AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

This is a story about an environmental disaster. As you read, think about the connection between the land and the humans who live on it.

BY ALEX PORTER AND KRISTIN LEWIS

Isaac "Ike" Osteen rolled down the window of his car, letting the breeze blow in. The air felt eerily hot, but Ike, 17, was so busy chatting with his two friends that he didn't really pay attention. It was April 14, 1935. High school graduation was only a month away. As Ike drove his friends to town in Baca County, Colorado, they talked excitedly about their plans.

Then they noticed something very strange: In the sky, thousands of birds, squawking and shrieking and cawing, were frantically flying south. Hundreds of rabbits were scampering across the ground. The animals seemed terrified, like they were trying to escape.

But from what?

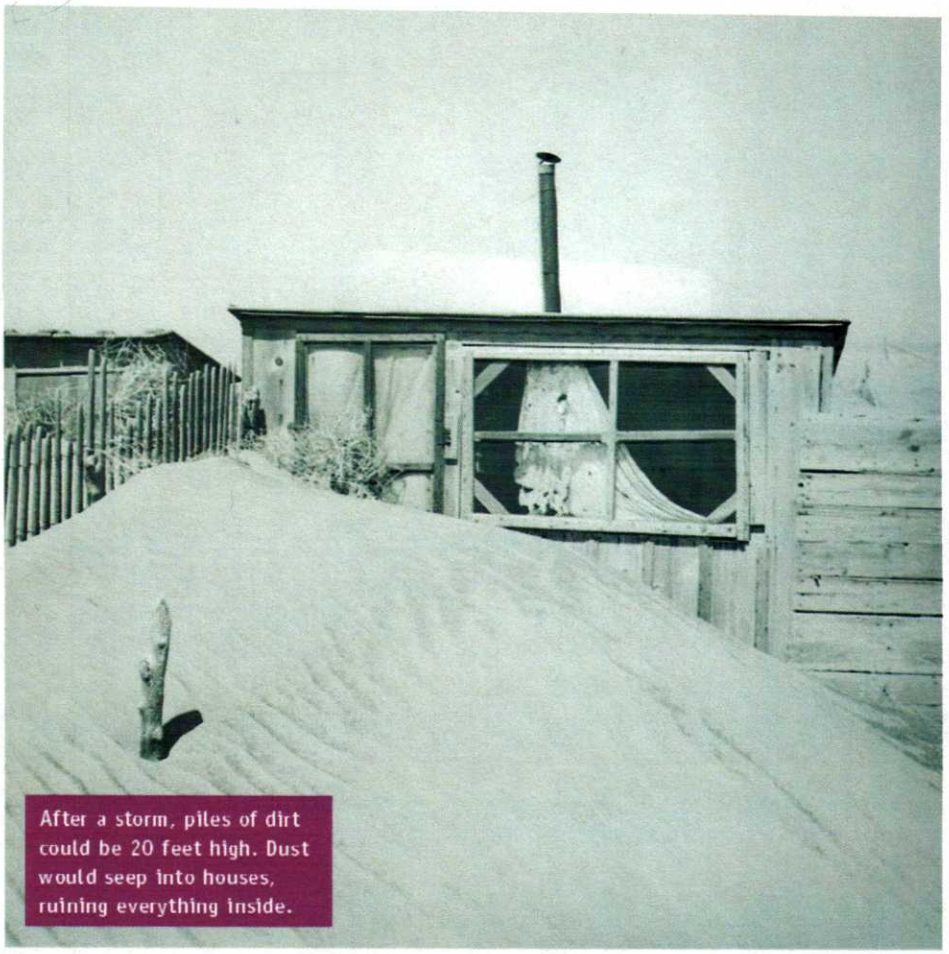
Suddenly, Ike felt a powerful jolt. Bzzt! Electricity shot through the car, shorting it out. He and his friends leapt out of the car.

And then they saw it: on the horizon, a monstrous cloud of dust, hundreds of feet high. It was a swirling, churning, roaring mass.

They ran toward a nearby farmhouse as fast as they could.

