Readers: We recommend browsing the questions below prior to reading the related section. If you come up with your own questions as you read the book and would like to share them, please email them to lisa.glidden@oswego.edu so that we can update this sheet.

General Questions from the Oswego Reading Initiative (ORI) Brochure
1. In your opinion, has America learned any lessons since the dust bowl era relative to the sustainable and responsible use of its natural resources? Cite examples to support your case.
2. Where do you feel we, as a country and a global citizen, are positioned today on the spectrum running from earth-hostile to earth-friendly?
3. What are some notable environmental disasters or environmental success stories, both here in the U.S. and abroad?
4. How can each of us make a contribution to a healthier existence and a healthier planet?
5. What role did government policy have in creating incentives that resulted in the dust bowl?

Study and Discussion Questions Organized By Discipline or Subject Matter

Introduction and Part I: The Promise
Meteorology: Questions 1, 2
History: Questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10
Geography: Question 9
Native American Studies: Questions 2, 8, 12, 13, 18
Immigration history: Questions 3, 4
Gender Studies: Question 5, 13
Government/Political Science/Economics: Questions 6, 7, 12, 16, 17, 19
Environmental Studies/Sustainability: Questions 6, 7, 17
Psychology/Social Psychology: Questions 9, 10, 11, 17
Sociology: Questions 4, 5, 8, 9
Anthropology: Question 4, 18
Creative Writing: Question 11, 18


The introduction takes the reader on a short tour of the present day Southern Plains towns in the Dust Bowl area. The land is inhospitable ("place that gives nothing back to a stranger", p.1) and the bold experiment of turning over the soil to grow crops starting around 1900 led to a disaster in the 1930s ("the land convulsed in a way that had never been seen before, and it did so at a time when one out of every four adults was out of work."). The story gets personal, as several survivors share their family histories and experience of living through that time (Ike Osteen, Jeanne Clark, Melt White). Their witness accounts continue through the rest of the book. A few important topics are introduced for the first time: ethnic tensions (p.9), settlement and speculative frenzy (pp.4, 6), soul-searching among the survivors -- feelings of shame and guilt and path to redemption (pp.2, 9, 10). The misery of enduring the dust storms, or dusters, is starkly revealed (pp.5-8).

Chapter 1 follows several settlers who came to the Southern Plains between the first decade of the 20th century and the end of the 1920s. The towns of Lamar and Springfield in the southwestern corner of Colorado, Boise City and Shattuck in the Oklahoma Panhandle and Dalhart in the Texas Panhandle all sprang from nothing -- the tall prairie grass, herds of bison, and Comanche Indians in the 1860s gave way first to cattle ranches and later, by 1930, to population centers with banks, car and farm equipment dealerships, fine stores, hotels, and dining, linked by the railroad to the rest of the nation, "and a few grain towers, all surrounded by broken fields of golden wheat" (p.50). The main narrative line of the settlement, personified by the life stories of Bam White, Doc Dawson, "Uncle" Dick Coon, John McCarthy, the Lucas and James families, George Ehrlich, Fred Folkers, and others, is broken by important digressions dealing with the geography, history, and toponymy of the land, history of its inhabitants, and economic and social commentary. The human side of the story makes it hard to put the book down. A further array of topics is woven into the
narrative. Some of them concern internal migration: government policies encouraging the settlement of the Northern and Southern Plains, labor factors leading to migration, the role of the banks and railroads, ethnic conflicts among the settlers. Others are more philosophical: betrayal, the American Dream, independence, hope, and hubris. On the economic side, the chapter deals with market and speculation, prosperity, finance and its profound effect on individual behavior, black market economy. The chapter ends with the premonition of a disaster: decline in the wheat prices at the end of 1920s, weather ruining some of the crops, the stock market crash of 1929, suitcase farmers abandoning their ploughed land, and the first recorded dust storm on September 14, 1930.

