

# Dust Bowl

## What was the impact of the Dust Bowl?

During the 1930s, the Midwest experienced so much blowing dust in the air that the region became known as the Dust Bowl. The term also refers to the event itself, usually dated from 1934 through 1940. The heart of the Dust Bowl was the Texas panhandle and western Oklahoma, but atmospheric winds carried the dust so far that East Coast cities sometimes found a powdery layer of dirt on windows, streets, sidewalks and automobiles. On the Great Plains, however, dust storms were so severe that crops failed to grow, livestock died of starvation and thirst and thousands of farm families lost their farms and faced severe poverty.

## Factors of the Dust Bowl

Most authorities cite two factors as the cause of the Dust Bowl. In the 1920s, with the coming of tractors and mechanical farm implements, farmers on the Great Plains plowed up huge tracts of land once covered with grasses that held the soil in place and helped to keep in moisture in the topsoil. Without the grass cover, the wind could lift dirt particles into the atmosphere where they were carried east by the prevailing winds. During the summers of 1934, 1936 and 1939-40, little rain fell, creating drought conditions in Iowa and across the Midwest. Extreme high temperatures topped 100 degrees sometimes for weeks at a time. Crops withered in the field and again, the soil was left with no cover to prevent the topsoil from blowing into the air.

The result was that the huge clouds of dust formed, often so strong that they blocked the sun creating darkness and limited visibility even during the day. Even when families stuffed rags under the doors and around the windows, dust filtered into homes covering everything. One woman recalled that when she sat up in the morning, she could see the silhouette of her head outlined in dust on her pillow.

## The Dust Bowl and The Great Depression

The extreme weather came on top of farmers struggling to survive during the Great Depression. Guaranteed high prices during WWI and government appeals to farmers' patriotism encouraged many to expand their herds and their cropland. When the war ended and demand for extra production fell, farmers continued to produce at record levels. Surpluses developed, and farm prices fell sharply making many farmers unable to pay their mortgages. Farm foreclosures across the Midwest skyrocketed and the situation looked desperate. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal boosted farm prices by paying farmers to limit production. While those programs were just beginning, however, the drought years of 1934 and 1936 made life even more difficult for farm families and the small towns that depended upon them. In Oklahoma and nearby regions, many families joined a mass migration to California, piling up whatever they could onto their automobiles. They became known as the "Okies."

## Conservation Efforts

The Dust Bowl taught the United States to explore better approaches to land management. Western lands with too little rainfall to support grain crops like corn or wheat should be left as pasture to maintain a grass cover that can retain moisture and keep topsoil in place. The federal government began support for programs to plant trees as windbreaks, to terrace hillsides, and to implement other land management programs. It also produced a famous film, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," that dramatically illustrated the relationship between farming practices and the Dust Bowl.

Both weather and human efforts contributed to the Dust Bowl. Iowans who lived it remember the frightening appearance of dark clouds of descending dirt. They suffered through it but also learned some valuable lessons about the need to respect the natural environment.

## Supporting Questions

### What was the Dust Bowl?

- [Dust Storm in Baca County, Colorado, 1935 \(Image\)](#)
- [Dust Storm in Eastern Colorado, c.a. 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Heavy Black Clouds of Dust Over Texas Panhandle, March 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Destroyed Orchard in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Dust Bowl Farmer in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Interview with Flora Robertson about Dust Storms in Oklahoma, August 5, 1940 \(Audio\)](#)

### How did people respond to the Dust Bowl?

- [Proposed Migrant Camps in California for Relocated Dust Bowl Families, 1935 \(Map\)](#)
- [Dust Storm in Amarillo, Texas, April 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Oklahoma Farm Family on Highway between Blythe and Indio, California, August 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Dust Bowl Family from Paris, Arkansas, Leaves on Highway No.1, June 1938 \(Image\)](#)
- ["Why We Come to California," 1940 \(Document\)](#)
- ["Dust Control Treatment of Center's Land Area Slated," June 3, 1943 \(Document\)](#)

