

UNST 124g fall 2011

high and dry

1 assignment

We could devote an entire term to learning about drought, the relationship between markets and the farm economy, or any of the many themes that come together in *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan. Here, you are asked to investigate the region in which the most intense part of the 1930s Dust Bowl unfolded, the southern high plains of North America. Each mentor section is asked to select, as a group, a broad theme relating to the region and be prepared to help our class discuss it in the context of the first five chapters of *The Worst Hard Time*. Each individual should write a short, one to two page, review of one aspect of each group's theme (the questions below offer some ideas to get you started). It is fine for more than one person to investigate the same issue.

The information you use in writing your topic review should of course come from scholarly sources and those sources should be cited and referenced. Please use at least two sources. We will use this information to discuss the main questions in class.

2 themes

1. What is the history of human settlement of the high plains?
Some specific issues to consider include
 - (a) Who were the region's first peoples?
 - (b) How did the leaders of early U.S.-government sponsored expeditions to New Spain (for example, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike and Major Stephen Long), report on what they found in the high plains? Be sure to include their thoughts on the agricultural potential of the region.
You might look for Pike's report, Exploratory travels through the western territories of North America...1805, 1806, 1807, by Order of the Government of the United States.
 - (c) Who was living on the southern high plains when European immigrants moved in and what happened to the earlier residents?
 - (d) How did the region become part of the United States?
 - (e) Why was the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 written and what effects did have in the high plains region?

Some of these topics can be subdivided (for example, "Who was living...?") There is a complex history here, give us a glimpse into it.

2. What is the history of ranching and farming on the southern high plains?
Some specific issues to consider include
 - (a) How and why was the XIT Ranch created?
 - (b) Why was the Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916 written and what was its effect? Be sure to consider earlier homesteading acts.
 - (c) What is the relationship between WWI and farm production (especially wheat) in the US? What was the United States Food Administration? How and why was it created?
 - (d) Overall, the wheat crop of 1930 was excellent. Why was it so hard for farmers to sell their crops that year?
 - (e) What are capital goods? Is farm land a natural resource (perhaps natural capital) or a capital good? Might the answer to the second question be different if we are thinking about finances or about sustainability?
 - (f) What are overcapitalization, speculation, and contraction of credit?
 - (g) What is economic globalization? We hear a lot in the news about globalization, both good and bad. Is globalization a new phenomenon? *You might look into world systems theory as you answer this question.*
 - (h) How has the economic basis of Dalhart, Texas changed from the late 19th century to today?
3. How do high plains ecosystems function and how has this changed over time?
Some specific issues to consider include
 - (a) What are the main differences between tallgrass and shortgrass prairies?
 - (b) What is soil and how does it form? How does soil erosion happen?
 - (c) What is a playa and why are playas important to prairie ecosystems?
 - (d) Do cattle and bison play equivalent roles in the prairie ecosystem?
 - (e) Do wheat and wild grasses provide equivalent ecosystem services?
 - (f) What is drought? What is the difference between climatological and agricultural drought?
 - (g) What is the source of agricultural water in the southern high plains and how has this changed since farming began there? Use the United States National Atlas (<http://www.nationalatlas.gov/>) **Map Maker** to investigate the climate context of farming in the United States. For example, is there a consistent relationship between farm size or irrigation practices and mean annual rainfall?

3 references

Egan, T. (2006). *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.