*"...With the gales came the dust. Sometimes it was so thick that it completely hid the sun. Visibility ranged from nothing to fifty feet, the former when the eyes were filled with dirt which could not be avoided, even with goggles."*

*"...At other times a cloud is seen to be approaching from a distance of many miles. Already it has the banked appearance of a cumulus cloud, but it is black instead of white, and it hangs low, seeming to hug the earth. Instead of being slow to change its form, it appears to be rolling on itself from the crest downward. As it sweeps onward, the landscape is progressively blotted out. Birds fly in terror before the storm, and only those that are strong of wing may escape. The smaller birds fly until they are exhausted, then fall to the ground, to share the fate of the thousands of jack rabbits which perish from suffocation."*

**The Drought**

The drought hit first in the eastern part of the country in 1930. In 1931, it moved toward the west. By 1934 it had turned the Great Plains into a desert. "If you would like to have your heart broken, just come out here," wrote Ernie Pyle, a roving reporter in Kansas, just north of the Oklahoma border, in June of 1936. "This is the dust-storm country. It is the saddest land I have ever seen."

The Drought alone did not cause the black blizzards. Although dry spells are unavoidable in the region, occurring roughly every 25 years, it was the combination of drought and misuse of the land that led to the incredible devastation of the Dust Bowl years. Originally covered with grasses that held the fine soil in place, the land of the southern plains was plowed by settlers who brought their farming techniques with them when they homesteaded the area. Wheat crops, in high demand during World War I, exhausted the topsoil. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep herds stripped the western plains of their cover. When the drought hit, the land just blew away in the wind.

A letter from an Oklahoma woman, later published in Reader's Digest magazine, recalls June of 1935. "In the dust-covered desolation of our No Man's Land here, wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is almost a hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. 'Visibility' approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor."

1. **What were the two causes of the Dust Bowl?**
2. **How were people misusing the land?**
3. **What would it look like when a dust storm would come through?**

**Mass Exodus from the Plain**

*"The land just blew away; we had to go somewhere."*

*-- Kansas preacher, June, 1936*

When the drought and dust storms showed no signs of letting up, many people abandoned their land. Others would have stayed but were forced out when they lost their land in bank foreclosures. In all, one-quarter of the population left, packing everything they owned into their cars and trucks, and headed west toward California. Although overall three out of four farmers stayed on their land, the mass exodus depleted the population drastically in certain areas. In the rural area outside Boise City, Oklahoma, the population dropped forty percent, with 1,642 small farmers and their families pulling up stakes.

The families did not receive a warm welcome in California. They were told to return as there were troubles in California as well. The Los Angeles police chief went so far as to send 125 policemen to act as bouncers at the state border, turning away "undesirables". Called "the bum brigade," by the press, the LAPD posse was recalled only when the use of city funds for this work was questioned.

Arriving in California, the migrants were faced with a life almost as difficult as the one they had left. Many California farms were corporate-owned. They were larger, and more modernized that those of the southern plains, and the crops were unfamiliar. The rolling fields of wheat were replaced by crops of fruit, nuts and vegetables. Like the Joad family in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath", some 40 percent of migrant farmers wound up in the San Joaquin Valley, picking grapes and cotton. They took up the work of Mexican migrant workers. Life for migrant workers was hard. They were paid by the quantity of fruit and cotton picked, with earnings ranging from seventy-five cents to $1.25 a day. Out of that, they had to pay twenty-five cents a day to rent a tar-paper shack with no floor or plumbing. In larger ranches, they often had to buy their groceries from a high-priced company store.

When migrants reached California and found that most of the farmland was tied up in large corporate farms, many gave up farming. They set up residence near larger cities in shacktowns called Little Oklahomas or Okievilles, on open lots local landowners divided into tiny subplots and sold cheaply, for $5 down and $3 in monthly installments. They built their houses from scavenged scraps, and lived without plumbing and electricity. Polluted water and a lack of trash and waste facilities led to outbreaks of typhoid, malaria, smallpox and tuberculosis.

Over the years, they replaced their shacks with real houses, sending their children to local schools and becoming part of the communities, although they continued to face discrimination when looking for work, and were called "Okies" and "Arkies" by the locals, regardless of where they came from.

1. **What did people do when their houses foreclosed?**
2. **How were they treated when they got to California?**
3. **How were they treated in California? Did they have jobs?**
4. **Where did they live? What was it like there?**