Questions

1. What is the Dust Bowl? When and where did it happen? Did it have a lasting effect?
2. What are the climatic conditions in the Southern Plains? Is the area suitable for human habitation? Is it suitable for ranching or farming crops? Describe the change in the views of different authorities at various times. What is the reason for their divergence?
3. List the ethnic groups that at different times populated the Southern Plains. When did they arrive? Did they coexist peacefully and harmoniously? Describe specific incidents. Why do you think conflict existed?
4. What are the main reasons for migration of Anglo settlers, Mexicans, Volga Germans, Jews, and other identifiable ethnic groups to the Southern Plains? How did their ethnic background affect their lifestyle? Why did nesters and cowboys distrust one another so much? What effect did their distrust have on the nesters’ activities?
5. What did a frontier town on the prairie look like in 1910 and in 1930? In what conditions did a typical family live and how did it sustain itself?
6. How did government policies, actions by the railroads and decisions taken by the banks impact the settlement of the prairie? Did the transitions from buffalo hunting to cattle ranching to planting crops happen naturally?
7. What was the main driving force behind the great plowup of 1900-1930? Compare and contrast different time periods in terms of land availability, the tools used to cultivate the land, access to financing, and the rate at which the land was converted from the wild prairie into arable land. Was this change sustainable in the long term?
8. What did first the Indians and, later, the cowboys think of the groups that succeeded them? How did they react to the loss of their livelihood? What was the attitude of the "sodbusters" towards the groups that preceded them? How did they react to their newfound prosperity?
9. Is there a similarity between the settlement of the Northern Plains and the Southern Plains? What lessons could the newer settlers have learned from their predecessors up north?
10. The book mentions many human qualities that made the settlement possible and defined the people who wanted to make the Southern Plains their home. What are they? What role did they play in the history of the land and in the success and the demise of the project to convert the prairie into the breadbasket of the nation?
11. What kind of language do those who lived through the Dust Bowl use to describe the experience? (Note your examples). What does it tell you about their relationship to the land and nature? What does it tell you about how they have processed the Dust Bowl and their part in it?
12. What do you think was the motivation for the "desperate" last homestead act of 1909 (4)?
13. How did settlers view Native American men and women? How did they view their relationship with nature?

14. What incentives drew people to the Southwest and places like ‘No Man’s Land’?

15. In what ways did technology enable the Dust Bowl?

16. What factors explain the variability in the price of wheat in the early twentieth-century?

17. As the price of wheat fell, what options did farmers have to deal with lower prices? How can we understand farmers’ reactions as rational? How can we understand their actions as irrational? What other options did they have? What were obstacles to other courses of action?

18. Bam White sometimes felt the desire to roam. “It could have been his Indian blood stirring again,” writes Egan (85). What kind of imagery of Native Americans does that evoke for you? What are other explanations for “the native love of mobility” (85)?

19. As prices decreased, “the government men shrugged; it was a free market, just like stocks, and you boys got stung by speculation. The volume of shares sold on the New York Stock Exchange had doubled in a year’s time in the late twenties, and wheat production did the same thing. President Hoover wasn’t going to step in and muddle in the dynamics of agrarian capitalism” (87). To what extent is the position of ‘the government men’ correct? How is it disingenuous?

Section II: Betrayal
Questions by Discipline/Subject Matter
Government/Economics/Political Science: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 14, 15, 21, 24
Writing/Oral History: 3, 11
Psychology: 3
Environmental Studies/Sustainability: 7, 12, 13, 16, 20
Meteorology: 9
Biology/Physiology/Health: 10
Philosophy/Political Theory: 4
Ethnic Studies: 14
Anthropology/Archeology: 17
Native American Studies: 18, 19
Biology/Botany: 16, 20
Sociology: 21
Research strategies: 21, 22
Journalism: 23
Gender Studies/Women’s Studies: 24

Synopsis of pp. 91-135, “Betrayal 1931-1933”

Chapters six through ten focus on how the southern plains people dealt with what they perceived as betrayal by the banks, the government, and the environment. The government had provided them with land of their own and had instructed them to plant wheat to capitalize on increasing export prices. How were they to know that both their land and the demand for wheat would dry up? As the banks failed and wheat prices fell drastically, Mother Nature seemed to be punishing them too. The once fertile land now overworked, became dry due to drought and was sucked up into the increasingly frequent storms. As the storms began, denial and uncertainty ruled. People struggled to support their families while maintaining their dignity, and to make sense of the sudden reversal of their fortunes.

