

I Am Still Myself: How the Dust Bowl Influenced Women's Clothing in Oklahoma

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Context and the Study of Clothing

The Dust Bowl began on April 14, 1935 and it is considered to be one of the worst ecological mistakes in American History. This event, caused by detrimental farming practices and drought, made it difficult to live in the Oklahoma Panhandle. The history of the Dust Bowl has primarily focused on the agricultural aspect, leaving the social history of this event unexplored. Social history helps to provide a more well rounded picture to our understanding of the past, and clothing is a medium through which to study social history. As clothing reflects our economic and social standing, our personality, our ideals, and our beliefs about the human body, the study of it can reveal deeper social and cultural trends.

1930s Style Ideal

The 1930s style ideal influenced every item of clothing that was made and worn. Typical 1930s garments employed mid-calf length skirts that followed the curve of the body, waistlines at the natural waist, sleeves that were big, small and 'poofy,' or long and simple, boldly patterned dresses, collars, and dress décor. This style is shown in the image below.



Materials Used

- *Dust, Drought, and Dreams Gone Dry* Oral History Collection at Oklahoma State University
- Books from the Edmon Low Library
- Dorthea Lang and Russell Lee images from the Library of Congress
- Stillwater History Museum at the Sheerar Textile Collection

Beauty in a World of Dirt



Women of the Dust Bowl worked hard to apply these stylistic norms, disseminated through magazines, to their clothing. There are many stories of women copying fashions directly from magazines, adding decorative trim to their clothing, and owning nice town dresses made from expensive materials. The ability to apply these stylistic norms shows that the Dust Bowl did not erode this society and their customs. Through the act of dressing up for social occasions, women showed a desire to be beautiful and present their best face to the world.

Even for the poorest, those who had to leave Oklahoma, the 1930s styles were clearly applied. In the image above, the waistline is at the natural waist and the skirt is long. The dress uses decorative fabrics and the sleeves are short and poofy. Despite the difficult times, people continued to desire beauty in their clothing; thriving was not an afterthought.

The Making and Wearing of Clothes

Women of the Dust Bowl did not own many clothes, which is most likely due to the expense of the materials. Many sewed their clothing, though it was not a universal skill. However, lacking the ability to sew did not seem to be a detriment to the family's well-being, as some women were able to contract the making of clothes out to others. One story tells of a woman who ironed a family's clothes in exchange for a newspaper subscription. This shows that the Dust Bowlers wanted to look presentable through keeping their clothes ironed, but also that they had the financial leeway to barter for non-essential items.

To save money for the essentials, feed sacks became a popular fabric during the Depression. Feed sacks are quintessentially 1930s, but the women in the Dust Bowl did not see the act of wearing feed sacks as degrading. Women were unashamed of wearing these clothes, due simply to the fact that everyone wore feed sacks.

There was little class distinction in the clothing, as the people in the Panhandle of Oklahoma were in the same economic class. Due to this, dressing better than one's peers was a financial impossibility for most. Many could only wear feed sacks but this was socially acceptable, as it was a collective action. Some people, though very few, did own store bought clothes and the act of wearing these clothes as everyday garb showed that the wearer was better off than their contemporaries. On the other end of the spectrum, some were too poor to buy feed sacks and were forced to rely on the government for their most basic needs, something the Dust Bowlers despised. As government clothing was brown or khaki, it was an extremely obvious mark of poverty and damaged pride.

Conclusion

The Dust Bowl is a pervasive American image, and the study of how this event influenced clothing helps scholars understand the social ramifications of the Dust Bowl. Women worked hard to apply the stylistic norms to their clothing and show their best face to the world. Though families were poor, they could own non-essential items. They were unashamed of their poverty, as the world was struggling just as much as they were. The Dust Bowl was a difficult event, but the women did not let this event change who they were; the clothing they had to wear did not diminish their inner worth. They were able to say, "Despite this circumstance, I am unchanged. I am still myself."



Acknowledgements

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Laura Arata, Oklahoma State University History Department

Funding: Wentz Research Scholarship Fund

Images: Library of Congress, Oklahoma State University Yearbooks Collection, and Sears and Roebuck Sourcebook