Dry and Dusty Lands: Exploring the Dust Bowl through Kansas State Agricultural Experiment 
Station Reports, Photographs, and Posters

David D. Vail

Overview
In the early 1900s, industrial agriculture flourished throughout the Great Plains. A “second 
aricultural 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.” 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)

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.

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 3 and 4).”

Figures of a similar size and shape may be placed next to each other. In this case the arrangement should be centered.

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 5 and 6).
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.