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Lisa Southerland

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# DUSTBOWL BALLADEER: WOODY GUTHRIE

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by *Lisa Southerland*

The Dustbowl Days of the 1930's will forever be an invisible scar to those who experienced them as will the sense of hopelessness and despair that resulted from the twin disaster of that decade, the Great Depression. Many are the stories of the big black cloud of dust that wiped out the sun followed by the blazing, burning sun. Many are the memories of the mortgage collector or the tractor man pushing the already desperately poor horse-and-plow tenant farmers from their dry, barren plots of ground. Many are the government photographs that recorded visual images of the haunting dustbowl story—dirty children, haggard young women, and powerless men in the prime of their lives, farm and homesteads under a blanket of dust, withered crops, and loaded-down jalopies headed west. And just as poignant and descriptive are the lyrics and melodies of Woody Guthrie. Born the summer of 1912 in Okemah, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was named in honor of the man the Democrats had just nominated for President. Years later, as an Oklahoma native, Guthrie verbally expressed the contradictory feelings of hopelessness and optimism among those affected most by the dust and depression: the tenant farmers, their wives, and children of the Western Plains—the Dustbowl.

Woody Guthrie was early and well acquainted with the despair and hopelessness of tenant farming in Oklahoma. Long before the big cloud rolled in across the prairies in the mid-1930's, Woody's grandfather had been a dirt farmer in Kansas; his father, Charley, was a hard-drinking two-bit politician and land speculator in Oklahoma. The Guthrie family, like many other families in Oklahoma in the early 1900's, struggled consistently to put food on the table. The cycle of boom and bust in Oklahoma, evident since statehood, has affected the population throughout state history; the Guthrie family was no exception.

As a youngster, Woody became known as an "alley rat," a loner, and a scavenger collecting junk while playing a harmonica. He dropped out of school and supported himself by song-and-dance routines performed for a meal. A series of family tragedies sent Woody out on his own. At 17 he hit the road "nibbling at the edge of hobo culture."

By 1935, after four summers of drought, a patina of dust hung in the air across the Plains forcing housewives to keep pots covered on the stove while cooking and preventing the proper setting of a table; plates and cups were set bottom side up to avoid being filled with the fine dust that sifted in through the cracks and crannies of farmhouses. Dust pneumonia became a regional health hazard. Hunger and exhaustion were daily occurrences. Those who could and those who were forced to loaded up and moved west in hopes of finding work in California. To the rest of the nation, Sooners became Okies, and Okies encompassed the whole retinue of those Arkansans, Texans, and Kansans, who were dusted out, mortgaged out, and pushed off the land. Most preferred to blame the dust, accepting it as a divine judgment for the waywardness, slothfulness, and lack of tenacity in the tenant farmers. Few would seek to address causes outside of natural disaster or divine discipline. One of the few was Woody Guthrie.

Like John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Guthrie provided through his *Dustbowl Ballads* a personal, political, and social view of the plight of the victims of the economically induced environmental disaster. When the ballads were recorded in May 1940, the dust had settled, but the story hadn't ended. The exploitation of people and land themes are strong in the *Dustbowl Ballads* and reflect the human tragedy of the disaster. They include "Dustbowl Refugee," "Talking Dustbowl," "I Ain't Got No Home," "Do Re Mi" (not a reference to the quaint ditty

sung by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*—instead, a reference to the lack of money: if you don't have the do mi, Buddy, you're out of here), "So Long; It's Been Good to Know You," "Dust Can't Kill Me," and others. The songs were thought-provoking and made the listener uncomfortable as they mirrored the lives of the unfortunate Dustbowlers who migrated to California by the thousands when the cloud settled in over their farms. It wasn't long before the ballads were recognized as "a landmark, one of the most influential American recordings of the twentieth century" (Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: a Life*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1980, p. 164). Not only did the ballads describe the events but also the words and simple, defiant optimism projected through the images in the songs of a dusty little man wandering around the country just ahead of the cloud, the tax collector, the wife and kids—the central "mythology of the generation of radicals coming of age."

