

David D. Vail, “Dry and Dusty Lands: Exploring the Dust Bowl through Kansas State Agricultural Experiment Station Reports, Photographs, and Posters,” *Field Notes for Crossing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship* (2015).

Overview

In the early 1900s, industrial agriculture flourished throughout the Great Plains. A “second agricultural revolution” brought intense cultivation for markets at home and abroad. As historian Deborah Fitzgerald makes clear in *Every Farm a Factory*, “for some it was a principle that unified a disparate collection of observations, practices, and problems; for others it was a road map that offered directions from old-fashioned traditionalism to modernity. For still others it was a mantra that promised far more than it could deliver.”¹ However, the land’s increasing profit meant an ecological simplification that promoted production at the cost of healthy soils, dynamic plant communities, and death to healthy microbes. Market pressures, intensive cultivation practices, and climatic shifts all proved deadly for communities in the Dust Bowl. The numerous promises made by eastern boosters—that rain would follow the plow, or, abundant prairies equaled abundant lives, or, that making a life in the grasslands meant daily adventures—did not come true. Instead, the technologies, economies, and ecosystems conspired to destroy the region (See Figures 1 and 2).

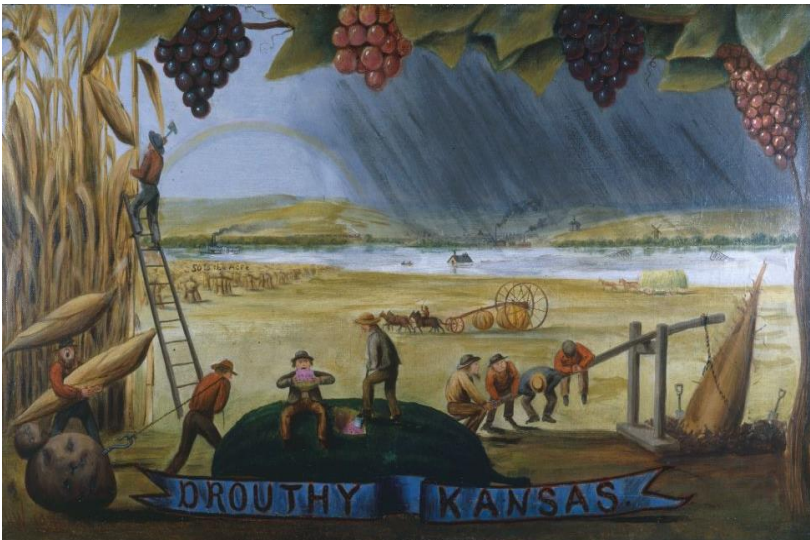


Figure 1. Henry Worrall, “The Great American Desert,” 1878, *Kansas Memory* (Kansas Historical Society)

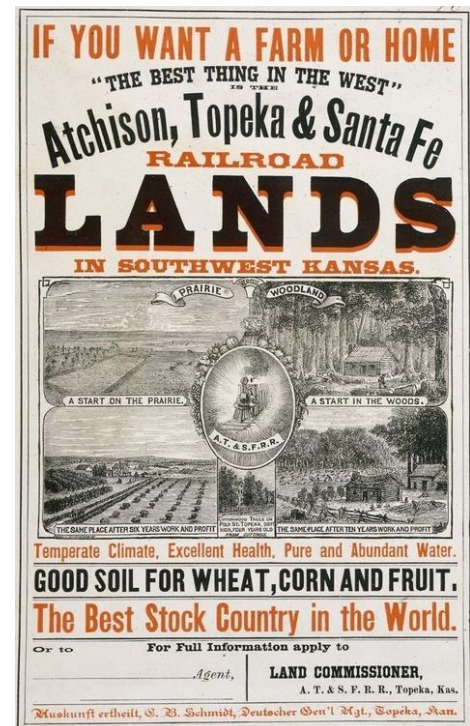


Figure 2. Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad Poster, “The Best Thing in the West,” *Kansas Memory* (Kansas Historical Society).

