

Most Oklahomans have probably heard of the extreme drought in the Panhandle, particularly in Cimarron County, earlier this year.

By ROBERT PIERCE

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Without modern conservation techniques, the Panhandle would have looked much like did in the 1930s – a period of history known as the “Dust Bowl.”

The drought recently gained not only state attention, but that of producers of “How Weather Changed America,” a series put together by The Weather Channel. So much so, they contacted the director of a museum in Boise City, Okla., to research the weather phenomenon.

Jody Risley, head of the Cimarron Heritage Center, said the crew came to Oklahoma in May, and producers got to see the full effects of the drought after months of such dry conditions.

“In fact, on the Saturday before Mother’s Day, we were shooting on the east side of the county with just some oak barns,” she said. “They got to see how the heat rising makes a look like a heat wave’s going. They got to see the clouds blowing up.”

Risley said during that afternoon, she and the producers were west of Boise City when dirt

began to blow through strong winds.

“The cameraman was in his van with his camera,” she said. “That camera was worth more than \$100,000. It locked up in that van, and he never rolled down a window. We would talk to him on his cell phone. Pretty soon, he told us we might as well get back in. What they were doing at that time was just shooting the dirt blowing.”

Risley said the crew had to come back to town to get supplies to clean the camera. She said the film crew wondered, because of the amount of dust blowing into vehicles in today’s climates, what it must have been like in a vehicle in the 1930s.

“On Mother’s Day, we shot the Model T out east of town,” she said. “We went and shot out of a homestead that was built in 1915. It was remodeled in the ’30s, and it was in the process of being sold, but I got hold of the previous and the going to be new landowners and got permission to go shoot there. It was a beautiful site. The windows were still intact. Nothing was boarded up or broken.”

Bob Anderson, a volunteer at the Cimarron Heritage Center, was recruited to drive the Model T, which is owned by the museum.



Risley also contacted three families, including six children, to volunteer as actors for the documentary, including locals Kenny Bob Tapp, LeLayne Tapp, Joshua Paul Tapp, Dalyn Reust, Wyatt Woolman and Kaylee Woolman.

Risley said she and the crew then came back and got some things from the museum to take out to the scenes to make it look more like a house from the Dust Bowl period, such as tables, chairs and dishes.

“We did some more shooting out there in the evening, but they were able to shoot the windmill turning and the sun setting, the kids running,” she said. “They shot here and in Elkhart through Thursday.”

Risley also contacted residents who had lived through the period, and the producers spoke to many of the individuals.

“They interviewed them and asked them questions like where were they born and did their family have a home, did they live with their grandparents,” she said. “They were children at their age. What did their parents do? How did they survive? Did they move away? Did anyone they know of die during that time? What did they eat? How did they celebrate Christmas or Easter? Did they remember Black Sunday?”

Risley said each person provided their own personal information of what they remembered about the Dust Bowl. She said one of the people interviewed showed some of the farm equipment of the time.

Risley made photos and documentation from the museum available to the producers for the project.

“I found places for them out in the country and contacted landowners for being able to go onto the property to take some videos or to do the movie shooting there,” she said.

Risley said while she had a big hand in the film, she did not plan the weather for the shooting.

“I had nothing to do with the dirt that blew, but they were pretty impressed with it,” she said. “After about two days, they were impressed with the dirt. They didn’t know how people could live out here, but they understood why we did.”

Risley said, however, producers found the weather they needed for the film quite easily.

“They said ‘How can we get some dirt?’ and I said ‘I think you’ll find it without having to do any extreme work,’” she said. “They did. The weather cooperated very well for shooting a movie.”

The crew later moved to Elkhart, which is about 40 miles from Boise City to shoot. Risley said producers continued to interview people there, and they also looked at the grasslands area near the Morton County community.

Risley said there are several unknown facts about the Dust Bowl period.

“It was caused from farming,” she said. “This is the Great Plains, and if it had been left to native grass, it probably would’ve started, but the wind did not blow all the time. When the dirt clouds came up, the people that live around here said the dirt didn’t blow at that time. People from around did not move. They were not the Okies. It was down around Ada that were the Okies that moved to California. The ones here pretty well stayed here. Very few of them left.”

Risley said the Dust Bowl was somewhat of a no win situation for the farmers of the day.

“If it’d never been plowed up, we probably wouldn’t had the Dust Bowl, but then how were people going to make a living?” she said.

Risley said the documentary is scheduled to air later this month.

“It’ll run on a Sunday through Saturday every night at 8 o’clock,” she said.