video "[Dust and Depression](#)" and conduct their own research into the Dust Bowl. They will imagine how a child of a family who lost their farm would feel and write a letter describing their experience.

Historical Thinking Concept(s):

- Use *primary source* evidence
- Identify *continuity and change*
- Analyze *cause and consequence*
- Take *historical perspectives*

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

- *Analyze:* gather information about the causes and consequences of the environmental disaster using the resources provided or individual research
- *Understand:* demonstrate an understanding of the importance of agriculture and climate in the Canadian Prairies
- *Communicate and Apply:* summarize the historic causes and consequences of the environmental disaster creatively through a letter rooted in their research

Background Information:

Saskatchewan and Alberta saw incredible growth in immigration from 1900 through the 1920s as settlers came to these provinces to establish farms. The area was known as the "Bread Basket" of North America because of the success growing wheat and other grain crops. Prairie land was broken and native vegetation like prairie grasses and low shrubs were cleared from the land and farmers planted crops.

In these early years, farms were successful due to good growing conditions. As the 1930s began, however, the farmers experienced prolonged drought which caused repeated devastation to annual harvests. Farm losses were compounded by infestations of cutworms, sawflies, and grasshoppers.

Farmers struggled to maintain their farms and governments were slow to respond to the crisis. Banks began repossessing farms and other farms were abandoned. It has been suggested that nearly 750,000 farms were lost in Canada between 1930 and 1935 and a majority of them were in southeastern Alberta and southern Saskatchewan.

Families who left their farms appeared to choose three different types of relocation: move to Ontario or eastern United States; move to bigger urban centres such as Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, or Edmonton; or move to the northern part of the provinces. In Saskatchewan, approximately 45,000 people moved from the southern half of the province to the northern forested area during the latter half of the 1930s. This was about 5% of the total provincial population.

Suggested reading before teaching this lesson:

- ["What it was like living in Saskatchewan in the 1930s,"](#) Adeline Roberts, *Reader's Digest*.
- [Climate and Change: Making Sense of the Dustbowl Years on the Canadian Prairies](#)
- ["The Dust Bowl: Prairie Farmers Suffer Nature's Wrath and Economic Crisis During the 1930s"](#) CBC.
- ["WDM talks devastating effects of the great depression during coffee club,"](#) *Moose Jaw Today*, 4 July 2021.
- [The Great Depression in Canada](#) (The Canadian Encyclopedia)
- [Prairie Dry Belt Disaster](#) (The Canadian Encyclopedia)
- ["W.L. Mackenzie King driving the Bennett buggy in Sturgeon Valley, SK"](#) (McCord Museum)
- [Great Depression](#) (The Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan)

Lesson Activity:

This activity is designed to be incorporated into a bigger learning unit or discussion about the Great Depression in Canada. It can be used as a full class activity or as a learning centre activity.

This activity relies on students considering historical perspectives. Remind students that when considering how people in the past might have felt or thought, it needs to be based on evidence and not their imagination. As explained by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton in *The Big Six*, "If students are writing a piece of historical fiction and doing it well, they will consider and reflect on the beliefs, values, and motivations of people in the time period. They will research details of the period in order to make factually accurate, evidence-based inferences about their characters, including what the characters might think, what they might do and why, and their responses to the social, cultural, and political environment around them."

1. Watch the [History Bits](#) video entitled "[Dust and Depression](#)."
2. Lead a class discussion about the effects of the drought on prairie farmers during the 1930s.
3. Share some quotes and recollections (primary sources) from people who lived through the Dust Bowl.
4. Instruct students to write a friendly letter describing the experience of a farm child from that era and how they may have felt. The writing process can include a rough draft, peer editing, and the completion of a final copy.
5. Provide students with time to complete additional online research about the conditions that existed on the Canadian prairies during the 1930s. (A list of suggested resources is included below.)

For assessment purposes, the letter should be evaluated on the following components:

- The letter uses standard formatting, punctuation, and spelling.
- The letter contains four historical facts about the conditions that existed on Canadian Prairies farms in the 1930s (e.g. dust, infestation, drought, loss of income).
- The letter mentions whether the family plans to stay on their farm or to relocate (and if so, where).
- The letter conveys emotions that a farm child from the 1930s might be feeling (based on research and evidence, not imagination).

Resources:

- ["Dust and Depression" History Bits](#) video
- Primary source collection
- ["What it was like living in Saskatchewan in the 1930s,"](#) Adeline Roberts, *Reader's Digest*.
- [Climate and Change: Making Sense of the Dustbowl Years on the Canadian Prairies](#)
- ["The Dust Bowl: Prairie Farmers Suffer Nature's Wrath and Economic Crisis During the 1930s,"](#) CBC.
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Extension Activities:

- Find and interview people from your community (grandparents, great-grandparents, neighbours, etc.) that can share their stories about living through this time period.
- Using your local library or archives, research newspaper articles and other records to reveal how your community was affected by the Great Depression and/or Dust Bowl.
- Research and discuss how the farmers' migration from the southern prairies into the north impacted Métis and First Nations populations.
- Research and debate the following question: Was the Dust Bowl a natural disaster or was it caused by people's actions?

