

Transcript of interview with Sherman Brollier

This oral history interview with Sherman Brollier, a lawyer in Hugoton, Stevens County, describes his experiences during the dust storms of the "dirty thirties." He focuses particularly on the ways that these storms disrupted his family's day to day existence. To protect his wife Ruth and his daughter Nadine, who both had breathing problems, Brollier took them to Red River, New Mexico to live during the summer. He would often go down to visit them, driving the 330 miles early in the morning or late at night. Brollier had contemplated moving his family away from Hugoton, and in 1937 he traveled west to see if the depression was as severe in the far West. He discovered that the depression had hit those states just as hard, although they did not have to contend with the blowing dust. So, he and his family remained in Hugoton.

Creator: Brollier, Sherman

Date: 1979

Callnumber: K551.51 Pam v. 1, no. 2

KSHS Identifier: DaRT ID: 210808

Item Identifier: 210808

www.kansasmemory.org/item/210808

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Taped Interview with Sherman Brollier

I'm Sherman Brollier and I live at 907 South Jackson in Hugoton. I was born and raised in Stevens County. I'm almost 72 years old. I've lived here all my life except while I was at KU college, and Washburn Law School and came to Hugoton to practice law in 1932 and retired in 1970.

I very definitely remember. Day after day and year after year starting in 1935. Ruth, my wife and I, were at the picture show in Hugoton on Main Street and about 3:00 o'clock or a little after it looked like smoke in the theater and I'm deathly scared of fire so we took out and went outside and it was completely dark.

And our daughter would have been two years old the next day and we left her with a baby sitter, Ruth Kagarice, at a little house just north of the high school building and we were scared that maybe this girl, babysitter, would panic and start out in that dust storm and get lost or something would happen so started to go home and lights on the car were of no value. So Ruth rolled the right window down in the little Ford coupe that we had and watched the curb till we got home and we just went along about, oh, four five, six miles an hour. When we got home, the baby-sitter, had the baby, our baby in the basement, and rocking her and singing to her and the baby was sound asleep and of course we were very much relieved that everything was alright.

And then those dust storms continued intermittently from, Oh, sometimes they started as early as January and often day after day.

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Some days from the south and when they came from the south the dust was ordinarily red because it was clay from Oklahoma. And the north; when they came from the north the dust was generally real dark, sometimes almost black.

And when the dust storms hit the town, Hugoton, it was impossible to drive or see over, sometimes over ten or twelve feet ahead of you. And people were at a standstill and very often at noon or one o'clock in the afternoon it was impossible to see a light in a store across the street, main street, from one side to the other.

And of course the dirt piled up and drifted all over the farm homes and houses and a lot of people left the country and went to Oregon, Washington and Texas and elsewhere.

I was practicing law at the time on a--in a little office right west of 6th and Main with Clyde Parker and he took a number of pictures although they are not as vivid, or plain, or clear as the pictures that were taken by Clyde Parker and others. Clyde was a lawyer here in Hugoton who died several years ago.

I have several of those pictures, the originals and several of the copies and they show vividly the looks or appearance of the dust storm as they, as it approached Hugoton. It would be impossible, was impossible to take a picture of the dust after it struck the town.

Wind velocity was less than 15 miles per hour and the dust just rolled like a barrel, or the appearance of a barrel, as it came into town. And

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sometimes it was as high as 2,000 feet according to reliable reports by persons who were flying in airplanes. And the dust settled as far east as Topeka, Kansas, when the wind was in the west and as far south as Southern Texas and as far north as the Dakotas.

The storms lasted during various times at various lengths. Sometimes they would last for 24 hours, sometimes only 6 or 8 hours; but ordinarily they would come up in the afternoon and would end before the next morning. End, we'll say, end after midnight. After those dust storms started, Ruth, my wife, and Nadine had breathing problems and I took them to Red River, New Mexico, where they stayed during the summertime. And I came back trying to make a living and would go back out there generally on Friday night or early Saturday morning. If the dust was blowing on Friday night I would go to sleep and wait until the dust settled and set the alarm for one or two o'clock and then drive out to Red River which is 330 miles southwest of Hugoton and get out there in time for some hotcakes and eggs and bacon.

Stayed there each summer for at least four or five years, and finally Nadine was old enough to go to school and we came back and fought it out through medication and diathermy and various treatments and she survived.

