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An anniversary approaches

Black Sunday, April 14, 1935

By Donita Lucas Shields

With all the good rains during the past weeks, it is unlikely there will be a repeat performance of Black Sunday, April 14, 1935. Yet it might be interesting to reminisce about the nation's largest Black Duster that struck the Midwest exactly fifty years ago this coming Sunday.

Back in those days there were no sophisticated nerve centers or sky-scanning satellites for forecasting inclement weather. However, there was a "Weather Bureau" that must be commended for being on its toes. Early that memorable Sunday morning, the National Weather Service put out calls from Bismarck, North Dakota, that winds were picking up and local dust was swirling on the ground and in the air.

By 10:00 a.m., the front began moving out of the Dakotas. Before noon, winds in Nebraska were recorded at 100 mph speeds. Sometime between noon and 1:00 p.m., the Black Duster formed along the Kansas-Nebraska line and quickly spread from Denver to Southwestern Iowa.

Black Sunday was officially off and roaring. Cyclonic winds hurled Dakota dust into Nebraska and then surged southward to combine it with Kansas topsoil. Kansas became the epicenter of the devastating turbulence. Most people thought that the dust cloud seemed to be coming from the northeast, but actually the roller continued in a southerly direction.

Killer winds picked up loose, dry soil from bare fields and hurled it 20,000 feet into the air where it boiled amidst the 100-plus mph winds. At the same time the roller churned ground soil in a

cylindrical manner which most local observers described as a "sidewinder" or a "horizontal tornado."

The Black Sunday roller broke all records as it created dust blackouts throughout Kansas, Eastern Colorado, Oklahoma, Eastern New Mexico, Texas, Western Arkansas, Missouri, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and the lower half of Iowa. All in all, this "horizontal tornado" spread itself into a 1,000-mile width and traveled some 1,500 miles before blowing itself out and disintegrating in the Gulf of Mexico.

Reporters who came on the scene to collect stories and do photography work encountered problems they hadn't expected. When they were ready to leave Western Oklahoma, the two--Bob Geiger and H. G. Eisenhard--discovered that their car wouldn't start because of the static electricity caused by the duster. This was a common auto ailment in those days unless the owner tied a length of chain to the rear axle of the vehicle. Geiger and Eisenhard hired Asa Pitzer, a local farmer, to take them back to Denver. Pitzer gladly accepted their \$50 offer to get them back home with their scoop.

That night the three men successfully fought their way through the howling winds and blinding, boiling dust to the Mile High City. Eisenhard is still remembered for his uncanny photography of Black Sunday. Geiger became famous for his coinage of the term "Dust Bowl," which became popular immediately to describe a part of the nation where nothing seemed to be going right. (first appeared in the April 12, 1985 edition of the SENTINEL LEADER). ❧