

# The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl

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## **Book Title**

The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl

## **Author**

Timothy Egan

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Houghton Mifflin Company, New York

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## **Summary**

During the summer of 2012, nearly 80% of all U.S. agricultural land was impacted by drought, which the USDA's Economic Research Service (2012) labeled as the "most severe and extensive drought in at least 25 years" (para. 1). Drought conditions during this timeframe made many people draw comparisons to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s (Botelho, 2012).

In June of 2012, I was making preparations for a graduate level course I teach called "Foundations of Agricultural Communications." The purpose of this course is to explore historical foundations of agricultural communications including selected philosophical concepts, how the field has changed over time, where it is today, and what it may look like in the future. The course also focuses on selected communication theories and their application and relevance to current issues in agriculture and agricultural communications.

I had started to contemplate the various assignments in the course and learned of the book selection for Texas Tech University's President's Reading Program – "The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl." It was a serendipitous choice. Although the book does not directly address the history or philosophy of agricultural communications, it does contain details and stories of one of the worst ecological disasters in American history. Additionally, it had direct connections to agriculture and to the South Plains area of Texas, where the university is located. Graduate students should be challenged through reading assignments to make connections to broader concepts or theories and this book provided an opportunity to do so. Because the book is not a straightforward history of agricultural communications, it encouraged students to adopt a more comprehensive view of this event in American agriculture history and more deeply consider the role of communication efforts.

The author, Tim Egan, is a New York Times journalist who has written several other books. “The Worst Hard Time” won the 2006 National Book Award for Nonfiction, attesting to the quality of research and writing. Egan is a talented writer who delivers a powerful story through his gift for prose. The book provides first-hand accounts of several families who lived through the Dust Bowl and is organized into three sections – Promise: The Great Plowup, 1901-1930; Betrayal, 1931-1933; Blowup, 1934-1939. The majority of the book is dedicated to the Blowup timeframe. In each section, connections can be made to the agricultural practices and the variety of communication methods used before, during, and after the Dust Bowl era.

Students in the course were required to read the book and focus on how communication efforts both encouraged the intensive farming practices that lead to the Dust Bowl and how communication was used to eventually help preserve the area’s natural resources. At the end of the course, students wrote a reflection paper that addressed three questions: 1) How did the book make you feel? 2) What connections to agricultural communications did you find? 3) What additional historical research in agricultural communications is needed? For the first two questions, students had to provide three specific examples from the book on which to elaborate. The response to the final question could be something related to the book’s content, or another topic altogether.

When asked to provide examples of agricultural communications, students mentioned many items but most focused on four key aspects: (1) newspapers, (2) movies and newsreels, (3) photography, and (4) persuasive communication.

One of the most colorful characters described in the book is John L. McCarty, who was the owner and editor of the “Dalhart Texan” newspaper in Dalhart, Texas. McCarty practiced questionable journalism in order to encourage and sustain Dalhart’s population growth during the early 1900s.

It steamed John. L. McCarty, sitting in his editor’s office at the Texan, working to keep alive the Dalhart vision. The town had nearly eight thousand people now, almost double what it was ten years ago. In McCarty’s mind, it would double again by the end of the 1930’s. But Dalhart needed to be slapped to its senses time and again, and it was the job of the loudest voice in the Panhandle to do just that. (p. 94)

The students were able to identify McCarty’s lack of objectivity while acknowledging his persuasive ability. He was able to rally nearly 2,000 people to a fenced field in Dalhart to club to death thousands of jackrabbits. When he learned of approaching hazardous dust storms, he would bury the news inside the paper instead of giving it prominent coverage. As the newspaper editor, he used a column in the paper to add his “spin” to the news of the day while remaining a steadfast promoter of Dalhart. Students frequently discussed the gatekeeping and agenda setting theories in relation to McCarty’s ability to use the newspaper to influence public opinion.

The second prominent aspect of the books students often mentioned was the use of movies and newsreels to show the Dust Bowl to those who did not live in this region of the country. One particular movie was discussed in detail – “The Plow That Broke the Plains.” This documentary film by Pare Lorentz was originally intended to be a Hollywood motion picture, but when Hollywood refused the film, the U.S. government provided funding. In 1935, Lorentz and his crew filmed the ravaged areas in six states, with the most disturbing footage coming from the Panhandle region of Texas. Lorentz captured the aftermath of years of intensive farming and drought. Egan writes that the film “would be one of the most influential documentaries ever made, the only peacetime produc-

tion by the American government of a film intended for broad commercial release” (p. 252).

This film was distributed widely to show audiences in other parts of the country the ruination of the Great Plains. The cinematic portrayal was able to convey the suffering and desperation in a more emotionally impactful way than news reports or even photographs could. Students in the course discussed the inherent strengths and weaknesses of various forms of media to convey messages.