### How did the Dust Bowl affect Americans?

- ["Dust Storm Headline Montage," between 1935 and 1942 \(Document\)](#)
- ["Migrant Mother" Florence Thompson with Her Children in Nipomo, California, February/March 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Farmer's Son Playing on a Large Soil Drift in Liberal, Kansas, March 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Manzanar Free Press Special Anniversary Edition, March 20, 1943 \(Document\)](#)
- ["Big Dust Storm Hits Project Sun. Afternoon" Newspaper Article, July 19, 1943 \(Document\)](#)
- [Iowa Public Television's "The Dust Bowl," 1979 \(Video\)](#)
- [Iowa Public Television's "The Depression, the Family Farm and the New Deal," April 28, 2015 \(Video\)](#)

## \*Printable Image and Document Guide

### Additional Resources

**Voices from the Dust Bowl:** This Library of Congress online gallery, known as the "Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection," contains selections that documented the everyday life of residents of Farm Security Administration (FSA) migrant work camps in central California in 1940 and 1941.

**The Dust Bowl Primary Source Set:** This primary source set about the Dust Bowl from the Library of Congress includes a number of photos of Americans during the Dust Bowl.

**Stanford History Education Group - The Dust Bowl:** This website contains education materials about the Dust Bowl for teachers to use in the classroom.

**Wessels Living History Farm - The Dust Bowl:** This webpage from Wessels Living History Farm in Nebraska focuses on the effects of the Dust Bowl in the Midwest in the 1930s.

**Library of Congress Dust Bowl Teaching Guide:** This Library of Congress teaching guide works in tandem with the LOC's primary source set on the Dust Bowl.

## Dust Storm in Baca County, Colorado, 1935



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Ward, J.H., "Dust storm. Baca County, Colorado," 1935

### Description

The photograph by J.H. Ward shows a dust storm moving in on a farm in Baca County, Colorado. Baca County is located in the southeasternmost part of the state.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Using evidence from this photo, describe what is happening in this image.
- Describe the ground and soil. Does this land look like land that a farmer could grow crops on? Use evidence from the photo to explain.
- Baca County is the southeasternmost county in Colorado. Compare this photo with [Destroyed Orchard in Cimarron County, Oklahoma](#), which is located in the Oklahoma panhandle, directly south of Baca County. Using evidence from both photos, explain how did the Dust Bowl impacted the neighboring states?

### Citation Information

Ward, J.H., "Dust storm. Baca County, Colorado," 1935. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Dust Storm in Eastern Colorado, ca. 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Ward, J.H., "Dust storm. Colorado," ca. 1936

### Description

This J.H. Ward photograph shows a huge dust storm moving toward a hill and through eastern Colorado.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the geography in this image, using evidence from the photo,
- What is happening in the background?
- Compare this photo with [Dust Storm in Baca County, Colorado](#). What is similar? What is different?

### Citation Information

Ward, J.H., "Dust storm. Colorado," ca. 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Heavy Black Clouds of Dust Over Texas Panhandle, March 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rothstein, Arthur, "Heavy black clouds of dust rising over the Texas Panhandle, Texas," March 1936

### Description

This photograph by Arthur Rothstein in 1936 shows a very heavy black cloud of dust behind a single car that is driving on a country road. The image was taken in the "Texas panhandle," which is the straight and narrow top part of the state bordering Oklahoma and New Mexico.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Using evidence from this photo, at what time of day was this image taken?
- Thinking about [Flora Robertson's interview](#) about dust storms in Oklahoma, describe what the people in this car and any homes in the area were about to endure as this dust storm came through.

