

DUST BOWL DISASTER

You live on a farm in Oklahoma in 1933. One day, with the sun burning down, an amazing thing happens. "Look! It's getting dark!" you shout.

"It's hoppers!" cries your brother.

You see them now. So many grasshoppers are in the sky that they darken the sun. They swarm down and begin eating everything in sight. They even eat the leaves off the trees!

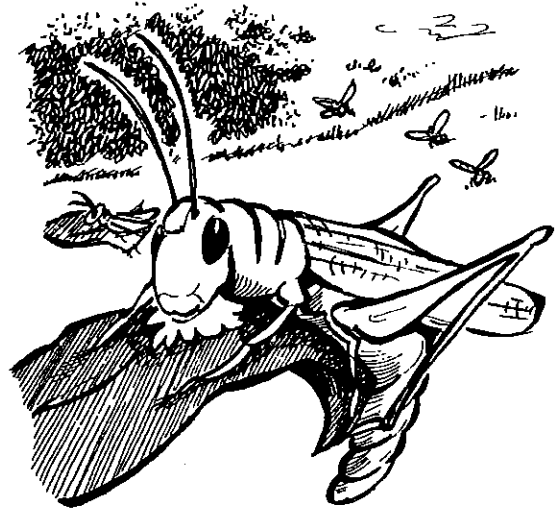
You think you have seen the worst. But the next day the sun is dark again. This time it's not from grasshoppers. It's the wildest dust storm you ever saw. Dust comes in the closed windows. It squeezes through cracks. It even coats your lips and gets down your throat.

"We got to get out of this place," your brother says. "We're behind in our mortgage payments. Pretty soon the bank will come and take this farm away."

You feel sad. The farm next door was sold last month. The auctioneers came one morning. You saw poor Mrs. Wilcox crying in the window. They were selling off all her furniture. They even sold her good china and silverware. "I love this farm," you say. "I love the smell of rain on the dirt. I love making things grow. I always wanted to be a farmer."

"We gotta go," your brother says. "We can't hang on any longer. We weren't doing that well before the grasshoppers came. Now these dust storms. And we haven't had enough rain to water a flower pot, much less crops. Don't you see how hopeless it is?"

You stuff your hands in your pockets and stare out across the land. You were born on this farm. You grew up here. Farming is in your blood. But maybe your brother is right. Maybe you just can't fight the odds anymore.



A lot of your neighbors are going to California. One of them has written back. He said it was good in California. Work was pretty easy to find. California was green and pretty. There were no clouds of grasshoppers or choking dust storms.



- *If you go to California, turn to page 3.*
- *If you stay here, turn to page 4.*

Find out what your fate is!

Sadly you pack your belongings in your old Chevrolet car. Soon you are on the way west on Highway 66. You don't look back at the farm you will never see again. You are afraid you'd cry and make a fool of yourself.

"California will be a new start for us," your brother says. You drive through clouds of dust as your old Chevy moves up and down the rolling countryside.

"We'll be strangers there," you say. "What if we can't find work?"

"We'll find work," your brother promises. But he's as scared as you are. You can tell.

When the hills turn into mountains, your old car really strains. Every time you go up a hill, the Chevy fills up with smoke. It sputters and coughs. You're afraid you won't even make it to California.

You see your brother's big, bony hands turn white as he grips the steering wheel. Like you, he's praying the old car has enough life in her to make it. He's muttering under his breath, "Come on, girl." It's like the car is a horse!

Plenty of other old cars and trucks are on the road going west with you. Broken-down cars are filled with farmers down on their luck. The dust storms and the grasshoppers have driven you all from your homes. Many of the cars are piled high with mattresses and baby buggies, pots and pans and brooms. Nothing you could pack was left behind. You are all too poor to buy replacements.

When you finally reach California, you see long rows of light green lettuce. Beyond them are artichokes and cauliflower. Tomatoes are ripening in the sun. What a beautiful sight!

"Let's stop here," your brother says. "I bet we could get work picking vegetables."

You ask a man who is burned red by the sun if workers are needed. He nods and wipes sweat off his brow. "Sure. We can use you. If you'll work cheap, Okies."

Your face burns with shame. You can tell the man looks down on folks from Oklahoma. He lets you know by calling you "Okies." (Folks from Arkansas are called "Arkies.") People like this red-faced man think you are poor trash. Well, you may be poor, but you are not trash.

"Let's move on," your brother says. He's even prouder than you are. He doesn't want to work for a man who called him "Okie." But you are not so sure. A job is a job. You are down to your last three dollars.

■ *If you work here, turn to page 5.*

■ *If you move on, turn to page 6.*

You walk around the farm, looking at each fencepost. There's a memory connected to everything. There is where you stood just before you first climbed on a horse. There's where you would sit to watch for your father coming in from the fields. Through that gate your mother would carry noon lunches. She'd always be smiling as she carried loaves of fresh bread covered with red checkered cotton cloth.