Primary Sources

Recollections of Anne Bailey

Describing a dust storm:

"My son came running into the house greatly excited. 'Come quick, Mom,' he shouted, 'there's a big black cloud coming in the sky.' He ran out ahead of me and pointed to the western sky where sure enough there was the blackest most terrifying cloud I have ever seen on the horizon. It was moving very quickly and the edge of it was rolling along.

Panic rose in me. What should I do? Where should we go? The house was sure to be blown away and our nearest neighbour was a mile away. At the rate the cloud was moving I could never make it as I would have to carry the baby. I shut the door tight, picked up the baby and yelling at the other two to follow, I ran for the dug out barn. Already the shadow of the cloud was upon us.

When it was light enough for me to see the forms of the cattle I knew it was safe to open the door, so once again I looked outside. ...Everything-land, air, sky-was a dull grey colour ... our feet sank in sand and we breathed and tasted sand. Such a mess."

On leaving her home:

"In those few moments, I got a lasting mental picture of the little home where my first babies were born. The house that had sheltered us from the snow and wind and dust storms would stand lonely and silent now, with the mice playing in the rooms and the frost cracking the flowered wallpaper I closed my eyes and said a silent little prayer."

**Excerpt of the poem, [A Farmer's Wife \(In the drought area in Saskatchewan\)](#),
Edna Jacques. Published in Maclean's magazine on October 15, 1931**

The crops have failed again, the wind and sun
 Dried out the stubble first, then one by one
The strips of summer-fallow, seered with heat
 Crunched like old fallen leaves—our lovely wheat—
The garden is a dreary blighted waste
 The very air is gritty to my taste.

"A Hot Sucking Wind," excerpted from *Ten Lost Years 1929-1939: Memories Of Canadians Who Survived The Depression, 1973*, edited by Barry Broadfoot.

"Here's how it was. Let me tell you. The wind blew all the time, from the four corners of the world. From the east one day, the west the next, and if you were working you didn't notice it too much but the women did. Ask my wife... she said the wind used to make the house vibrate, and it was just a small wind, but there, always steady and always hot. A hot sucking wind. It sucked up the moisture. So this wind just blew and blew, and we had dust storms and times when we kept the lanterns lit all day."

Recollections of Leon Beaujot, [From Horse and Buggy to GPS: Life on a Saskatchewan Farm](#), Roderic Beaujot.

"At Handsworth, the farming conditions kept getting worse. By the early 1930s there were dust bowl conditions, compounded with grasshopper infestations. The blowing dust was so severe that it would cause blackouts. It was not as dark as at night, but the dust would block out the sun. Some years there was so little rain that Bertheline would say that there had hardly been 'quatre gouttes en croix' (that is, hardly enough to make a cross with the four drops that had fallen). The family would place wet rags in the cracks of the house to prevent the dust from coming in."

E.H. Target, Medicine Hat News. Quoted in "[Happyland: a history of the "dirty thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937](#)", Curtis R. McManus.

As I write this letter at 11:30 am on June 28, I see crops of wheat seeded almost two months ago barely above the ground and now flattened and withered. A fifty mile an hour gale is raging and the air is laden with thick particles of dust, so much so that the day is turned to night and I have to light a lamp with which to see. At this time of year I visualize a green countryside whereas in reality, stark desolation sweeps the country.

"The Year It Didn't Rain", Max Braithwaite, March 19, 1955, Maclean's.

I remember one particularly bad storm in the town of Vonda, Sask., where I taught school in 1937. I came home to find my wife and three-year-old child in bed with wet cloths over their faces. My wife had taken down the curtains from the windows, the pictures from the walls and the knickknacks from the shelves and packed them away from the grit. It simplified dusting.

She washed dishes before every meal as well as after—not even the tightest cupboard could keep out the dust. She set the table and covered everything with a cloth until we put the food on plates. And as we ate we watched the ripples of dust forming on the white tablecloth.



Glenbow Archives ND-3-6742

[Destitute family in Edmonton, Alberta, while returning to Saskatoon from the Peace River country.](#) Glenbow Archives. ND-3-6742.



Glenbow Archives NA-2496-1

[Dust storm, Pearce Airport, Alberta.](#) Glenbow Archives. NA-2496-1.



[Drought conditions showing drifting soil along a fence between Cadillac and Kincaid.](#) Library and Archives Canada. 1982-247 NPC.