In the 1930s, people on the Great Plains endured one of America’s most destructive ecological disasters—the Dust Bowl. What caused fertile farms to turn to dust? How did people survive? What lessons can we learn from the Dust Bowl?

We can find answers to these questions in the region’s history and geography. Centuries of human interaction with the environment intensified between 1850 and 1930 as farmers believed that they could overcome the area’s variable weather and climate. The 1930s disaster taught them that they were wrong. However, people survived the dust and the drought by forging new community ties and by embracing new government programs. People also discovered a new respect for the power of nature. The Dust Bowl experience demonstrates the complex relationship between humans and the dynamic Great Plains environment.
Plains inhabitants faced a complex and highly variable environment featuring periods of wet weather and periods of drought. People on the Plains also endured hostile weather phenomena such as tornados, blizzards, floods, hail storms, dust storms, and the constant wind. The short-lived tornado or the hail storm posed less of a threat than the most serious weather hazard on the Plains: drought. The Plains has episodic, recurrent drought: periods of average or above average rainfall alternate with periods of drought. Despite the challenges with rainfall, economic conditions in the Plains changed dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century with the expansion of railroads into the region from the east. The railroads, government scientists, and land speculators all repeated the same phrase: “The rain follows the plow.” They used this phrase to convince farmers that plowing the land released moisture into the atmosphere which, in turn, produced more rain.

A period of prosperity between 1900 and 1920 seemed to vindicate changes to the land. Although farmers did not know it at the time, this boom period relied on temporary conditions. Parts of the Plains received record rainfall in the 1910s and 1920s. The temporary environmental and economic conditions that encouraged the boom on the Plains ended in the early 1930s when an epic drought started. No longer protected by the grass and its deep roots, the soil dried and turned to a fine dust that the winds spread everywhere. The lack of rain destroyed the sense of control over nature that Plains farmers had enjoyed during the boom years. The winds and the dry fields produced monumental dust storms. Perhaps the largest one occurred on April 14, 1935, a day known as Black Sunday, when the sunlight grew dim and the sun was blocked by the great dust-filled maelstrom.

In the absence of a dramatic storm, dust still swept through farms. Dust blocked roads, buried fences, destroyed tractors, and accumulated like great snow drifts against buildings. In response to the hostile conditions, farm families created self-help groups to save their way of life. They made a virtue out of staying on their farms through the dark years. Women often added new duties to their already extensive work. Some people left their farms and moved to the nearest urban center, while others packed their meager belongings and went west, especially to California. Many more farmers stayed. Historians estimate that seventy to eighty percent of people in the region of the Dust Bowl remained on their land. The intense physical and psychological experiences of living through dust storms inspired many artists to try to capture the essence of the Dust Bowl. For example, Woody Guthrie sang ballads about the suffering of ordinary folk on the Plains.