In addition to the visual impact of motion pictures and newsreels, students focused on the use of photography to capture and demonstrate the tragic circumstances for the Great Plains region and the people who lived there. In his chapter on Black Sunday, Egan includes the story of an AP reporter, Robert Geiger, and photographer, Harry Eisenhard, who were in the Oklahoma that fateful day April 14, 1935. Eisenhard took a photograph of the approaching dust cloud, estimated at several thousand feet high; the photo appeared in newspapers all over the world. In fact, Geiger actually coined the term “Dust Bowl” in one of his reports.

‘Three little words, achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent – if it rains.’ The three little words did not stick as much as the two, and thereafter, headline writers, politicians, and newsreels referred to the airborne part of the southern plains by its new name: the Dust Bowl. (p. 222)

Another aspect of photography highlighted in the book was Roy Emerson Stryker’s efforts to document the Dust Bowl through a team of photographers working for the Farm Security Administration. The photographs were originally requested for propaganda purposes to support President Roosevelt’s campaign for a second term, but “the government photo unit provided to be one of the lasting and most popular contribution of the New Deal, far outliving its propaganda purposes” (p. 248). Egan explained that many newspapers and newsreels included images of the dusters, but they often overlooked the impact of these storms at the ground level. “It was rare to see the lines in a sandblasted face, or look into the eyes of a broken nester, or see a woman nursing her child slumped next to a jalopy loaded with all her worldly goods” (p. 248). The FSA photographers captured these images, some of which are now quite famous. Students recognized the emotional quality these photographs conveyed while admitting it was heartbreaking to see the faces of those so impacted by the devastation.

The final major aspect students frequently mentioned was the use of persuasive communication. In the 1800s, this region of the country suffered from a negative perception as being the “Great American Desert.” Stephen Long used these words in 1820 to describe the area and wrote: “In regard to this extensive section of the country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence” (p. 23).

In order to attract investors and settlers to the area, many syndicates and salesmen used communication efforts that contained misleading or completely false information. In the early 1900s, the Southwestern Immigration and Development Company used pamphlets and fliers to promote the availability of arable land in the south plains. This company used blatant lies to encourage settlers to move to the panhandle area of Oklahoma and Texas.

Hope died the first time people laid eyes on Boise City, Oklahoma. It was founded on fraud. Even the name itself was a lie. Boy-City, the promoters pronounced it, from the French words le boi – trees. Except there was not a single tree in Boise City. Nor was there a city. (p. 32)

Egan explained that the company sold lots for a town that did not exist. The brochures promoting the city had images of paved streets lined in trees with businesses already established. Everything was a lie and the settlers who paid for lots did not even know until they arrived to find nothing, not even the hint of an established city. The aggressive and often erroneous sales tactics lead to the rapid settlement of the Great Plains and eventual ruination of the native grasses that had kept the soil from being moved by the fierce winds. Students discussed the ethics surrounding these tactics and noted the involvement of the federal government that endorsed claims that the area was ideal for plowing and planting.

In addition to highlighting references to agricultural communications, students were asked to provide suggestions for historical research in our discipline. This book encouraged those discussions because it is an excellent example of in-depth research. Egan provides extensive notes to document his years of research efforts that included interviews and document analysis. While reading this book, not only do students learn more about this period in history, they are also exposed to the amount of time, energy, and research that went into the writing process. Egan keeps record of the sources for this information and students were able to understand the sheer volume of references necessary to write a high quality research project.

“The Worst Hard Time” is an excellent read for those interested in agricultural history. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it, and I know my students did as well. I will continue to require students in the course to read the book because it demonstrates the influence communication can have on what we know, do, and believe. I strongly recommend others read this book and think about how it could be incorporated in their own profession.

Students in my course were able to make connections to the overarching themes of the book and we addressed a variety of thought-provoking questions: Are we headed to another Dust Bowl if we do not change how this area is farmed? What communication efforts will it take to change farming practices? What can be done to help those who are not directly involved in farming better understand the complexity of the industry?

In 1936, the Great Plains Drought Area Committee provided a report to President Roosevelt to explain why the Dust Bowl had occurred and what could be done to prevent the area from becoming any more desolate. The report concluded by saying:

“The situation is so serious that the Nation, for its own sake, cannot afford to allow the farmer to fail... We endanger our democracy if we allow the Great Plains, or any other section of the country to become an economic desert” (p. 269).

This noble statement demonstrates the significance of this period in our American agricultural heritage. We should learn from the lessons of this tragic historical event so we do not relive it.

## References

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