



The devastation of floods was compounded in the 1930s by the disaster of drought.

AND THEN — THE DROUGHT.

As if floods and depression were not enough trouble, along came the dust bowl.

“Searing droughts,” wrote Kerr, “. . . burned the fields all across the Southwest from Oklahoma to California. Hard drought had first struck the West’s farmers in 1890 (when settlers turned to farming the southern plains after the great blizzard of 1886 killed many cattle). From then on, the western frontier of America moved back and forth according to the rainfall.”

The floods and dust storms resulted from related causes, Kerr believed, as fragile hillsides were turned to crops without sufficient care for topsoil and run-off protection.

“Before the white men came,” Kerr wrote, “Oklahoma’s western prairies, central rolling hills, and eastern meadows and forests had a thick layer of spongy soil. This soaked up much of the rain, and allowed the rest to flow into deep creeks and rivers.

“Then came the moldboard plow.”

Beginning in 1930, the dust bowl region — parts of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, the Dakotas — experienced nine dry years. The worst was 1936, when rainfall totaled less than 23 inches average across Oklahoma. There was hardly a lake in the state, except small-town water supply lakes.¹¹

“By the spring of 1931,” Kerr wrote, “plows had broken most of the land in the southern plains. . . . That summer the rain did not fall. . . . There was a dryness in the air that got into your mouth and eyes and stung your face. For seven years the curse of drought struck the Great Plains. The dust storms began in the cheerless autumn of 1933 and blew for five years. . . . Millions of acres were damaged. Some fields became sand dunes. Thousands of farmers, beaten by hard times, drought, and dust storms, wearily left the plains.”¹²