The drouth of '34: a farm woman's account

In this magazine article, Mary McKinney relates her experiences during the drought of the 1930s. Her reminiscence includes details about how farm families conserved water and kept cool during the blazing summer months, and also how they responded to relief efforts and New Deal programs. The article can be found in Kansas Magazine (1935), 22-24.

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Drought 1934

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The Drouth of '34

A Farm Woman's Account

By MARY FRANCES McKINNEY

GRANDPA could always quiet the children by telling them the story of '74. How they had been visiting at Uncle Jep's when he was but a lad. As they neared home a black cloud appeared in the sky. His father said, "Mother they're here." The grasshoppers had arrived. They devoured every green thing. It was an enthralling tale.

With the drouth of 1934 down in history we shall have something to tell our grandchildren. A story which we hope may quiet them, when their mother's nerves are on edge and all is confusion, as the tale of the grasshoppers stilled us.

The winter of '33 was a dry one. Dry and mild. Pastures were late. Why, we had to keep the cows in the feed lots an extra thirty days—May 20 I think it was when we turned out to pasture. Picking was mighty short even then. Did you ever watch an old white-face cow when first she is turned on grass in the spring? She eats and walks always hoping the grass may be juicier over the hill. Nearly everybody had some water in the ponds when they turned out but old timers said they had never seen water much scarcer.

Harvest was early. Oats was short and light but wheat made thirty bushels of A 1 quality. Combines dotted the valley everywhere. Threshing and combining was all over by the Fourth of July. Sorgo didn't appear to do well. The hired man began the second cultivating and decided he was doing more harm than good. But do you know that sorgo stayed green all summer. One hundred days the thermometer registered 100 degrees and more and no rain. When the rains did come that sorgo shot up three times as high and headed out. The seeds did not ripen before frost but we had almost as much roughage as the year before.

Corn burned and dried in tassel stage. If a farmer had no silo to put this corn in he erected a temporary one of snow fencing or baled hay or bundles. We knew we dare not let that fodder get wet or it would disappear into thin air. Those temporary silos were sights to behold. Some, as the leaning tower of Pisa, were propped up with poles. If there was a nearby tree the silo was tied to this. Others had a big bulge around the middle as if they needed a corset. But they all conserved feed that would have spoiled otherwise. Eighty acres of corn went into one silo when in an ordinary year eight or twelve acres would have filled it easily.

Everyone on the upland began hauling water in June. Three miles to the river, four miles to Eagle creek. You had to start early or several teams would be there ahead of you. Folks weren't as downhearted as you might think. Always John Perkins had some yarn to tell and those waiting in line spelled you as you dipped the water. Do you know they dipped one pool on Eagle creek dry? Ordinary times it was a good swimming hole with gravel bottom but we dipped her dry. Soon after the water situation really became serious the governor sent in pumps loaned by oil companies. A relief worker was furnished to run the pump and engine. If you have never dipped water until your back ached and it seemed you could not lift another drop you cannot fully appreciate those pumps. All we had to do was drive up on the

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bank and a long hose put the water right in the barrels. Children could haul water after that.

A great array of wagons formed the procession. Some had a large tank wagon. More often it was a lumber wagon with eight barrels of all kinds and descriptions resurrected where'er they might be found. The barrels were covered with gunny sacks to keep the water from splashing out.

Tanks were set close to the gates in the pastures and how eagerly cattle awaited the coming of that wagon every day. The bosses of the herd led the procession and took their time about drinking their fill. I used to wonder if the timid heifers and calves ever really got all they wanted. They did only when there was plenty left after the others were satisfied.

There is terrible monotony about any drouth. Day after day is the same. The sun comes up hot. There are no cool mornings. Sky is as pretty a blue as you would want and always a few lazy white clouds float around. You get so mad at those clouds you forget how pretty they are. What you want to see is some real thunderheads. The stars at night twinkle with a bold brassy glare—not friendly-like as usual. The 1934 drouth was just like all others in these respects. One thing was different. One afternoon the wind from the south was hot. About 4 o'clock it was hotter and faster. Till about 3 o'clock the next morning that wind roared. Have you ever been in a prairie fire? Well this wind felt as though it was coming off a blazing prairie. It burned our faces. There was no escaping it. Old timers said they had never experienced anything like it.

