Black Sunday: The Day the Dust Bowl Got Its Name

Sample script written for portfolio purposes; not client work.

Author: KW Studios
Format: YouTube documentary narration
Estimated runtime: about 4 min 16 sec (641 narration words at 150 wpm)

Hook (0:00–0:15)

> [B-ROLL: Archival photo of the Black Sunday dust wall approaching Spearman, Texas, April 14, 1935 (National Archives / NOAA Photo Library). Slow push-in.]

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: April 14, 1935 — The Southern Plains]

It was a warm, sunny Sunday afternoon on the High Plains. Then a black wall rolled in from the north, and daylight vanished. People said it was darker than the darkest night. Some could not see their own hands in front of their faces.

Setup

> [B-ROLL: FSA / Library of Congress photos of drifted sand against fences, abandoned farmsteads, and bare, plowed fields.]

To understand that day, you have to go back a few years. During and after World War I, farmers on the southern Plains plowed up millions of acres of native grass to grow wheat. Those grass roots had held the soil in place.

Then, in the early 1930s, a severe drought set in. The bare topsoil dried out, and the wind began to carry it away. People had a lot of names for these storms: dusters, dirt storms, black blizzards.

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: “Black blizzards”]

It came on top of the Great Depression. Dust piled up in drifts, like snow, against fences, barns, and houses. Crops failed.

By the spring of 1935, the storms were relentless. A weather observer in Lubbock, Texas, recorded 23 days of sand and dust storms that April.

Rising tension

> [B-ROLL: NWS Norman reconstructed weather map of April 13, 1935. Then archival photos of the storm approaching Liberal and Rolla, Kansas (National Archives).]

April 14th, 1935, was Palm Sunday. In many places, the afternoon brought some of the warmest temperatures of the month.

But a mass of cold air was pushing down from the north. And it was dragging a wall of dust with it.

Around 4 p.m., the dust hit Beaver, in the Oklahoma Panhandle. It reached Boise City around 5:15. In the Panhandles, winds reached 60 miles an hour, and temperatures dropped fast. The dust carried so much static electricity that, by several accounts, it disrupted car ignition systems.

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: Beaver, OK ~4:00 p.m. → Boise City, OK ~5:15 p.m. → Amarillo, TX 7:20 p.m.]

On a road outside Boise City, an Associated Press reporter named Robert E. Geiger and a photographer were caught in it. They had to wait two hours before they could get back to town.

Turning point

> [B-ROLL: NOAA Photo Library "Garden City" two-photo sequence: street before the storm, then the same street about 15 minutes later in near darkness.]

At 7:20 that evening, the storm reached Amarillo, Texas. The Amarillo Daily News carried the Associated Press report: "The billowing black cloud struck Amarillo at 7:20 o'clock and visibility was zero for 12 minutes."

In Liberal, Kansas, the local paper wrote that when the storm struck, "it was impossible to see one's hand before his face even two inches away."

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: "...impossible to see one's hand before his face even two inches away." — Liberal News, April 15, 1935]

In Pampa, Texas, a singer-songwriter named Woody Guthrie lived through the storm. He later wrote a song that many tie to that day: "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh."

The next day, Associated Press stories credited to Geiger appeared in newspapers, including in Lubbock, Texas, and Washington, D.C. They described the region with two words: "dust bowl." Those stories are generally credited as the first use of the phrase. It stuck. Soon it named both a place and an era.

Resolution

> [B-ROLL: NRCS/USDA historical photos of Hugh Hammond Bennett; contour-plowed fields; rows of young shelterbelt trees.]

Washington was already paying attention. That spring, as Congress weighed a bill on soil conservation, dust storms from the Plains drifted over the capital itself. Hugh Hammond Bennett, a longtime government soil expert, used the moment to press his case.

On April 27th, 1935, less than two weeks after Black Sunday, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Soil Conservation Act. It created the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent agency in the Department of Agriculture, with Bennett as its first chief.

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: April 27, 1935 — Soil Conservation Service created]

The government pushed methods like contour plowing, crop rotation, and cover crops. Crews planted shelterbelts of trees to break the wind.

Recovery was slow. By 1940, an estimated 2.5 million people had left the Plains states. But by the early 1940s, the great dust storms had largely ended, and much of the land had recovered.

In 1994, the Soil Conservation Service got a new name: the Natural Resources Conservation Service. It still works with farmers today.

Outro/CTA

> [B-ROLL: Library of Congress FSA photo by Arthur Rothstein, “Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm,” Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936 (label clearly as 1936, not Black Sunday). Fade to black.]

Black Sunday lasted only a few hours. But it gave a disaster its name, and it helped convince a nation that soil is something you have to protect.

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SOURCES

1. National Weather Service, Norman, OK, “The Black Sunday Dust Storm of April 14, 1935.” https://www.weather.gov/oun/events-19350414

2. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, “NRCS History” (brief history). https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/history/brief-history-nrcs

3. USDA NRCS, “Hugh Hammond Bennett Biography.” https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/history/brief-history-nrcs/hugh-hammond-bennett-biography

4. Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Dust Bowl.” https://www.britannica.com/place/Dust-Bowl

5. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs, Arthur Rothstein, “Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma.” https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017760335/