

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

This oral history interview with Olive Kramer of Hugoton, Stevens County, describes her experiences during the dust bowl of the 1930s. She devotes much of her interview to reminiscing about how these dust storms interrupted the daily routines of those living in western Kansas. She also mentions government programs -- such as the cattle purchase program -- that provided relief for citizens suffering from unemployment. During a particularly bad spell, her husband (who also gave an interview) sent her and their children east to Kansas City (it is not clear for how long). Kramer talks also about the emergency hospital set up in the basement of the Methodist Church to care for the residents dealing with dust pneumonia. Copied from Dust Storms as Remembered by Hugoton Citizens.

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When asked to recall the dirt storms I can remember the first big black roller that came in when I was a senior in high school one spring Saturday. The chickens went to roost and we did too. We all harbored up in the house when we saw this big roller coming and of course it passed through the area. It had been black for miles before it arrived here because we accused them of sending it out of North Dakota for us.

And I talked to Wendell Hubbard this morning about it and he said he remembers it very vividly because the basketball team had gone down to Elkhart to play basketball. Daytime games were scheduled then. They got stranded at Rolla because of the storm and because they also had a couple of tires go flat; but they stayed all night at Rolla and came on home on the train to Hugoton the next day.

Thinking further down the route, it must have been at least 10 years before these rollers struck again and by that time I was a housewife. There seemed to be no way that we could keep the dirt out of the houses without caulking all of the windows shut and sometimes we didn't care what it looked like and we caulked around the window frames and around the baseboards. We hung wet sheets up over the doors. Maybe the windows when the dirt was at its worst because there was such a vacuum I suppose on the inside of our places that the dirt just came in every conceivable crack. Even the shingles on the roofs couldn't keep it out.

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

There were people, if their houses were a little older that got so much dirt in their attic that even the lathes and the plastering would fall and just drop bucketsful of that dirt. When you tried to clean after a dirt storm or after your ceiling broke down on you, it was one cleaning. It was sweeping up dustpans and bucketsful of dirt, then going back and cleaning it with a vacuum and you still didn't think it was clean and you'd get out your water and your scrub mop and just scrub it up.

There was a government program. My brother was the first one sent to this county to just buy up the thin cattle and slaughter them. There was a slaughtering program of cattle. I don't know how the horses weathered it. Cattle sold for ten to twenty dollars a head. I think that's about all they paid the farmer for them to slaughter them. We didn't have too many horses and mules in the county at that time because we just had begun to not use so many animals in the field to do the farm work and had turned to the tractors. I don't know about our pets. You know I was just so busy trying to keep it clean for the babies that I, we didn't have dogs or cats so I don't know the trouble they they had with those poor little things; but it was just devastating whenever one of those big blows came through. You just had to get inside and stay inside.

It just had been blowing a series of days when Mrs. Kramer decided, and Mr. Gardner that they'd send we wives and our little ones East

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

to Kansas City and near Kansas City and so all six of us were in the car driving from here to Garden City and the two men were watching both sides of the road trying to keep out of the ditch and looking forward too to see that they didn't run into somebody and when we got to Garden City they put us on the train and headed us East and found out that that was the last train that had gone through for several days. If we hadn't made it at that moment why we'd have been stranded at Garden City with our youngsters instead of getting out of the dirt and going to Kansas City. And Mr. Kramer's brother came back with him so he wouldn't have to make the trip alone and he'd lived out here as a boy and a young man and he wanted to see what it was like so they drove into the place and unlocked the door and here comes the dirt falling down when you open the door and shut it and he immediately got out the sweeper and started to work. You had to take a cover of dust off all your furniture and you had to clean up your kitchen before you could prepare a meal or anything. Mr. Kramer just sat down and said, "Elsie, this will wait." We've had this happen over and over.

It's the second and third generation that own this beautiful farm land now. Their parents staying on and roughing it out in the dirty thirties and it's really hard to explain to them what shape the land got into and had to be rehabilitated and of course that water was here underneath the ground all this time but irrigation hadn't been started or developed. But there wouldn't have been

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

enough water if you'd had sprinklers on every quarter in the county to have washed off that dust or to have kept the land from blowing. It was just because it covered such a great area.

I'm not a student of the weather. This country is always blessed with wind of some kind and we are said to be in the middle of the Westerlies but this was a different type of wind in my thinking than we have today. Of course those of us that have lived here live in the wake of hoping that a drought situation never comes again that opens up this land to this wind as it did.