Questions
1. Why is this unit called “Betrayal”?
2. Were the southern plains people right to feel betrayed? Provide support for your opinion.
3. How does Egan express their feelings of betrayal? Show examples from the text.
4. Do the southern plains people deserve any blame for their predicament? Provide support for your opinion.
5. What role did banks play in the “Dust Bowl” tragedy?
6. What role did the government play in the “Dust Bowl” tragedy?
7. What role did the environment play in the “Dust Bowl” tragedy?
8. What role did global economic conditions play in the tragedy?
9. What were weather forecasting techniques like during this period?
10. How did the health of “Dust Bowl” survivors suffer? What were common health conditions that resulted from the dust storms?
11. The term “Dust Bowl” first appeared in the mid-1930s, years after the storms began. How did southern plain inhabitants describe the storms they witnessed? What phrases did they use in their first-hand accounts?
12. “Of all the countries in the world, we Americans have been the greatest destroyers of land of any race of people barbaric or civilized,” Bennett said in a speech at the start of the dust storms” (p. 125). Do you agree with this quote by Hugh Bennett?
13. Why were Hugh Bennett’s ideas about man’s relationship with nature so controversial?
14. How were non-Anglos viewed/treated during the tragedy? Has it changed today? Provide examples to support your point of view.
15. Why were the southern plains also called No Man’s Land (p. 105)? What is the history behind the name No Man’s Land?
16. Explain Stephen Long & John Wesley Powell’s views regarding the “arid land” of the southern plains (p. 119)? Do you agree or disagree?
17. What significance is there in Bill Baker’s discovery of the mummified child in a cave in Cimarron County (p. 122)?
18. What is the history of Native Americans in the southern plains region?
19. How might the Native Americans of the plains have been able to help the settlers?
20. What are the present-day farming techniques used in the southern plains?
21. What do the town of Boise City and Dalhart look like today? Consider demographics and economic indicators like primary industry, employment rates.
22. Examine the Notes & Sources for chapters 6-10 (pp. 319-321). Locate two of the primary sources listed. Use the History-Primary Sources Research Guide to begin your search.
23. John L. McCarthy intended to “...keep alive the Dalhart vision” by reporting his version of the news (p. 94). Are there instances when it is permissible to compromise journalistic ethics?
24. With increasing poverty and unemployment, how was it that business was booming at Mrs. Walker’s whorehouse (pp. 93-94)? Is there any relationship between economic depression and the sex industry?

Section III: Blowup, 1934-1939
Questions by Discipline/Subject Matter:
Government/Political Science: 1, 4, 9, 16, 18, 21, 22
Political Theory: 22
History: 2, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14, 18, 19, 23
Psychology: 2, 9
Philosophy: 2, 22
Meteorology: 3, 7, 10, 16, 17
Biology: 5, 6
Botany: 4
Environmental Studies/Sustainability: 4, 15, 16
Sociology/Population Studies: 5
Health: 6
Physics: 7
Ethnic Studies: 8
Oral Histories/Writing: 10, 19, 23

The struggle to survive on the southern plains starts seeming more and more futile in the face of worsening dust storms. The storms become bad enough to gain the attention of Easterners, and life on the plains becomes more precarious, until the terrifying watershed event—Black Sunday, April 14, 1935.

The public and the Roosevelt administration devote serious attention to the problems of the Southern plains, and seek novel solutions. New Deal programs like William Bennett's Soil Conservation Districts and the Farm Security Administration begin. We trace the plight of the residents during this time through the diary of Don Hartwell, and we learn of the fates of the families whose lives we have been following.

1. What do you think of the federal government's plan to buy and slaughter cattle from the High Plains (147)?

2. What was the event of May 9, 1934 that linked the fate of the High Plains to that of New York City (150)? Do you think we are truly capable of caring what happens to people we don't know until we are affected ourselves?

3. Have you ever experienced a “white-out” in Central New York? How do you imagine the dust storms compare? (To see a description of Charles Shaw trying to drive through a dust storm to get to the birth of his first child, see pp. 155-157. There’s another description of Shaw’s drive to a hospital during a storm on pp. 196-197.)

4. What do you think about Roosevelt's idea of “planting a great wall of trees from the Canadian border to Texas” as a way to improve the land of the plains?

5. In the 1930s, the birth rate in the US declined for the first time in its history (169). What is the significance of that?

6. Describe dust pneumonia. What are the symptoms? Why does it occur? Who did it affect the most on the plains of the 1930s? Does it still occur anywhere? How common is it?

7. At various points in the book, Egan talks about the surprising level of static electricity in the air, enough to sometimes produce visible flames (171-172). How high were the levels of static electricity during the Dust Bowl, and why were the conditions sometimes perfect to produce so much? Why did the levels fluctuate?

