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The Last Man - Waiting Out the Dust Bowl

By Toni Lee Robinson

In the mid-1930s, farmers in the midwestern U.S. had already endured a great deal. They had been through several years of drought and the dreaded black clouds of the dust storms. The voracious winds tore more precious topsoil from their fields each day.

The summer of '36 blazed its way into the record books as the hottest yet. One terrible black storm after another rolled over the land. With no crops and no income for several years, farm families struggled to feed themselves. Paying off mortgages was out of the question. People living in the Dust Bowl began to lose hope.

"Sheriff's Sale" signs appeared at the doors of those who could no longer make payments. These families saw their homes and land taken by the banks and their belongings auctioned off to the highest bidder. One family after another loaded up what little they had and drove away. Shattered dreams and broken hearts fluttered in the dust behind them. The area lost one quarter of its people.

But many were determined to stick it out in the Dust Bowl. One Texas newspaper editor started the "Last Man Club," urging Midwesterners to hang on. Each of those who took up his challenge vowed to be the last man to leave and to help others hold on as well. In the end, three quarters of the resilient Plains people dug in and endured.

Meanwhile, Franklin D. Roosevelt had become president. A nation deep in crisis looked to him for answers. With millions of Americans out of work, the Dust Bowl seemed just one problem among many. But by 1935, the blight had spread. The drought now held twenty-seven states in its grip. Policy makers in Washington, D.C., began to see that something had to be done to help the nation's farmers.



Roosevelt set several programs in motion to relieve the farm crisis. The Emergency Farm Mortgage Act allotted money to refinance farm mortgages. The Farm Bankruptcy Act limited the power of banks to repossess farms in times of crisis. The Farm Credit Act set up local lending agencies and gave farmers easier access to credit. These measures enabled many families to hang on to their farms.

But keeping their drought-stricken farms didn't mean farmers could feed their herds of livestock. Many animals were near starvation. Market prices were so low that cattle sold for less than it cost to ship them to market. Roosevelt stepped in with a new federal agency. The Drought Relief Service bought livestock for up to twenty dollars a head. The animals were slaughtered and given to agencies that dispensed food to the needy.

It was wrenching for farmers to give up their livestock, but watching the animals starve to death was harder still. Getting rid of the herds also eased pressure on damaged grazing land. For many families, the DRS checks made it possible to survive the hard times.

Though Roosevelt's emergency measures helped, farmers still faced a grave dilemma. The Midwest was losing its greatest treasure. Inch by inch, the rich soil that fed America was blowing away. By the mid-thirties, some 40 million acres were no longer fit for farming. Many more millions of acres were at risk.

According to Congress, soil erosion was "a national menace." To deal with the dilemma, Roosevelt created the Soil Conservation Service. Based on the research of soil scientist Hugh H. Bennett, the SCS implemented crop rotation, cover crops, contour plowing, terracing, and other practices - all designed to prevent damage to the soil.

Farmers were reluctant at first. How could bureaucrats know more about farming than those who had been on the land for generations? But the SCS paid subsidies to farmers who tried the new methods. Soil conservation districts were set up so that conservation issues were handled locally instead of federally. Most farmers were won over.

Roosevelt also began a program of tree planting as a barrier against the winds that swept the prairies. The Shelterbelt Project paid farmers to plant native trees along roads and fence rows, forming natural barriers that slowed the wind and held soil in place. The project provided for windbreaks across a hundred-mile wide belt of the Great Plains.

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By 1938, it was estimated that conservation practices had cut the loss of soil by sixty-five percent. The new methods couldn't bring back farmlands already lost, but science and hard work did much to slow the destruction of the Midwest. Still, the drought dragged on. Farmers wondered what would become of them and the land they loved. Would they ever again see fields turned to seas of gold by acres of ripening wheat? Was the Midwest doomed to become another Sahara?

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Questions

1. Describe the things that were happening to farmers in the Dust Bowl.

2. What did "Sheriff's Sale" signs mean?

- A. A yard sale would be held to benefit the Sheriff's Department.
- B. A farm had been repossessed, and the family's possessions were being auctioned.
- C. The Sheriff was the auctioneer.
- D. The Sheriff was selling his property.

3. You could tell that the Midwesterners were resilient because:

- A. They hung on and kept going in spite of hardships.
- B. They were hopeless.
- C. They loved farming.
- D. They were reluctant to try new things.

4. Name one of the emergency finance measures for farms, and tell how it helped.

5. Explain the purpose of the Drought Relief Service.

6. What did Congress refer to as a "national menace"?

- A. starving cattle
- B. outdated farming practices
- C. lack of trees in the Midwest
- D. soil erosion

7. List three practices initiated for the purpose of soil conservation.

8. Why do you think it was so important to Midwesterners to stay on their land in spite of conditions in the Dust Bowl?
