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In Panhandle, the best crops are Dust Bowl memories

By John David Sutter
Staff Writer

BOISE CITY — Memories of the Dust Bowl hit Millard Fowler, 95, when he sees the wind whipping up small dust storms near his wheat fields in Cimarron County.

"It just looks like the old dirty '30s every time I go by there," he said.

He remembers years when the trees just across the street were choked up to their necks in powdery dust, and when he would wake up in the morning to find his silhouette traced in dirt on his pillow.

"It's different, but I think it's drier right now than it was in 1934 and five, when it was so bad," he said, adding: "There's a lot of dirt blowing around here now when the wind blows."

While heavy rains are flooding crops across the Midwest and most of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Panhandle has been hit with one of the worst droughts in its history.

It's drier now than it was in the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, and to date it's the second driest year on record for the Panhandle. Boise City has only received 1.35 inches of rain this year, its lowest year-to-date total on record. On Thursday, the U.S. Drought Monitor upgraded the situation to its most severe drought rating: "exceptional."

Crops are failing. Cattle are starving. The winds are howling.

Comparisons to the Dust Bowl are everywhere — but not because anyone expects the monster dust storms of the '30s. Farming practices have changed to prevent that, conservation officials say.

The record-setting drought has put the tenacious workers here in a sad and familiar situation: They might be forced to liquidate their farms and to abandon their homeland.

The rain will make the decision. All they can do is pray and wait.

Read the stories of three farmers on Page 16A

Charles Tapp, 65

Some of Charles Tapp's wheat looks better than it should in a drought this bad. Marigold grain seems to reach out for the blue horizon.

Take a closer look, though, and the extent of the drought's damage is evident.

Wheat plants that should sprout in bundles of five to 10 stand alone like hair plugs on a dusty scalp. Inside the heads of the grain, the wheat berries are shriveled up and dried out. The fewer the berries, the less a farmer makes.

Meteorologist J.J. Brost of the National Weather Service in Amarillo, said parts of the Panhandle got an inch of rain last week. The showers were "feast or famine," he said, adding that Boise City got next to nothing.

For a drought this severe, recent rain "is just kind of a drop in the bucket," he said. It could take years to break the cycle.

Soil tests show no moisture 4 inches down into the ground, said Cherrie Brown, district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Cole Twombly, a Panhandle farmer, said he attended his uncle's burial recently and noticed the ground was powder dry 6 feet under.

Perhaps the biggest victory in the fight against the dust storms is the federal Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers like Tapp to take some land out of production. They get paid not to farm it, and prairie grasses keep the soil anchored to the ground, unlike in the Dust Bowl days when this entire county was raked in vain again and again by plows.

Tapp figures he'll harvest 10 to 15 percent of the wheat he normally would, which is like working for a year and not getting paid, he said. Luckily, he said, his wife is an accountant, or he'd have to give up his farm.

Still, downplaying his plight, Tapp says Cimarron County is not as bad off as the deluged Midwest.

"I thank my lucky stars my house hasn't washed up some river," he said. "Here, we can at least sweep the dust out of the house or shovel the dust off the front porch if we have to."

Millard Fowler, 95

Millard Fowler married his wife, Esther, in 1934 — it was a Dust Bowl wedding.

Fowler said he grabbed a barber from across the street to serve as a witness and married his raven-haired city girl in his father's house.

A happy moment in desperate times.

When Fowler went to ask Esther's father for his daughter's hand in marriage, he found the man in his garage with a gun aimed at his head. Fowler did his best to talk his future father-in-law down from suicide, but shortly after the two were married, Esther's father asphyxiated himself.

"He lost everything, and he just couldn't seem to handle it," he said.

They were "poor as church mice" in those days, Fowler said: "We absolutely didn't have anything, really, only each other."

They survived the first two years of marriage living off a wedding present: a dozen hens. When those died in 1936, and the ground was so dry that "we didn't even raise weeds," and the young couple were "starved out" of the area, as Fowler puts it, left to run to Indiana where Fowler had some family and found a night job for almost no money.

They couldn't stay away from the Panhandle long, though, and by the end of the winter they'd borrowed money to buy gas to drive home.



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"I guess you could say we got homesick," he said. "And by that time, it had rained a little in the country and it looked a little better."

Life is hard here, but it's happy. You can't find such extremes in too many places, Fowler said.

So when droughts like this one hit, "you just have to grin it and bear it," he said.

But for how long?

After farming for all of his life (he still drives a red pickup and won't let a soul but him drive his combine, according to friends), Fowler plans to lease his land to someone else this fall.

His wife died last winter, at age 94. She had Alzheimer's and finally just gave up, Fowler said.

Things just haven't been the same since, he said.

But in a way, it fits in his life of cyclical hardship. He won't leave this place until he dies.

Gene Boyd, 81

On Thursday, Gene Boyd took about 30 of his cattle to auction in Texhoma.

Others, like Jim Belford, have sold off entire herds.

With the ground so dry, the cattle don't have anything to eat.

Normally, Boyd's cattle would be just grazing by now, a free operation that relies only on Mother Nature's inputs of sun and water.

But Boyd's rangeland has been grazed down so far that it looks like tanned leather. He has to buy feed for his cattle and dip into reserve stocks of hay.

Each month, that costs him \$4,000 for the feed, he said. The hay, when he needs it, is \$70 per day.

All that money goes to feeding his cattle only half of what they actually need right now, he said.

They're getting skinnier and not producing enough milk. Calf weights in Cimarron County have dropped between 20 and 50 percent, said Stephen Vaughn, a farm loan officer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency.

You can see the ribs on Boyd's calves.

On Wednesday, Boyd rode out to pasture on horseback to choose which of the cattle he would sell. When he approaches without food, the cows line up to holler at him. They bray and squawk. They're hungry, he said.

Unless the grasslands start sprouting with food soon, he said, he'll have to sell them all.

"After you put 81 years in on it, it's pretty hard to sell a bunch of cows," he said. "But if it don't rain in the next month, there won't be cattle left."

There's a chance government aid might be on the way to help. It took nearly a year of drought to convince proud and resilient Panhandle residents to write a letter to Gov. Brad Henry. Last week, Henry asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture for disaster relief for the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Despite that, residents still feel ignored and forgotten by state government. Aid could come in the form of low-interest loans, or tax breaks on lost cattle. But Ann Boyd, Gene Boyd's 76-year-old wife, says none of that will help.

"We don't want a loan," she said. "We'd never be able to pay it back anyway."

What they need, she said, is rain.