### Citation Information

Rothstein, Arthur, "Heavy black clouds of dust rising over the Texas Panhandle, Texas," March 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Destroyed Orchard in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rothstein, Arthur, "Orchard destroyed by drifting sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma," April 1936

### Description

The 1936 photograph by famed-American photographer Arthur Rothstein captures dry soil piling up high toward the top of dead trees in an orchard. The image was taken in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, which is the westernmost part of the state.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the image. Does this look like a farm in America? Explain.
- The image shows an orchard in Oklahoma. Explain what the farmer or family must have felt as they watched this orchard become choked and killed by the drifting soil.
- What options might the family have had when it came to their land and growing crops? What might you do?

### Citation Information

Rothstein, Arthur, "Orchard destroyed by drifting sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma," April 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Dust Bowl Farmer in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rothstein, Arthur, "Dust bowl farmer raising fence to keep it from being buried under drifting sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma," April 1936

### Description

The 1936 photograph by Arthur Rothstein shows a farmer digging up a fence and attempting to move it higher to prevent it from being buried in the dust that is accumulating around it. There is a young boy on his knees close by. This photo was taken in Cimarron County, which is located in the westernmost part of Oklahoma.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Using evidence from the image, what is the man doing in this photo?
- Describe the land in the image. Could crops grow in this soil? Would livestock be able to graze on this land? Explain why or why not.
- How did the Dust Bowl era impact the soil in the Great Plains?

### Citation Information

Rothstein, Arthur, "Dust bowl farmer raising fence to keep it from being buried under drifting sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma," April 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Interview with Flora Robertson about Dust Storms in Oklahoma, August 5, 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Robertson, Flora, "Interview about dust storms in Oklahoma," 5 August 1940

### Description

Flora Robertson is heard being interviewed about dust storms in Oklahoma. Robertson lived in the state with her family during the Dust Bowl. In this audio file, she discusses the fear of being in a dust storm. Flora and her family ultimately moved to California to escape the Dust Bowl, but every year they returned to their farm. The audio also includes an original poem beginning, "I came to Oklahoma before it was a state."

### [Transcript of Flora Robertson's Interview about Oklahoma Dust Storms](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

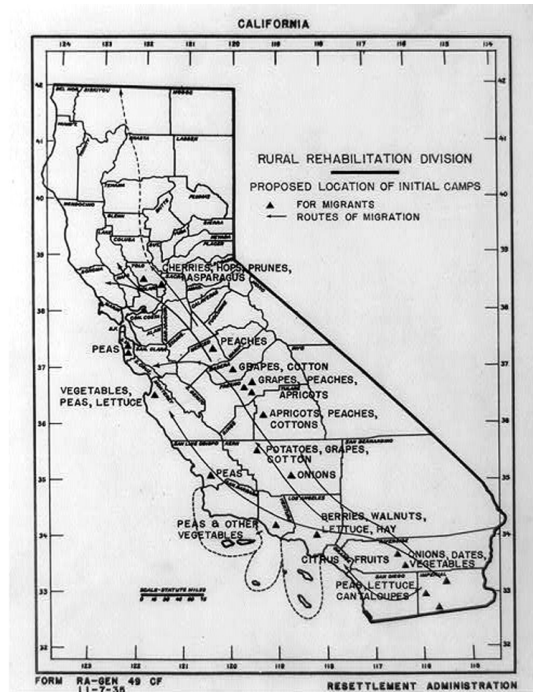
- To what does Flora Robertson compare the clouds of dust? Why did she make that comparison?
- Why would the lamp that Flora lit in the storm house not produce enough light to see anything?
- Describe what Flora said about the lungs of her lamb Dottie after it died. Why did Flora and her family put wet rags over their mouths?
- Why do you think Flora and her family waited five years before leaving Oklahoma?

### Citation Information

Robertson, Flora, "Interview about dust storms in Oklahoma," 5 August 1940. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)



## Proposed Migrant Camps in California for Relocated Dust Bowl Families, 1935



Courtesy of Library of Congress, [Map of California by the Rural Rehabilitation Division showing areas where different crops are grown, proposed location of initial camps for migrants, and routes of migration],” 1935

### Description

The map was designed to assist Dust Bowl families in relocating to migrant camps in California. It was created by the Rural Rehabilitation Division to show areas where different crops are grown, proposed location of initial camps for migrants and routes of migration.