In Kansas, the combination of economic depression, environmental catastrophe, and cultural despondence was especially pronounced. By 1934, drought, depression, and despair became mainstays in American life. Kansan communities, similar to other American towns, encountered a deadly drought. Dust storms choked the life out of land, animals, and family members. Agricultural experiment station reports, such as the Garden City Branch station, told the story:

The drought of 1934 . . . coupled with unwise land use and tillage practices, gave rise in the spring of 1935 to the most severe and widespread dust storms this country has ever witnessed. Occasionally a ‘Black Blizzard’ in the form of a rapidly moving billowy cloud of dust would move in from the north, at which times visibility was

reduced to zero . . . During such storms, midday was plunged into jet black darkness and it was impossible to see one's [sic] own hand when extended in front at arm's [sic] length.²

Storms, Drought, and Science in Kansas State's Morse Department of Special Collections

Primary sources tell stories of the dust bowl through first-hand experiences, scientific reports, and historical photographs. By exploring how agricultural experimentation agents studied drought and reflected on dust storms, students, scientists, historians, and policymakers can offer informed approaches to contemporary challenges. Institutions such as Kansas State University's Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections and the Kansas Historical Society oversee numerous primary sources that allow scientists, scholars, and students to "take the farmer's view, the agricultural scientist's view, or, perhaps, the dust storm's view."³

Agricultural Experiment Station Branch Reports:

Branch reports, surveys, and summaries are useful to see how the science of farming, climate studies, and technologies all contributed to the ecological disaster. After recording drought, soil, and crop data in the Tribune, Kansas area, Branch Superintendent T. B. Stinson described the pending disaster in a summary report: "The spring of 1935 was the dustiest ever experienced here according to the old settlers of this territory. . . The first severe dust storm occurred on February 21. The storm struck here about noon and lasted until late in the evening (See Figures 4 and 5)."

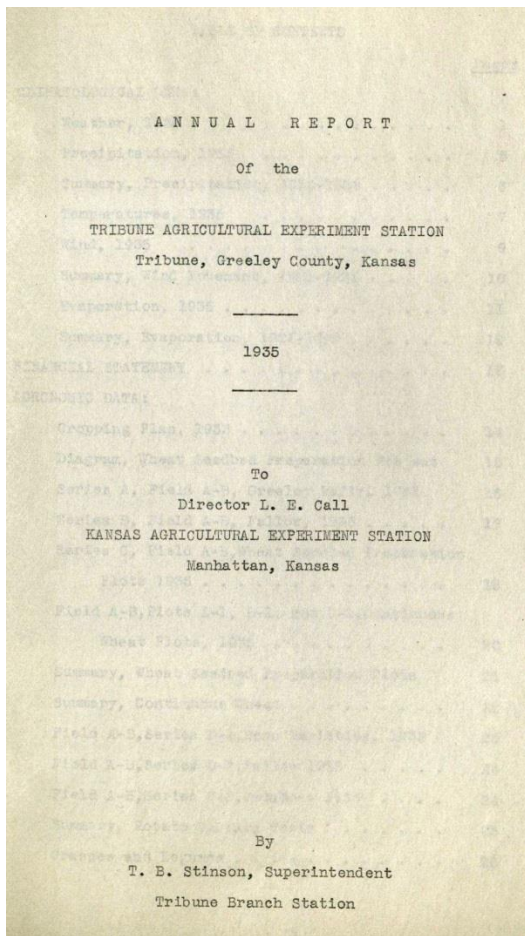


Figure 4. "Annual Report the Tribune Branch," Kansas Experiment Station Report, 1935 (Morse Department of Special Collections).