But the storm moved faster. When the blast hit, it knocked them to the ground, enveloping them in choking dust.

Ike and his friends were caught in "Black Sunday," the worst dust storm in American history.



After a storm, piles of dirt could be 20 feet high. Dust would seep into houses, ruining everything inside.

Dust Everywhere

Dust storms were nothing new to Ike. For the past few years, they had been ravaging the Great Plains, a large area of mostly treeless, flat grassland that extends from northern Texas all the way to Canada. Each time a storm hit, the dust would get into everything: kitchens, bedrooms, hair, nails, mouths. Families would cower inside their homes, faces wrapped in damp rags to filter out the grit. Farmers would smear their nostrils with Vaseline to keep their nasal passages from clogging and bleeding. The dust made everyone sick, especially children and the elderly, who contracted "dust pneumonia." Many of them died.

It hadn't always been this way.

True, the Great Plains had always had severe weather: bitter winters and scorching summers, with periods of drought and flooding. Indeed, for thousands of years, these extremes had been a normal part of the region. In fact, the Great Plains had accommodated all kinds of life. Buffalo had grazed on the long, thick grasses; small bands of American Indians had followed

TOP: ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN/CORBIS; OPPOSITE PAGE: BETTMANN/CORBIS (2); MAP: JIM MCMAHON/"MAPMAN"

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these vast herds across the prairies.

By the time Ike's father moved to Baca County in 1909, those days were long gone. In the late 1800s, a new generation of frontiersmen had arrived. They were determined to make this vast and unsettled region their own. In short order, the buffalo were hunted almost to extinction, then the American Indians were forced to move to reservations. Ranchers fenced off the open prairies and let their cattle feed on the rich grasses.

But the ranchers didn't last. They were soon pushed out by farmers like the Osteens, who ripped out the tall grasses to plant crops.

Then the dust storms arrived. Nature was out of balance.