### [Transcript of Proposed Migrant Camps in California Map](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Why would people displaced from their homes during the Dust Bowl be considered migrants?
- List the different crops that the map suggests be grown in California. How do these crops compare to what is grown in Iowa today?
- Why might people from the Great Plains want to see a map like this during the Dust Bowl era?
- How does this map help answer the supporting question: How did people respond to the Dust Bowl?

### Citation Information

“[Map of California by the Rural Rehabilitation Division showing areas where different crops are grown, proposed location of initial camps for migrants, and routes of migration],” 1935. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Dust Storm in Amarillo, Texas, April 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rothstein, Arthur, "Dust storm. Amarillo, Texas," April 1936

### Description

This Arthur Rothstein photograph shows a parked car in the foreground of a town with a woman wearing a dress holding her hat on her head. A dust storm can be seen engulfing the town of Amarillo, Texas.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- This photo shows life in a city during the Dust Bowl era. Describe what is happening in this photo.
- Compare this photo to [Oklahoma Farm Family on Highway](#). What is similar between the two photos? What is different?
- Does it appear that people moved away from cities during the Dust Bowl era? Explain your thinking.
- During the Dust Bowl would you rather be in a city or a rural area? Explain why.

### Citation Information

Rothstein, Arthur, "Dust storm. Amarillo, Texas," April 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Oklahoma Farm Family on Highway between Blythe and Indio, California, August 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lange, Dorothea, "Example of self-resettlement in California. Oklahoma farm family on highway between Blythe and Indio," August 1936

### Description

This photograph is an example of self-resettlement in California. This Oklahoma farm family is waiting along a highway between Blythe and Indio. Forced by the drought of 1936 to abandon their farm, they set out with their children to drive to California. They picked cotton in Arizona for a day or two at a time to give them enough money for food and gas to continue. On this day, they were within a day's travel of their destination, Bakersfield, California. Their car had broken down en route and was abandoned.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- This family moved from Oklahoma in their car, which broke down before reaching their final destination. Why would they be waiting on the side of the road?
- How do you suppose this family feels about relocating? What emotions would you feel if you were the father, the mother or the children?
- Why do you suppose this family is moving? How did this family respond to the Dust Bowl?

### Citation Information

Lange, Dorothea, "Example of self-resettlement in California. Oklahoma farm family on highway between Blythe and Indio," August 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Dust Bowl Family from Paris, Arkansas, Leaves on Highway No.1, June 1938



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lange, Dorothea, "On highway no. 1 of the "OK" state near Webbers Falls, Muskogee County, Oklahoma..." June 1938

### Description

This photograph, taken by famed-American photographer Dorothea Lange, shows a family that was from Paris, Arkansas, relocating during the Dust Bowl era. The title indicates they anticipate ending up in California one day — as many families did.

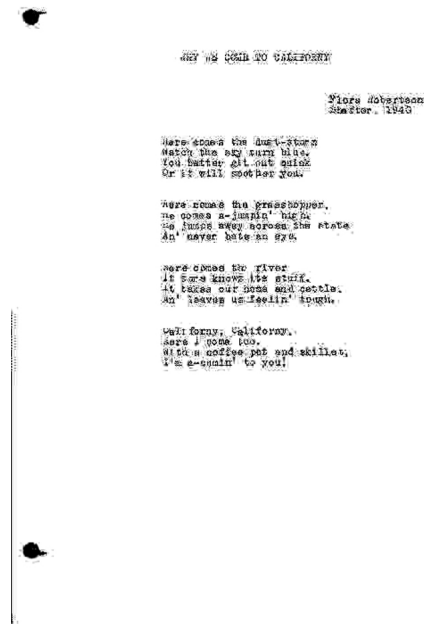
### Text-Dependent Questions

- Look closely at the photo, describe what is taking place.
- Describe what life would be like for this family. Do you suppose they feel secure in their future? Explain.
- Compare this photo to [Oklahoma Farm Family on Highway](#). What is similar? What is different? If you had to join one of these families on their journey, which family would you select? Explain your reasons why.