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Depends on how severely the dust storms and where you were and what you meant by clean up. To clean up a house it took, oh, probably twice as long as it would ordinarily if the house hadn't been cleaned up for a month or two at the present time. And it was impossible to clean up some of the areas around farm buildings because the dust piled would be anywhere from one to six or eight feet deep, wherever. It would be just like the sand and dust would drift in there and pile up just like snow would drift. The same effect, the same height if the wind and dust storm stayed in the same direction long enough and we have several pictures available. I think some are at the library, showing piles of dust maybe ten, fifteen, twenty feet high.

Many of the farm tractors and machinery was completely destroyed by being completely covered up with dust and then when it rained the dust of course naturally got wet and caused the machinery to rust. And also the dust got into the motors of the machinery and when it was started it was impossible to eliminate all the dust and the friction from that abrasive dust. Ruined several tractor motors, combine motors, and other motors.

Well, you didn't do much of anything except just hope it quit. That's about all; and maybe cook up an old rooster and some noodles and get some soup and eat.

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And the radio wasn't very good at that time because there was too much static electricity to get good reception; and anyhow radios in 1934 were not as efficient as they are at the present time. There wasn't any TV. It wasn't even in town. It wasn't in town until several years later as far as that's concerned. So I don't know, there wasn't much to do except just read and wait and hope.

Well, the main reason, didn't have enough money to move on. That was the main reason. Dr. Konoyer and I took a two weeks trip out through Wyoming and Idaho and Washington and Oregon and Utah in 1937 and we found that the depression out there was just as severe as the lack of employment and income was here in Hugoton. While they didn't have dust storms there wasn't any opportunity or any real advantage to moving out there, that we could find at least. Nobody was working unless they had previously established themselves. There were a lot of people on relief at that time. More on relief out there than there were in Stevens County.

Well, probably the first storm, dust storm was about as severe as any of them. It was total darkness and that's about as dark as you can get. And some of the others were not quite that dark. You could sometimes see a light across the street in the middle of the day.

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Well, the wind didn't do so much damage as the dirt did damage by settling in places where it wasn't wanted. And gardens filled up if they had a fence around the gardens or something to break the wind like you would a snow fence, then the dust would settle in there and it was difficult, if not impossible to cultivate because it was just like cement as far as thickness was concerned. It wasn't cement-like. It didn't mold into a permanent form but it was too much silt to enable you to cultivate it and farm it and plant anything and make it grow. You had to clean that out or start a garden somewhere else. And on the farms the main damage occurred around places where there were windbreaks, barns or houses, anything that would catch the dust. Just the same as those buildings or obstacles would catch snow in the wintertime. And it did a lot of damage to cars and trucks and tractors and then caused rust on other machinery.

It is impossible to explain vividly what a dust storm looks like after it's hit for the simple reason that there was no way that you could take a picture of it after it struck. You could see it coming at you just like a bullet or an arrow or something. But after it hit it was too late to do anything to picture it so you could have a real physical, visual thing to look at in the future.

We lived at that time on Monroe Street in Hugoton. We had a large cottonwood tree just south of the living room window. Probably about 10 to 15 feet, is that right? 10 or 15 feet, maybe 20, but in the middle of the day after one dust storm hit, even though the sun was shining,

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it would not penetrate the dust and you could see the tree trunk in some cases and very often it was impossible to see the limbs although you could visualize the trunk of the tree in the middle of the afternoon.

There is an authentic report that some people from Moscow were going home when one of those dust storms hit and they stopped their car and they heard a loud blasting sound and they looked up and saw a light to their left going fairly fast, 15 or 20 miles an hour. And they thought that the world had come to an end sure enough. And it was the Santa Fe train coming to Hugoton, and they were blowing the whistles so that anybody at a crossing would know that if they were there, to get off the crossing to keep from getting hit; because they couldn't, people couldn't see to drive and that whistle was blowing and the light was sufficiently bright for people on the Highway, U. S. 56 to see the light from the road, and only they couldn't drive. The train could drive because it had a track to stay on.

Well, there were a few of them died. Several of them were taken to Dodge City to the hospital; and I think several of them were hospitalized and given medical treatment for maybe two or three, maybe four weeks.