

Document A: Henderson Letter (Original)

July 26, 1935

"DUST TO EAST," TO HENRY A. WALLANCE, SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Drawing conclusion: According to Ms. Henderson, are there any alternatives to their situation? What are they? Why is she writing to the Secretary of Agriculture?

*Who has given me to this sweet
And given my brother dust to eat?
And when will his wage come in?
[. . .]*

For twenty-seven years this little spot on the vast expanses of the great plains has been the center of all our thought and hope and effort. And marvelous are the changes that we have seen in which we have participated.

The almost unbroken buffalo grass sod has given way to cultivated fields. The small rude huts or dugouts of the early days have been replaced by reasonably comfortable homes. The old trails have become wide graded highways. Railways have been built, reducing our journey to market from thirty miles to fifteen and later to two and a half. Little towns have sprung up with attractive homes, trees, flowers, schools, churches, and hospitals. Automobiles and trucks, tractors and combines have revolutionized methods of farm work and manner of living. The wonderful crop of 1926 when our country alone produced 10,000,000 bushels of wheat--more, it was said, than any other equal area in the world--revealed the possibilities of our productive soil and under modern methods of farming. I can shut my eyes and feel yet the rush of an almost painful thankfulness when we looked out over our fields that summer and watched our ripening grain bending, rising, bending again in golden waves swept on interminably by the restless wind. It seemed as if at last our dreams were coming true. . .

Yet now our daily physical torture, confusion of mind, gradual wearing down of courage, seem to make that long continued hope look like a vanishing dream. For we are in the worst of the dust storm area where William Vaughn Moody's expression, "dust to eat" is not merely a figure of speech as he intended, but the phrasing of a bitter reality, increasing in seriousness with each passing day. Any attempt to suggest the violent discomfort of these storms is likely to be vain except to those who have already experienced them. . . .

To many old-timers like ourselves who have for twenty-five years or more wrought the persistent effort of bodies and minds into the soil of this now barren land, the greatest cause of anxiety is the fear that our county may yet be designated as "submarginal" land and included in the areas now being purchased for public domain. A fourth year of failure such as now seems probable would give added weight to the arguments for such a procedure. Repossession of our land by the federal government and a general migration to more favored localities may be the best way to meet the present disheartening situation. Yet the problem is not one that admits of a simple, off-

hand solution. . . . It involves the interests not only of farm people but of the many small towns which have sprung up as trading centers throughout the plains region. . . .

Yet common sense suggests that the regions which are no longer entirely self-supporting cannot rely indefinitely upon government aid. So the problem remains and the one satisfactory solution is beyond all human control. Some of our neighbors with small children, fearing the effects upon their health, have left temporarily "until it rains." Others have left permanently, thinking doubtless that nothing could be worse. Thus far we and most of our friends seem held--for better or for worse--by memory and hope. I can look backward and see our covered wagon drawn up by the door of the cabin in the early light of that May morning long ago, can feel again the sweet fresh breath of the untrodden prairie, and recall for a moment the proud confidence of our youth. But when I try to see the wagon--or the Model T truck--headed in the opposite direction, away from our home and all our cherished hopes, I can not see it at all. Perhaps it is only because the dust is too dense and blinding.

Meanwhile the longing for rain has become almost an obsession. We remember the gentle all-night rains that used to make a grateful music on the shingles close above our heads, or the showers that came just in time to save a dying crop. We recall the torrents that occasionally burst upon us in sudden storms, making our level farm a temporary lake where only the ducks felt at home. We dream of the faint gurgling sound of dry soil sucking in the grateful moisture of the early or the later rains; of the fresh green of sprouting wheat or barley, the reddish bronze of springing rye. But we waken to another day of wind and dust and hopes deferred, of attempts to use to the utmost every small resource, to care for the stock and poultry as well as we can with our scanty supplies, to keep our balance and to trust that upon some happier day our wage may even yet come in.

Source: *Caroline Henderson's letter to Henry A. Wallace, sent July 26, 1935.*