You just can't leave here. When the time comes for your brother to go, you hug him. You wish him all the luck in the world. You wave until he disappears from sight.

Your neighbor down the road comes to see you the day after your brother leaves. She shakes her head and says, "You made a big mistake. We're packing up the truck and going to the city to look for work. There's no future here."

"I'm hanging in here. I've got to," you say. And, in spite of all the hard times, you marry your childhood sweetheart. Now you have someone to help you here on the farm.

Things don't get better, though. Your corn dies in the hot sun. The sky is dark with dust storms again. Pretty soon the wind attacks your frail cornstalks and each one lies down.

You must wear a handkerchief over your face to keep out the dust. Even at night the dust covers the stars.

In the morning after the worst dust storm ever, you find your spouse staring desperately at a letter.

"What is it?" you ask.

"The bank is going to foreclose. This farm is going to be auctioned off. We lost. We tried, but we lost," your spouse says in a shaky voice.

You take the letter. "I could sell my watch. I could sell the silverware. That would give us a few more months . . .," you say.

Your spouse goes over to the window. "There's nothing out there but dead corn and dust," your spouse says.

Maybe you should look for a job in the city as your neighbor did. Maybe you should let the farm go.

■ *If you try to save the farm, turn to page 7.*

■ *If you go to the city, turn to page 8.*

"Let's earn some money," you say. Your brother agrees.

"Okay, you lazy Okies, get a move on!" the red-faced man yells. "We got lettuce wanting to be picked in the fields."

You earn only a few dollars a day. Your back hurts so much you can't straighten up. At night you can't even sleep.

"I wish we hadn't come to California," you grumble as your back throbs like a toothache.

"Too late for that now," your brother says.

You work each day, ten hours in the hot sun. You pick lettuce and artichokes. Then you move on to black and red cherries. After that you pick grapes.

"Hey, Okie!" the bosses usually shout. You are used to it now. You half forget you have a real name.

You live in your car until you can rent a small house. You aren't earning a lot, but you are getting by. And you are even putting a little money in the bank. You and your brother get jobs in a cannery and you make quite a bit more money. Then your brother gets married and you are on your own.

You have met a nice person in California, and you are thinking of getting married too. You have just about enough money saved to buy a little old house. World War II is raging in Europe. American factories are building a lot of military material for Britain. You get a really good job in a factory building destroyers and cargo ships. You've never made such good money in your life. You feel bad that you are making good money on something so awful as war. But it's not your fault.

You go into the military service yourself after Pearl Harbor. You serve in the Pacific and see the horror of war first-hand. You earn a commendation for heroism.

After the war you and your spouse buy a little house in California. You begin raising your family. You always keep a vegetable garden in your back yard. (As they say, you can take a farmer off the farm, but you can't take the farm from a farmer!)

■ *Turn to page 9.*

You hurry after your brother, jumping in the Chevy. Soon you are rumbling down the road again. You travel another week until your money runs out. You live on peanut butter sandwiches and cold cereal.

You find a camp with tents and old cars. Dirty mattresses lie on the ground. People are cooking beans in cans over open fires.

"Any work?" you ask an older man.

"No kinda work 'cept picking 'chokes for fifteen cents an hour," he says.

You are sorry you didn't take the first job that day. So what if the man called you Okies? You agree to pick artichokes for a man who pays you three dollars for ten hours of work.

Next you pick cherries. Then you pick pears. One time you are almost killed falling from a tree. Luckily, you are not seriously hurt. But then you go to pick oranges and you fall again. You tumble from a ladder and badly sprain your back.

Your brother stays in California, but you have to go back to Oklahoma. Your aunt has offered to take you in. You don't look forward to it, though.

After your back is better, you help your aunt make a poor living from her little farm. She complains all the time, and life is pretty grim.

"You wouldn't be a cripple if you hadn't been fool enough to go running off to California," your aunt says almost every day.

"I'm not a cripple, Aunt. I just got a trick back," you always answer. "Anyway, how would you keep this farm without my help?"

"It'd be better if I lost it. It's just no-good, hardscrabble land. I wish I didn't have it anymore," your aunt mutters.

And then, one Monday morning in 1935, some men ask if they can check the land for oil. You give them permission, but you don't expect any good luck.

To your shock it turns out there are seven good oil wells on the land. Your aunt is rich!

"Well," says your aunt, "If it weren't for you, I woulda long since got rid of this place, so fair is fair. Half of it is yours."

You let out a great whoop of joy. All of a sudden the future is bright again, and you're glad you came back to Oklahoma.

■ *Turn to page 9.*

You go down to talk to the banker. He shakes your hand and seems very nice. But he can't do anything about the foreclosure.

"It's out of my hands. If you can't bring the payments up to date, we have to take the farm," he says.

You borrow money on your watch and silverware. You know you are only buying time. You are probably just putting off the day when you'll lose the farm anyway. But you keep hoping something will turn up.

