

**P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO**  
This photo shows a dust storm approaching the region. Such storms were common threats during the harshest days of the so-called Dirty Thirties. (From the book "Yankton: The Way It Was!" by Bob Karolevitz)

# A Dark Age: Yankton And The 'Dirty Thirties'

**BY KATIE GLEICH**  
The Press & Dakotan

Ask any South Dakotan who is old enough to remember life during the 1930s, and they will invariably close their eyes, think for a minute, then tell you: "We call them the good old days, but times were hard."

Hard, as in earth hard from lack of rain, the hard backs of the grasshoppers, and hard luck.

However, determination and the pioneer spirit was just as prevalent as the motes of dust collecting on windowsills.

While most media attention was given to states further south—such as Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas—South Dakota was not immune to the drought and dust storms that characterize the era. High temperatures and little rainfall left many farmers in Yankton and the surrounding counties with little or no viable crops, which in turn meant no feed for hogs or cattle, and, of course, no income.

When it would rain, there was usually hail and wind accompanying it, damaging what crops had managed to survive, as well as outbuildings on farm properties. There were also plagues of grasshoppers chomping their way through what the sun and the hail didn't get.

A July 13, 1933, headline in the *Press and Dakotan* read: "Failure Of Small Grain Worst In State's

History, Federal Survey Indicates." According to the article, high temperatures, low precipitation and infestations of grasshoppers made for the worst June in South Dakota's agricultural history. While corn fared the best, wheat, oat, barley, potato and rye production averaged about 20 percent of normal numbers.

What stands out most in the minds of those who survived the 1930s, however, are the dust storms. Interviews with several residents of Avera Yankton Care Center yielded vivid memories of the storms.

Clara Vavra, who grew up in Tripp, recalled, "There was so much dust in everything. It was so hard to do anything, because you would go and you'd clean the windowsills and stuff like that in the house and everything, and in a few minutes or an hour, it was so bad, it didn't help at all. One day it got so bad, the clouds were just black, and it was so still—everyone thought there was going to be a tornado. It was a dust storm on the way."

Fern Schnider, who lived 3 1/2 miles west of Irene, remembered, "I was about 12 years old, and I remember one afternoon, a dust storm came up about 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was so dark you couldn't see across the room. We had to light all our lamps, it was that thick with dust."

Mildred Holec clearly remem-

**"... I remember one afternoon, a dust storm came up about 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was so dark you couldn't see across the room. We had to light all our lamps, it was that thick with dust."**

**FERN SCHNIDER**



**PHOTO: SOUTH DAKOTA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
The disastrous, terrifying 1930s Dust Bowl, the effects of which were felt throughout the Great Plains, had a powerful impact on land and people. This photo was taken in south-central South Dakota and reflects the devastation of the drought, aggravated by land-use practices that offered no protection for the soil.



**PHOTO: DAKOTA TERRITORIAL MUSEUM**  
Thousands of people flocked to Gurney's Pancake Days, a free all-you-can-eat pancake and sausage feast held during the company's fall festival. Besides helping people out with its free feeds, Gurney's was a steady employer during the Great Depression.

bered a series of dust storms while growing up 12 miles south of Dante. "The mornings would start real nice—you know, sunny; then probably around 10 o'clock it started getting darker and darker. You'd look up at the sky and the sun was getting clouded up with dust. Then you knew a dust storm was coming."

Holec continued, "One time it hit about noon, and the chickens were going home to roost because it was so dark. But they couldn't get to the chicken house because the dust would fill their eyes and they couldn't see. I remember my dad and I had to pick them up, and we'd have to clean their eyes and put them in the hen house."

Yankton wasn't immune to the

dust storms. In describing one particularly terrible storm, an article in the Nov. 13, 1933, issue of the *Press and Dakotan* stated: "During the peak of the storm, day was literally turned into night, the sun being completely obscured and darkness settling over the entire landscape. ... Cars were driven with headlights on, which showed as through a dense fog, and street lights were turned on."

"A peculiar feature of the phenomenon was the appearance of a bright blue halo at the top where the sun was attempting to shine through. The whole scene was weird and eerie, and even a bit disturbing for many people. The wind reached a velocity of be-

tween 40 and 50 miles an hour here during the height of the storm.

"Housewives were appalled at the way fine dust drifted and settled in to cover everything, driving through even the most closely weather-stripped windows."

Holec related another tragic story all too common for the era:

"It wasn't just one year, it was year after year it seemed like. I can't remember how many years it lasted," she said. "But I do remember in 1934—that was the driest year. The grain got about four or five inches high, and it would start drying up. There was no hay, there was no grain for the cattle to eat that winter, except the Russian thistle. That flourished, so my dad

and my brothers cut the Russian thistle and stacked them. I remember Dad would put down a layer of thistle, then a layer of salt, and stack it so the cattle would have something to eat during the winter. That's all my dad had for feed for the cattle. The cattle liked it, but it just kept them alive. The milk cows wouldn't give any milk. And then in the spring of '35, after eating that Russian thistle all winter long, the cows went out into the pasture and ate that fresh green grass; it was too rich for them and they died. My dad lost sixty head of his nicest cattle.

"The saddest part of it was," Holec continued, "my two sisters were married and lived a little north of Dante, and that was only 12 miles away. They had rains where they could raise hay and sorghum for their cattle. They didn't dry up like we did."

Schnider added, "Times were hard—you'd just hope and pray that you'd get a crop."

When farmers did get a crop, they also had to pray it would make it to harvest.

"Oh, the grasshoppers," Schnider said. "There were a lot of grasshoppers. My mother would hang our clothes out on the line, and she would watch them until the grasshoppers came, and then she'd bring them in and hang them around the doors and tables to finish drying. ... The grasshoppers would eat most anything."

Vavra remembered, "The grasshoppers were so bad, they'd fly and they'd sit on you, and no matter what you'd do, they'd

**DUST BOWL | PAGE 18B**

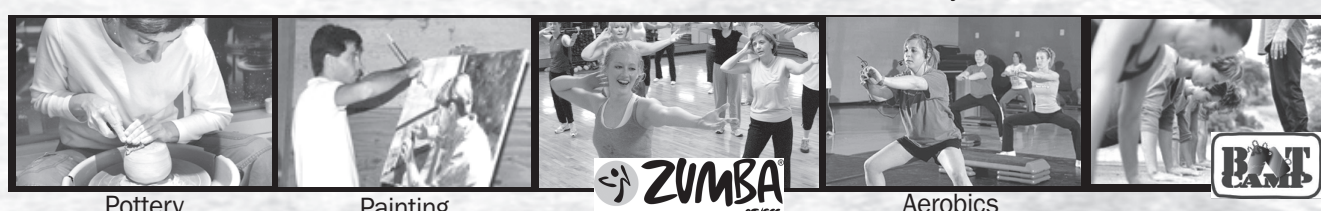
# NFAA EASTON YANKTON ARCHERY COMPLEX

## Archery.... And So Much More

**We offer many opportunities for all age groups!**

- Trained Coaches
- Fun Atmosphere
- State-of-the-Art Facilities
- Classrooms Available for Rent

- **Special Events & Gatherings, such as...**
- Archery-themed Birthday Parties
- Group Pottery Classes
- Zumba classes for ages 4 to 104!!



800 Archery Lane • Yankton, SD • 605-260-9282