### Citation Information

Lange, Dorothea, "On highway no. 1 of the "OK" state near Webbers Falls, Muskogee County, Oklahoma. Seven children and eldest son's family. Father was a blacksmith in Paris, Arkansas. Son was a tenant farmer. "We're bound for Kingfisher (Oklahoma wheat) and Lubbock (Texas cotton). We're not trying to but we'll be in California yet. We're not going back to Arkansas; believe I can better myself," June 1938. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “Why We Come to California,” 1940



Courtesy of The Cedar Rapids Gazette, Smith, Rick, “Cedar Rapids Flood Buyout is History,” The Cedar Rapids Gazette, 14 September 2014

### Description

This document is a poem written in 1940 by a woman, Flora Robertson, who lived during the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma. Flora left her home and settled in a migrant camp in California.

### [Transcript of “Why We Come to California”](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the conditions Flora Robertson was living in before she decided to leave for California.
- What does the author say she brought with her to California? Why would she only have those things? What items would you bring if you had to move and why?
- Listen to [Flora’s interview about dust storms in Oklahoma](#). How does this poem help to further illustrate the conditions during the Dust Bowl?

### Citation Information

Robertson, Flora, “Why We Come to California,” 1940. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

# "Dust Control Treatment of Center's Land Area Slated," June 3, 1943



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Dust Control Treatment of Center's Land Area Slated," *Topaz Times*, 3 June 1943

## Description

The *Topaz Times* is a Japanese evacuation and relocation newspaper out of Utah. The article outlines how the public works division are treating the land in Utah to control the dust, since irrigation alone does not work.

## [Transcript of "Dust Control Treatment of Center's Land Area Slated"](#)

## [Printable Excerpt of "Dust Control Treatment of Center's Land Area Slated"](#)

## Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe how the public works division wants the ground to be plowed.
- What is the new plowing recommendation expected to help?
- What are residents of the area expected to do regarding the ground that is being pulverized? Why would this be important?

## Citation Information

"Dust Control Treatment of Center's Land Area Slated," *Topaz Times*, 3 June 1943. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “Dust Storm Headline Montage,” between 1935 and 1942



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Dust Storm Headline Montage,” between 1935 and 1942

### Description

The montage shows a collection of headlines from various newspapers that focus on the dust storms and the Dust Bowl.

### [Transcript of “Dust Storm Headline Montage”](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the headlines. Which headline seems to be the most emotional? Explain.
- What do these headlines essentially say about the effects of the dust storm on Americans?
- After looking at these headlines, write your own headline for a newspaper set during the Dust Bowl?

### Citation Information

“Dust Storm Headline Montage,” between 1935 and 1942. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “Migrant Mother” Florence Thompson with Her Children in Nipomo, California, February/March 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lange, Dorothea, “Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is native Californian. Nipomo, California,” February/March 1936

### Description

This photograph by Dorothea Lange is part of a well-known collection taken of Florence Thompson with several of her children during the Dust Bowl. The photo collection, known as the “Migrant Mother” series, shows Thompson with her children in a tent shelter in Nipomo, California.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Look closely at the photo, describe the conditions in which this family was living.
- This family had seven children, four of which can be seen in this photo. Using evidence from this photo, what would life be like for the children during this time?
- Using this photo as a basis, look at the photo of [Dust Bowl family from Arkansas](#). What kind of living conditions might the family from Arkansas expect in California?