Town folks suffered of course. In Emporia the water situation was so serious they asked folks to cut out a few baths. They tried to get some ahead for Saturday night. When you haven't a drop of water on the farm except that which you haul it's remarkable how far a quart of water can go. Now a quart of water in the wash basin at the end of a busy day takes off a heap of grime and you sleep better.

Talk about sleeping. That's where we did have it over the town folks. We moved out doors. On every farm you passed you were apt to see bed springs on the front porch or side yard. Children slept on comforts on the ground but nearly always the old folks slept on springs. You might see a bed on a hayrack which was pretty good idea. It was up off the ground and ants and varmints weren't so apt to disturb you. We suffered mighty few hot nights. You might be warm when you went to bed but you pulled cover before dawn.

Katydids sang as lustily as they do ordinary years. Bats darted to and fro and you wondered if they would contact you the next time they passed. Father explained to the children that they were catching insects as they flashed back and forth. Screech owls visited the bird bath every night after we quieted down. They billed and cooed and waded but I never did hear one screech. The dog slept by us every night. The children's tame mallards camped under the couch. Every morning about an hour before daybreak they set out Indian file to explore. Always their chatter wakened father. Since they were the children's special wards they were tolerated throughout that long hot summer.

Women folks got off mighty easy during the drouth. Early gardens dried up in June. That meant there was no hoeing or canning. Chickens early learned to care for themselves. We never did have to round them up before a shower or gather up half drowned ones and revive them in the oven. Harvest is never much any more and it was too hot for company. Sleeping out meant there was not much bed making. Water being scarce laundry was reduced to a minimum. None of the regular summer chores. One neighbor I remember told me that she had never

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had such an easy time since she was a bride.

Speaking of brides, the drouth brought a whole procession of them. Why for five Sundays in succession we went to showers. It was a hustle to get the chicken fried and dinner packed before Sunday school. The children somehow always helped more eagerly on those days. We didn't have afternoon showers for our girls in the neighborhood. It was an all day affair. The whole family went. Right after dinner we all crowded round to watch the groom unwrap a clothes basket filled with presents. The bride always read the names and held up the gifts. Those clothes baskets were always heaped with good wishes—gem pans, mixing bowls, tea towels, glass dishes and such things. Simple gifts all of them, but the true spirit of giving and receiving was there. The groom never failed to get a pair of booties or rattle. We always expected such a package and always tittered when it was displayed.

If the grandchildren are not asleep or bored by this time we may teach them their letters. A stands for animal no longer. AAA stands for Agricultural Adjustment Administration. CCC for Civilian Conservation Corps. Children just as well learn such words in infancy. Or if such alphabetical set-ups have passed out of existence by the time of our grandchildren we will dig up some of the relics—children are always interested in relics.

Nineteen thirty-four was the first full year under the AAA. All the farmers were skittish of contracts to reduce acreage of wheat and corn and number of hogs. They were ready to tar and feather Alexander Legge some years before when he came out and suggested that they plow up part of their wheat. But by 1934 most of us had our backs to the wall. Besides, the New Deal offered a little cash compensation. And brother that helped. There were three papers we had to sign; one white, one yellow, and one orange. A farmer just hates to sign his name to something that binds him. The contracts were voluntary and some individuals did not sign. When that drouth came along and there wasn't 100 bushels of corn picked in the whole county those farmers were mighty glad they had signed up and had a little something coming in. They didn't understand and they kept the money only long enough to hand over to some of their creditors. A little here and a little there. It just seemed like the Lord was on the side of the Democrats. Republicans and Democrats agreed that the surplus should be wiped out. The surplus existed all through the Hoover administration but the Lord didn't seem to help him. With one stroke in 1934 He wiped out the entire surplus.

The Sunday before Labor day came rain—glorious rain. Children revelled in it and played in it with the calves and colts. A rainbow appeared in the sky as far to the northeast as I ever saw—a complete arc from horizon to horizon. We bowed our heads as we thought of that promise to Noah long ago—"I do set my bow in the cloud and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."