8. In the town of Delhart there was a sign, Black Man Don’t Let The Sun Go Down On You Here (176-177, 183). Egan relates a story about the humiliating (and unjust) treatment of African American men in that little town. Do you think that kind of treatment was unusual in the High Plains? How about in other parts of the country?

9. Egan describes a “new type of mental illness—the person driven mad by dust” (177). He relates the story of a young widow, found wandering and incoherent, whose children were taken away by the court. What do you think about this? Why did this and similar actions haunt the judge who was involved, Judge Cowan?

10. After all the dust storms that preceded it, what made the Black Sunday storm of April 14, 1935, the worst? Which one or two images of the storm stand out the most to you? Whose stories do you find the especially memorable.
11. Throughout the book, Egan comments on the special kind of persistence it took to keep house and make a home on the plains during the time of the dust storms. Were there challenges to living on the high plains that may have especially affected wives and mothers? Husbands and fathers? Schoolchildren?

12. In this section, Egan describes the difficulties of day-to-day life among the plains residents very vividly. Which do you think would have been more difficult during the Great Depression: life in a large city or life in one of the small towns on the plains?

13. According to Egan, Hugh Bennett said that “One hundred million acres had lost most of its topsoil and nearly half had been ‘essentially destroyed’ and could not be farmed again” (223). How can you make sense of a number that large? What can you do that helps you picture such a vast amount of land? How about this figure from p. 254? “More than 850 million tons of topsoil had blown off the southern plains” in a year. How much topsoil is that, relative to how much there was to start with in the southern plains? If you had to explain to grade school children how much this was, how would you help them understand that number?

14. It has been said that journalism is the first draft of history. This book is a history written by a journalist. How do you think it might have been different had it been written by a historian?

15. Several times, Egan indicates that there was controversy over whether the dust bowl was the result of natural disaster or was humanly created (225). Now that you are completing the book, which do you think was the case? Do you think Egan himself believes one side or the other? Why? Why does it make a difference?

16. 2012 saw another serious drought in the Midwest. We didn’t hear much about concerns over a new dust bowl. What do you think was different this time? (One hint, p. 311: Soil conservation districts, established by William Bennett to help farmers protect the land, are the only New Deal grassroots program still in effect.)

17. Rainmaking became a profession during the dust years, as Egan notes several times in his book (190-191, 231). Is there any sound science behind rainmaking or is it all pseudo-science? Has rainmaking become a real possibility since the 1930s?

18. During his “Second Hundred Days,” FDR instituted a number of government programs, designed to “bail out” farmers affected by the depression and dust bowl (236-237). Some people (including some of the dust bowl farmers) found these programs too interventionist, preferring less rather than more government. The Supreme Court found some programs unconstitutional. What do you think? Given the gravity of the depression and the disaster in the farmlands, what should be the role of government.

19. Don Hartwell had very specific goals for the diary he started in secret in 1936: to make sure the struggles and hardships of the Nebraska farmers during the decade of the dust storms were recorded first hand for posterity (242). How do you think he knew he was recording events of historic significance? Have you ever kept a diary? Is there value to keeping a diary intended for later, unknown readers? What other famous diaries are you familiar with?

20. Egan says that the photos of the suffering residents of the farm belt that were taken by government photographers were highly influential; so was the documentary film, The Plow That Broke the Plains (248). Which do you find more powerful in telling the story of the dust bowl: words or pictures?

21. A controversial element of the New Deal was the support of artists in government service, and yet without support much about the Great Depression might not have been documented (248-253). Artists like photographer Dorothea Lange, painter Jackson Pollock, and documentarian Pare Lorentz were among those who worked for the government. Investigate the work of the Farm Security Administration and the Federal Art Project, and some of the artists who worked for them. What do you think should be the relationship between government and the arts?

22. The first report sent to Roosevelt by the Great Plains Drought Area Committee about the causes of the dust storms concluded that public homesteading policy was largely at fault. But the report also said, “We
endanger our democracy if we allow the Great Plains, or any other section of the country, to become an economic desert” (269). How much responsibility (economic, political, ethical) should the rest of the country have for regions that have suffered disaster? At what point does it become right or wrong for people to rely on government support to “bail them out” after a weather related disaster?

23. Egan bases much of his book on oral histories provided by survivors. Discuss the power of those stories in helping us to understand history. What are other events that should be chronicled while survivors are available to tell their stories? Are there stories you, yourself can gather from others?