The showcase for the ballads was a folk music program on prime-time network radio. Dramatizations of homefolks' reactions to the Great Dust Storm of 1935 were complete with sound effects and Woody's very southwestern, dusty, natural singing.

In "Dustbowl Refugees," written in 1937, Guthrie describes those fleeing from the oppressive dust as homeless, moving from crop to crop like "whirlwinds in the desert." He often introduced the song by saying, "You know, there are different kinds of refugees. There are people who are forced to take refuge under a railroad bridge because they ain't got no place else to go, and then there are those who take refuge in public office..." He then wrote "Dust Pneumonia Blues," which ended with a popular Dustbowl joke about a girl who had fainted in the rain and into whose face a bucket of sand was thrown in order to bring her back again. Later, he wrote "Dust Can't Kill Me," which captured the defiant pride and anguish of the refugees:

That old dust storm killed my baby,  
But it won't kill me, Lord.  
No, it won't kill me.

Some of his songs were parodies of the politicians' response to the refugees, while others mocked the refugees themselves who believed that the dust was a sure sign the world was at an end, divine judgment—their lot. When the clouds rolled over the churchhouses, Woody poked fun at

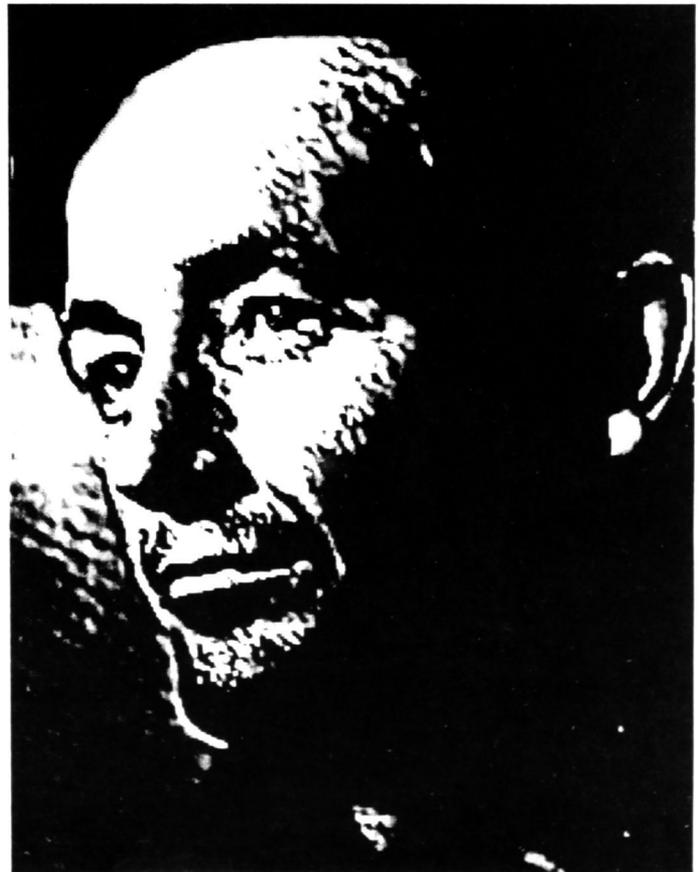
the preacher who folded his specs, put down his text, and took up a collection.

The "Dusty Old Dust" song was a fairly traditional rendering of the events of the Great Dust Storm of April 1935, while the chorus has become a standard of American folk music:

So long, it's been good to know you  
So long, it's been good to know you  
So long, it's been good to know you  
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home  
And I've got to be drifting along...

Drifting is what Woody did, from Oklahoma to Texas to California and back—to New York and California and back—always Oklahoma in the middle. For Woody possessed a free and restless spirit, a defiant optimism in the face of tragedy, despair, and disease; and that was his way of beating the Dustbowl Blues.□

*LISA SOUTHERLAND* of Hobart is a SOSU senior in Social Science Education. She, her husband, and their four children live on a farm where they produce alfalfa, hay, and wheat, and raise cattle and Angora goats.



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