Then something wonderful happens. President Franklin Roosevelt signs a new law. It's called the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act. You can get money to save your farm! You can hang on until another crop goes in the ground. If you are lucky, why, maybe you can pull it off!

You and your spouse work hard to put in corn in the spring. This time there are no grasshoppers and dust storms. Your corn grows tall and green again. It's not the best crop you ever had, but you make a little profit.

The years ahead are hard. You must struggle for almost ten years. It's very hard when your children are born. You have to watch every penny. But by 1944, your farm is prosperous. You even buy more land.

You go walking in the tall, lush corn with your son and daughter. "We almost lost the farm back in the thirties," you tell them.

"Were there really giant grasshoppers?" asks your daughter.

"Why, they darkened the sun," you say.

"Wow!" says your son.

"But we fought them. And we fought the dust storms. We stood up to the drought and the Depression. We beat it all," you say proudly. "And do you know why?"

"Why?" asks your son.

"Because we're farmers. We feed America, and other parts of the world too. We do one of the most important jobs on earth. We're proud of what we do. We don't give up easily," you say with a big grin.

Your daughter smiles. "I'm proud of being a farmer too."

"Me too," says your son.

And you are very proud of them.

■ Turn to page 9.

You turn your farm back to the bank and move to a nearby city. You rent a room. You get a job at the bank. Now it's your job to set up farm auctions. You watch the tractors mow down the fences and old barns of your former neighbors.

When the bank takes over a farm, the bank often has all the buildings mowed down. Then the small farm is sold to a large farmer. You hate your work. You get a salary to live on, but the work makes you sick.

One day you get a call from an old friend. You have known him since childhood.

"Do you really work for the bank now?" he asks.

"It's a job," you say.

"They are coming to destroy my farm next week," he says.

You try to explain to the old friend that it's not the bank's fault. If nobody pays their mortgages, then the bank will fail. And everybody who has money in the bank will lose their cash. These are terrible times. It's nobody's fault. It's just the way things are.

You go to your old friend's house and try to cheer him up on the day the tractors come.

"This is where the wife and I raised our kids," he says.

"I know. It hurts a lot. I know how I felt when our farm went," you say.

You watch the tractor coming. The empty chicken house is knocked down first. Then the barn. Big tears run down the man's face. You can't stand it any more.

You quit your job at the bank and get another job in another city. You drift around from job to job. You never find anything you like.

Friends who know you say you never really find yourself again. It's true, too. You are rootless, just floating around. You suppose that's what happens when a farmer is driven from the farm. You were meant to work the land.

There's just nothing else you want to do.

■ *Turn to page 9.*

The Lynching of the Judge

Some farmers during these times were really desperate. In Iowa the bank was selling a farm for fifteen thousand dollars. The farmer owed that much. But the farm was worth eighty thousand dollars.

"It's not fair!" shouted the farmer. All his friends marched with him to the courthouse. Judge Bradley told them he couldn't help them. The farm would have to be sold. The farmer couldn't pay his mortgage. That was all there was to it.

The farmers grabbed the judge. They took him from the courthouse. They put a rope around his neck and said they were going to hang him. They didn't mean it. But the judge was really scared. Finally, the farmers let the judge go. And all the farmers were put in jail.

The farm was sold for fifteen thousand. Most of the other farmers lost their farms too. It was a very sad time in America.

Matching

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|--|-----------------|
| 1. The sun was darkened by hordes of _____ . | a) Iowa |
| 2. The farmers threatened to hang Judge Bradley in _____ . | b) sold |
| 3. When the wind blew, everything was covered with _____ . | c) mortgages |
| 4. The farmers lost their farms because they couldn't pay their _____ . | d) grasshoppers |
| 5. When the auctioneers came to a farm, it meant that the farm was being _____ . | e) dust |

Group Activities

1. Discuss the good and bad things about living on a farm.
2. Using a road map, find old Route 66. This was the route used by many people fleeing from the dust storms of the Midwest and going to California. (On many maps Route 66 is now shown as Interstate 40.)
3. From encyclopedias or science books, find a good sketch or picture of a grasshopper. You and each of your classmates draw one or color a photocopied picture of one. Each grasshopper should be about three to four inches long. Cut them all out and mount them on the wall. Then imagine millions of these creatures and you will know what the hopper invasion of the 1930s was like.

Individual Activities

1. Finish one of the stories below, using the opening sentence. Your story should be about a hundred words long.
 - a) I opened the front door and fifty grasshoppers swarmed in. First I yelled and then . . . (Finish the story.)
 - b) I was caught in a car in the middle of a dust storm. I wanted to jump out and run, but . . . (Finish the story.)
2. Read a part of the book *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck for a feeling of what these times were like for people.
3. Some of the people from Oklahoma and Arkansas were called "Okies" and "Arkies." Their feelings were sometimes hurt by this. Why do you think this was so? Explain in a paragraph.