### Citation Information

Lange, Dorothea, “Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is native Californian. Nipomo, California,” February/March 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)



## Farmer's Son Playing on a Large Soil Drift in Liberal, Kansas, March 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rothstein, Arthur, "A farmer's son playing on one of the large soil drifts which threaten to cover up his home. Liberal, Kansas," March 1936

### Description

This photograph by Arthur Rothstein shows a young boy holding what appears to be a football sitting on top of a very large dune of dust. The photo was taken in Liberal, Kansas, which is located in the southwest part of the state.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- What clues from the photograph help you determine the time period in which it was taken?
- Does this land look like land that could easily be farmed?
- How do you think this boy's life has been impacted by the Dust Bowl?

### Citation Information

Rothstein, Arthur, "A farmer's son playing on one of the large soil drifts which threaten to cover up his home. Liberal, Kansas," March 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Manzanar Free Press Special Anniversary Edition, March 20, 1943



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Manzanar Free Press, 20 March 1943

### Description

The Manzanar Relocation Center Administration and newspaper of Manzanar Community Enterprises is a publication of a Japanese Internment Camp. The front page of this edition highlights a piece of writing about how a year has gone by since the author has been at the camp and includes a focus on the dust storms in the area.

### [Transcript of Manzanar Free Press Special Edition](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- How did the author describe the dust storms?
- The author of this poem was Japanese and living in a Japanese internment camp in California during World War II. The author was not allowed to leave the camp but experienced the effects of the Dust Bowl like other Americans. Describe the emotions this author must have felt as they lived through these dust storms, while being interned at the same time.

### Citation Information

*Manzanar Free Press*, 20 March 1943. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

# “Big Dust Storm Hits Project Sun. Afternoon” Newspaper Article, July 19, 1943



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Big Dust Storm Hits Project Sun. Afternoon,” The Daily Tulean Dispatch, 19 July 1943

## Description

This newspaper article from the *The Daily Tulean Dispatch* internment camp in California is written about a baseball game that was interrupted by a massive dust storm. It describes what the people in attendance did in response to seeing the dust cloud approaching.

[Transcript of “Big Dust Storm Hits Project Sun. Afternoon”](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Big Dust Storm Hits Project Sun. Afternoon”](#)

## Text-Dependent Questions

- What event was taking place at the time of the dust storm moved in? What was the response of the crowd upon seeing the dust storm approaching? How long did the “black-out” last? Explain using specific details from the text.
- Explain how this document can be used to answer the supporting question — how did the Dust Bowl affect Americans?

## Citation Information

“Big Dust Storm Hits Project Sun. Afternoon,” *The Daily Tulean Dispatch*, 19 July 1943. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Iowa Public Television's "The Dust Bowl," 1979



Courtesy of Iowa Public Television, "The Dust Bowl," Iowa Heritage Hard Times - Iowa Public Television, 1979

### Description

This video, produced by Iowa Public Television, documents the impact of the Dust Bowl on Iowa farms.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe what you witnessed in the video to explain why this event was called the Dust Bowl.
- How does this video help you understand how the Dust Bowl impacted Iowans?

### Citation Information

"The Dust Bowl," Iowa Heritage *Hard Times* - Iowa Public Television, 1979. [Courtesy of Iowa Public Television](#)

## Iowa Public Television's "The Depression, the Family Farm and the New Deal," April 28, 2015



Courtesy of Iowa Public Television, "The Depression, the Family Farm and the New Deal," Iowa Public Television - Iowa Pathways, 28 April 28 2015

### Description

This segment from Iowa Public Television's documentary, "The People in the Pictures: Stories from the Wettach Farm Photos," features original photography and first-person accounts of farm life in rural America during the Great Depression and early 20th century.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Why was there nothing for American's to do during this time period but try to survive?
- Why was the Farm Security Administration's goal so important?

### Citation Information

"The Depression, the Family Farm and the New Deal," Iowa Public Television - Iowa Pathways, 28 April 28 2015.

[Courtesy of Iowa Public Television](#)