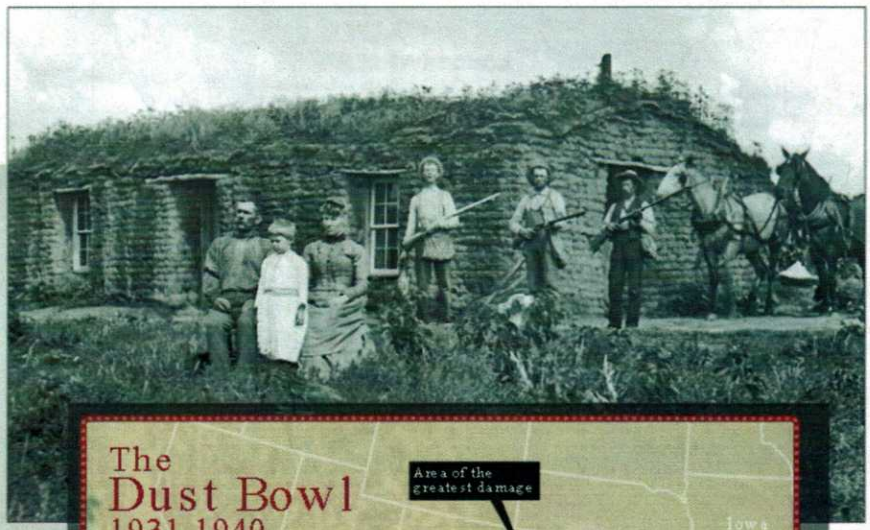
Money to Be Made

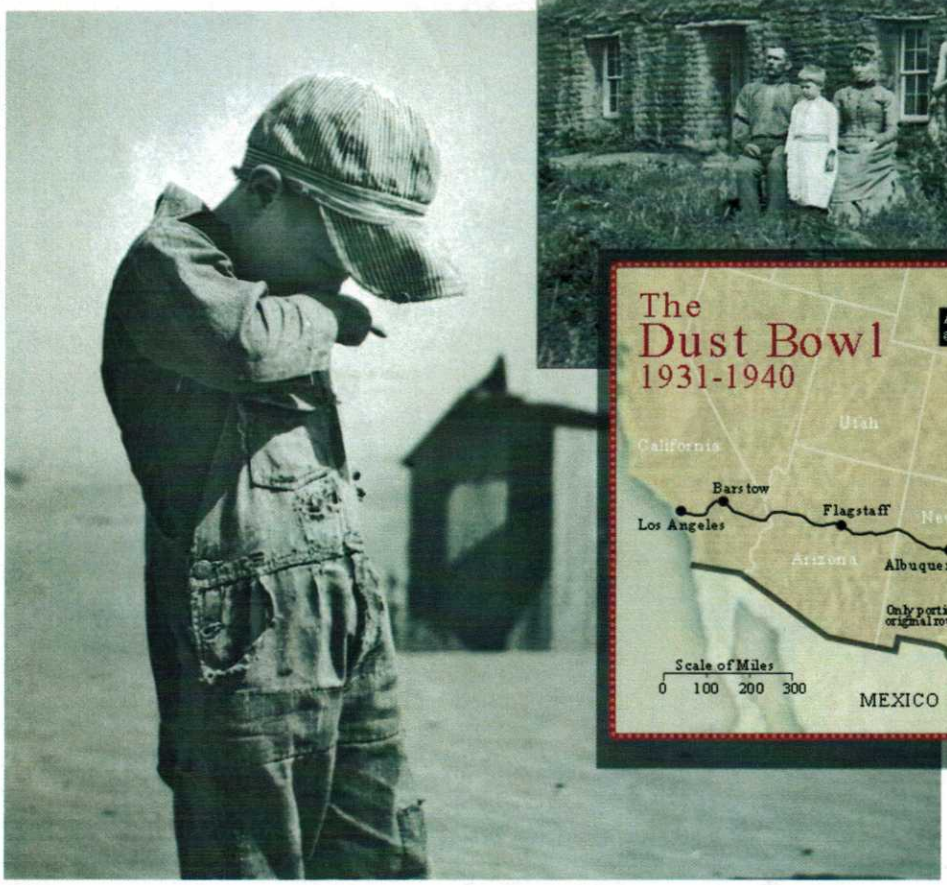
When Ike was growing up, daily life was often a struggle for him and his family. His house was a dugout: a one-room home built into a hill, with walls made of sod, or soil. He shared this room with his parents and eight siblings.

Throughout the spring, Ike's mother would pour boiling water over the walls to kill the bugs that appeared every morning. On winter nights, the family burned cow dung to keep warm. They raised cattle, which provided milk and cream that could be traded for supplies. They ate the eggs laid by their hens and carried water from a well.

Life was far from easy, but Ike loved the frontier. He loved the golden wheat fields in autumn. He loved the smell of the hay in the barn. He loved listening to his dad play music with his friends, their fiddles echoing through the night.

But this way of life didn't last. Ike's father fell ill and died. At the age of 12, Ike went to work, determined to help his family. Thankfully, the rains had been abundant throughout the 1920s. Crops flourished.





LEFT: The dust was especially hard on the lungs. **TOP:** Many families in the Great Plains lived in "dugouts" like this.

There was money to be made helping plow fields. Ike gave every penny he earned to his mom.

No One Listened

By the 1930s, grain prices were falling and farmers in the Great Plains were in trouble. To make ends meet, they had to plant more grain. So they ripped out more and more grassland to make room.

And why shouldn't they? At the time, Americans thought the supply of land was limitless. The government had declared that land was one resource that "cannot be used up." Ike earned extra money helping neighbors turn their prairie land into farmable soil by tearing out the top layer with a tractor. Thousands of others had the same idea.

Soon, millions of acres were transformed into a new landscape. The prairies vanished, replaced by endless rows of corn and wheat.

There were some who raised concerns about these farming techniques. Another drought, they said, was sure to come. Crops would choke. Things could get bad. But the dream of prosperity was too alluring, and no one listened.

Mother Nature, however, was about to strike back.