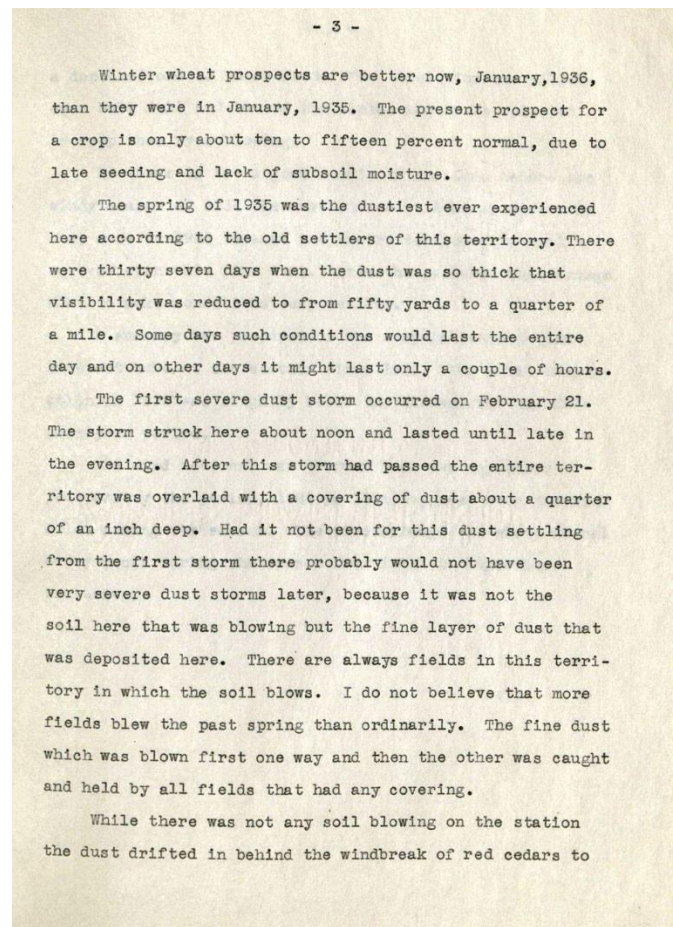


Figure 5. "Annual Report of the Tribune Branch," *Kansas Experiment Station Report*, 1935, 3 (Morse Department of Special Collections).

Historical Photographs:

Kansas State's Special Collections also has numerous photograph collections that connect historical perspectives to scientific studies by providing a visual context of the ecological, economic, and cultural intersections that created the Dust Bowl (See Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Western Kansas Dust Storms, circa 1930s, Vertical Photograph File Collection (Morse Department of Special Collections).

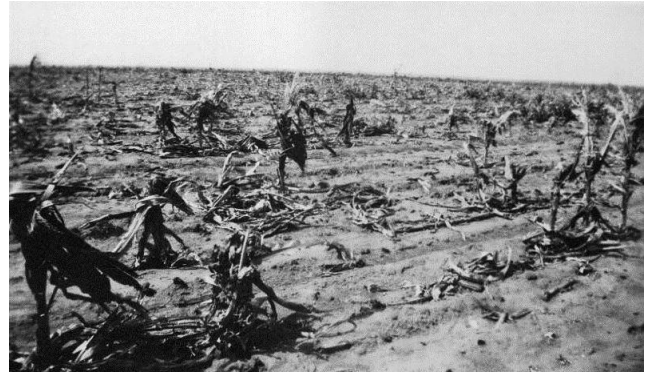


Figure 7. Drought in Jewell County, Agronomy Collection, Cooperative Extension Service, 1934. (Morse Department of Special Collections).

Further Exploration

Readers of *Crossing Borders* will find numerous other materials in the Morse Department of Special Collections and the Kansas Historical Society highlighting this terrible history. These resources encourage an interdisciplinary approach that helps students, scholars, and scientists think broadly about the past to assist in future challenges.

Author Biography

Dr. David Vail is an assistant professor in the Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections and serves as public services archivist. His specialties include environmental history, agricultural history, history of science and technology, and public history. Dr. Vail also holds an ancillary position with Kansas State's Geography Department and serves as a member of the Kansas Humanities Council Board of Directors.

Notes

¹ Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 5.

² "Annual Report of the Garden City Branch," *Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station* (Garden City, KS: 1932–1937), 12.

³ Meagan Duever, Casey Hoeve, Livia Olson, David D. Vail, Ellen Urton, "Leveraging Library Ecology: Growing Beyond Boundaries to Cultivate a Sustainable Knowledge Community Through Team-Based Librarianship," *ACRL 2015 Conference Proceedings* (Portland, Oregon: 2015).