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MEMORIES OF A DUSTER

by *Ken Robertson*

The last good rain had come in September when an east wind brought turbulent gray clouds and a cold downpour that began with driving torrents and ended in a steady drizzle lasting until nightfall. No snow fell the entire winter. In January, a Norther brought light showers of sleet that left tiny dimples in the sandy soil of the dry fields when the pellets melted.

In February, the wind blew cold from the north and then warm from the south with a hint of spring, alternating as if it were running a potato race—stirring the dust and carrying soil from open fields into their fence rows, piling hummocks caught by the skunk brush, wild currant bushes, and sunflower stalks that lined the roadsides. By March, the topsoil was as dry as talcum powder, and the winter wheat had hardly grown beyond the initial spike or two of its sprout.

On a Sunday, the wind began to blow from the west with fierce gusts that raised clouds of powdery soil from the dry fields into the air. The following day, high atmospheric dust arrived from the vacant plains of the Texas Panhandle, blotting out the sun until it was as dull as a tan moon you could look at directly without blinking. The wind blew steadily, rolling the dust high into the air and slithering the heavier grains of soil across the land, penetrating clothing, houses, barns, and cars, finding every crack and crevice and leaving a dun-colored layer of gritty dust on bed and floor and table and stove.

On Tuesday I hurried home from school in the gusts of the storm, a mile and a half across dusty fields before I reached the protection of the blackjack oak trees of our wooded pasture. My eyes were reddened by the grit and ringed with muddy brown circles where eye water had mixed with dirt. Mother looked at my face and handed me the water bucket to fill at the windmill outside the kitchen door.

"Wash up," she ordered. "I'll get you a clean towel."

She had stuffed damp cloths in the cracks around the kitchen's poorly fitted windows in a vain attempt to keep out the pervasive dust and was baking a guinea hen

with gravy and great lumps of dressing that made the dark, stringy meat more appetizing. In a covered dish in the closed oven, the meal was safely protected from the dust.

The storm had brought Harley Alcorn, a horse trader from Fort Cobb, who stopped at our house every year or so for a free meal as he traveled about like a gypsy, driving a team pulling a light wagon and trailing two or three horses behind. Pointing skyward, he shouted to Father over the noise of the wind, "Say, my friend, there's a farm up there if you've got a place to put it."

Father had been raised in Kentucky, and he took pride in his ability to judge horses. He liked to brag of the times he skinned Alcorn in a trade. Mother was sceptical of Father's horse-trading prowess and considered Alcorn a windy fool, but she always cooked a good meal and arranged a place for him to sleep when the old trader happened by.

At the table, Alcorn told about a summer when, as a young man working with a threshing crew, he drove his team and hayrack all the way to Nebraska. "Nebrasky," he pronounced it. The sound of the word fascinated my five-year-old brother, Lester, who slid from his chair and ran behind us chanting "Nebrasky, Nebrasky, Nebrasky," until Mother, embarrassed by his mockery, caught his arm and hushed him by threatening to withhold his dessert. Lester had watched as she made the lemon meringue pie flavored with extract bought from the Rawleigh salesman and topped with fresh egg whites whipped up under the protection of a dampened cloth.

During the night, the wind abated and the sky cleared. Mother rose before daylight, swept the dust from the floors, and cleaned the table, chairs, and stove before cooking breakfast. But the dry smell of dust remained throughout the house and didn't entirely disappear until April's rains brought an end to the dust storms and Mother boiled the bed covers and curtains spotless during spring house cleaning. □

KEN ROBERTSON of Decatur, Illinois, spent his formative years in Custer County near Fay.