Black Rollers

By 1932, the grim predictions had come true. The Great Plains was hit by record-breaking heat and relentless drought. Temperatures soared to 115 degrees. Ike's mom tried to cool their dugout by dousing it with water, which quickly sizzled into steam. Fields were baked into powder. Soil, once held in place by the tough, drought-resistant prairie grass, dried out and blew away in the high winds, kicking up blizzards of dirt.

These "black rollers" could funnel as high as 10,000 feet into the sky. Cars and buildings were buried. Cows went blind. Animals choked to death, their bellies swollen with dust. Soon, the region was being called the "Dust Bowl."

As Kansas author Avis D. Carlson wrote, "We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions."

Sure enough, crops died, and Ike watched Baca County fall apart.

Then came Black Sunday.

A New Era

Black Sunday was far worse than anything Ike had seen. Eventually, he and his friends managed to grope their way into the farmhouse. By then, the world had gone pitch-black; the dust had blotted out the sun. They waited while the storm howled outside, rattling the house like a baby's toy.

Hours later, in the quiet of dawn, they emerged into a world that had changed forever. The storm had been hundreds of miles wide. It had blown all the way to New York City. It had dumped 12 million tons of dust on Chicago. It even reached ships 300 miles off the Atlantic coast.

Prairie residents would later say that it was the end of the world. But the truth is that Black Sunday heralded the beginning of a new era. That day was a wake-up call. The country realized that humans had devastated the land, and that land was not a limitless resource. If they didn't do something, the dust storms would return.

In the coming years,

During the 1930s, America went through an economic crisis called the Great Depression. Thousands lost their homes, their savings, everything. Desperate and starving, millions waited in "bread lines" like this one.

BETTMANN/CORBIS

government officials worked to restore the Great Plains. They replanted grasses and millions of trees. They dispatched relief workers, equipped with new farming practices that would be less harmful. It worked. Today, many areas have been restored.

Nothing Comes Close

More than 2.5 million people fled the Dust Bowl in the 1930s—many to California. For them, the dream of a prosperous farm life had faded. As far as they were concerned, nature had spoken, and the message was clear: Go away.

So what about Ike Osteen?

Eventually, the drought in Baca County ended and the rains returned. By then, most of Ike's family had moved on, starting new lives in happier places. Ike had moved on too. After graduating from high school (second in his class!), he worked on the railroads and traveled the country. He fought in World War II. Many years later, he returned to Baca County, the land he had always loved so dearly.

Today, Ike is well into his 90s. His life has been fulfilling. He has a resilience that only those who lived through the Dust Bowl can understand. When he hears others complain about hard times, he shrugs. They don't know what hard times are, he thinks. Nothing can come close to the horror of those long years, when simply taking a breath could kill you. S

POETRY CONNECTION

THIS IS A POEM FROM THE AWARD-WINNING NOVEL-IN-VERSE *OUT OF THE DUST*, ABOUT A YOUNG GIRL IN OKLAHOMA DURING THE DUST BOWL

Go to Scope Online for the whole poem.

HOPE

By Karen Hesse

It started out as snow,
oh,
big flakes
floating
softly,
catching on my sweater,
lacy on the edges of my sleeves.

Snow covered the dust,
softened the fences,
soothed the parched lips
of the land.

And then it changed,
halfway between snow and rain,
sleet,
glazing the earth.

Until at last
it slipped into rain,
light as mist.

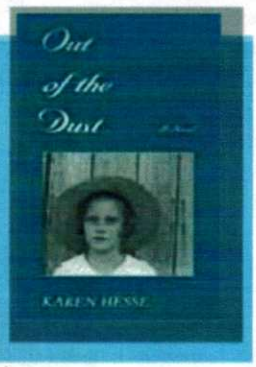
It was the kindest
kind of rain
that fell.

Why do you think this poem is called "Hope"?

CONTEST

Connect the Genres

How does the suffering of the Earth during the Dust Bowl mirror the suffering of those who lived through it? Write a paragraph answering this question. Draw on the article as well as the poem. Then send your answer to DUST BOWL CONTEST. Five winners will get *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse. See page 2 for details.



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