Some of the old, old timers including my Father said that perhaps we were burdened with this because we broke out too much of this land-- in the times of World War I wasn't it, when we needed the wheat so badly. All of this area was broke out and planted to wheat and raised some marvelous wheat for a few years; but we had too much of this area bare at the same time and we had--we had enough of these dirtstorms and enough wind coming through that there was..... The air was just always full of dirt. There was times when we would go days, days at a time, that the air, it wasn't saturated with the dirt but you could sure see it and you could sure feel it.

My thought about the oil that Mr. Kramer thought was in that soil was that that was our very best soil that was blowing away and it-- our better soil is heavier. Of course we used to make jokes about it. We said, "Today your land blew over on us and tomorrow our land will blow over on you." So we were exchanging topsoil all of the time.

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

She wanted to know how we kept the dust away from our food when we were trying to eat. Well, we were just cleaning the kitchen cabinet and the dishes every time before we started cooking a meal and I guess we just ate those meals fast so that they didn't get covered with dust. You look back on things now and they seem funny but at that time it didn't. We just anticipated the dust anytime and we kept everything covered. You just had a lot of washing to do because you were using all of your tea towels or portions of sheets or sheets dampened and put over things just to catch the dirt that was coming in. Of course, gradually we got our houses pretty well sealed against the dirt. As I said before they didn't look very good. The caulking that we had to put around and people would take strips of sheets and wet it and punch it into any cracks that would let the dirt seep in.

Well, of course the first one I saw, I was a teenager and it rolled in just like a big black cloud. I had never seen a cyclone or a tornado if there is a difference; and we of course didn't know but what we would just be blown away when the thing hit and it passed, rolled on down, of course it had come miles and it rolled on past and we weren't in the thick of it for more than an hour that time. Now later on the blows would last for just hours. They used to say in this country that the wind would go down with the sun but it didn't always do it during the dirt storm days. It might get quieter toward midnight which was comforting because you felt like that you were awake and up in the daytime to do something if you need to be protected.

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

Kramer spoke about the people having dust pneumonia. There was a time that here the Red Cross set up an emergency hospital in the basement of the Methodist Church because we didn't have a hospital any closer than Liberal and cots were provided and patients were taken care of by nurses and doctors through the day just like any hospital would try to. I know I talked to Dr. Frederick one time about a hospital where I was doctoring because it was old and I said that it wasn't as nice as our hospital here at home because it was much newer and he said it doesn't take a building to make a hospital. He said I've seen just as much good medical practice in a tent as I've seen anyplace. Of course he was in the service. And I've thought about that since that emergency hospitalization that we set up in the church took care of those patients just as good as if they'd have been in a building built for that purpose because they needed the nursing and doctoring care at that moment and we were just fortunate that the Red Cross stepped in and did that.

Oh yes, I went down to substitute teach at school and we called the parents and the buses had been sent home a long time but we wouldn't let any child go until the parents came after them because the storm, the visibility was so poor that we didn't want to let a child go out on his own. And I remember one Mother coming and her child wasn't there and we just knew we had turned the child over to someone that was responsible for taking her home and finally checked it that we turned her over to her Father and there that would be the trauma that the

Interview with Mrs. Gus (Olive) Kramer

parents would have getting up there to school to get their children and the first one there getting the youngster and then the other one wondering where the child was and if they got home safely.

If you think keeping a house clean and having it ready to use was something, just think about the school buildings and the churches. They'd work to have those churches clean and then one could come up Saturday night and here we'd have the dust covered over till you'd make footprints down the carpeted aisle if you had a carpet. We just sort of just didn't lean toward carpeting our houses because we wanted a floor covering that you could sweep and clean and mop but there's many a time that the buses didn't go or if they did go within an hour's time they'd maybe turn around and take the children all back home again. We didn't have too many buses. Not nearly as many children riding the buses then as they are now.

We were really thankful for the doctors that we had at that time. They were really country doctors and they came to your home to take care of you. Of course they didn't have a hospital to take you to and they'd stay all night if they had to to see you through it. Our son had the asthma of from two years old on, from about two years old. It would frighten me for Mr. Kramer to be out of town because he knew more about Don's asthma than I did because I was just afraid that with that dirt situation that he was going into pneumonia. I couldn't tell the difference between asthma and a chest congestion and we probably took him to the Doctor more often than we did any of the other boys because we were just afraid that he would get pneumonia.

41