

Third in Gendai Nogyo Series
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Dear Ayame,

I saw you riding on your scooter this afternoon with your mother. Pretty soon you will be able to ride on your own. I haven't forgotten about wanting to tell you why Turkey Red disappeared from the fields of your great grandparents' fields and all across the 'breadbasket of the United States.' Before I do that I want to tell you another story. It relates to the disappearance of Turkey Red and it connects with what I wrote to you last time. It might seem a little strange but the story begins in 1999. Your grandpa and grandma gathered together with their sisters and their families to celebrate your great-grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. I asked Great Grandma what is the one thing that you wanted your grandchildren and great grandchildren to remember. Without hesitation she said the Dust Bowl. What's that?, you may ask. Well here's what she had to say:

'It was the Spring of 1934. I was three years old and I was sitting at the dinner table with all of my older brothers and sisters. There was a big window facing the West and out of this window my mom looked out and saw this black wall moving towards the house. She had no idea what it was. Mom calmly told all of us kids its time to go down into the cellar. When my mom said this we all knew something serious was going on. The only time we ever went down there was when there was a tornado. So my older brothers opened the door in the floor of the pantry and we all descended into the little room closed the door and waited. It was dark down there. We could hear the wind howling and the windows rattling in their frames. After the winds died down we came up from our refuge and found a coating of dust across the table and our dinner plates. My mom didn't want to frighten us kids but years later she told me that when she first saw that wall of black she thought the world was coming to an end.' It would have been a perfect end to the drama of the early 1930's. Drought had gripped the land. The crops had failed. And, except for the kindness of their banker, they almost lost their farm because they didn't have enough money to pay the principal of their loan.

Wind is part of living on the prairies. From a young age you have to learn to walk in the wind leaning into it as you face it or leaning sideways during a crossing wind. If you don't do it you'll get blown over. There are no trees to slow the wind. Wind was not the problem. Nor was it a lack of rain. Rains on the prairies are always sporadic. The prairies had 14,000 years of adaptation to get it right. But the prairie grass was no longer there to hold the soil in place and 70 years of growing crops and exporting the grain had exhausted the organic matter that had held the soil together. The Dust Bowl was not a natural disaster nor an act of God. Soil conservationists from the US government determined that the Dust Bowl was a human made disaster in which farmers broke land and grew crops in regions where the land should never have been farmed. It was the short sighted vision of being able to make money exporting grains to Europe after WW I that led to the greatest ecological disaster in American history until that time.

For a period of about ten years the US government began the soil conservation service to popularize the importance of preserving the soil. They hired the best writers to write books about good farming and caring for the soil to change the direction that American agriculture was heading. But, this this urgency of caring for the soil gave way to business leaders promoting the industrialization of American agriculture as excess military manufacturing capacity searched for expanding markets overseas.

The 1940's signified a major shift from traditional agrarian life.