

LETTERS

Our Own Letter from the Dust Bowl

Eva, Okla.,
Dec. 8, 1936.

Mr. Walter Rott,
Manila, P. I.

Dear Neighbor - across the world:

I've just been reading again your friendly letter which brought to me so much stimulus and encouragement. I'm sorry that even after the long delay I cannot write the kind of "postscript" to my Spring letter that we know you would be happy to receive. It would be most gratifying if I could assure you out of the year's experience that "sudden the worst turns the best"; that the long-
for rains did come in time to save the struggling wheat and prepare the ground for feed crops; that the all-but-vanished grass has started again to restore our ruined pastures to usefulness; and that rainfall through the season of growth had sufficed to produce ample supplies of grain and forage for our stock and poultry this winter. Unfortunately not one of these statements would be true.

For 1936 we must record another year of failure. Yet that failure might so easily have been changed to moderate success by one good rain in late July or August that we do not altogether despair. As I write I can hear the tractor laboring along on the north field while Will is laying up a fresh set of terraces in the hope that next year may give us all a

better chance. It seems impossible to dispense with that little word *hope*, even though at times we are conscious of the pain of hopes too long deferred.

Soon after my last letter was mailed, Will suffered a painful accident which might easily have proved a permanent handicap. While he was unloading a barrel of coal oil, it slipped and fell, bruising one ankle severely and, I still believe, fracturing some of the smaller bones. At that time the dust storms were at their worst. For a while it seemed that perhaps, regardless of desire, we could not go on. There were many days, as I struggled to care for the stock, when I could not see from one of the farm buildings to another through the blinding, choking clouds. Dust was piling up every

where, filling gateways, burying machinery, drifting around the buildings, making the less traveled roads almost impassable. The mere matter of getting milk or even water to the house in a condition fit for use presented a difficult problem. Will improvised a crutch from a short length of pump rod and after the first few days helped all he could to direct and carry on the outdoor work, actually crawling on hands and knees the length of the barn left to break open the bales of Colorado alfalfa and get it ready for me to drop into the mangers. In spite of his being almost compelled to do the things he shouldn't have done, the injured ankle slowly regained its shape and strength and the recovery is one thing to be grateful for as we look back over a difficult year.

The wind and dust continued without much abatement through March and April and early May. The first sign of any hopeful change came with a light rain on May 17 though the following week of high winds destroyed most of the benefit. By this time any lingering hope of wheat production in our vicinity had faded away, though limited areas in the extreme eastern part of the country returned small yields. The ground was too dry and hard to permit satisfactory preparation for spring planting, though Will had done some listing and "chiseling" as well as the condition of the soil would allow. On June 4 as if to confute all theories about the diversion our moisture-bearing winds to Greenland and such attempted explanations of the long-protracted drought, we had one tremendous rain—a regular "gully-washer"—when two and a half inches poured down in half an hour. The unworked soil could not absorb it fast enough, especially as there is strong tendency for the fine wind-ground silt to coat over the surface, closing the pores of the soil as if with a thin cement and preventing natural penetration. So much of this precious moisture proved ineffective for actual crop production, broke over contour and terrace lines and finally formed several "playa" lakes in the neighborhood of basins which have no outlet. One of our neighbors now plans to pump some of this still standing water back upon his fields.

During the fall these temporary lakes furnished sanctuary to immense flocks of seagulls, possibly driven inland by storms along some coast or attracted by the hosts of grasshoppers which had helped to complete the damage done by the drought. It was a new and delightful interest to us to watch the strong, impetuous flight of these gulls as they skimmed low over our fields or massed in silvery shimmering clouds against the darkening horizon as they returned at nightfall to the sheltering lake. All at once they were gone and we saw them no more.

That heavy rain on June 4 before a seed was planted was our only source of moisture through the growing season aside from two or three drought showers which scarcely dampened the surface. As you asked about the contour farming, you may be interested to know that we are more than ever convinced of its usefulness for our locality. Where our terrace lines remained unbroken and held the water back to soak slowly into the soil, the effect upon production was noticeably beneficial. From one small field where the water had stood, which was sowed to

came as soon as the ground was dry, we were able to save two fair cuttings in August and October. From still smaller areas of maize along the terrace lines we threshed out about forty-five bushels of grain for chicken feed. This also had the distinction of having matured upon stored moisture without benefit of additional rainfall. On the other hand where our terraces broke in the swift onrush of the flowing water, there was slight penetration, the ground dried quickly and seed failed entirely to come up.

It seems particularly unfortunate that the well-devised plans of the Department of Agriculture looking toward the control of soil erosion should have had so little chance for a fair trial. Inducements of small acreage payments were offered and widely accepted for cultivation on contour lines with the provision that all forage should be left on the ground for cover, though matured grain might be gathered. In some places the plans worked out as desired. The fallen stalks and leaves should serve a double purpose by providing protection and by beginning to restore to the soil the moisture-conserving humus, so much of which has been wasted in recent years. But in very many places, the seed never sprouted and the bare ground is still exposed to the destructive work of the wind. Where the deep listing has been let undisturbed, it should help to reduce wind damage. In our judgment drilled crops of millet, cane or Sudan grass with their closer rooting and thicker stubble afford an even better safeguard against erosion than the listed crops. But they are expensive to plant and the millet and Sudan grass are especially attractive to grasshoppers. So all sorts of things must be considered.

A few families have removed from our neighborhood during the spring and summer but most of those who held out through the dust storms are still here, working along various lines toward their individual hopes for the future. There is no constraint and little agreement as to the best methods to pursue in attempts at recovery. The planners, however, might be divided into two large groups, those who would rely upon improved cultivation to conserve every bit of natural rainfall, and those who believe in the possibility of rather extensive irrigation by pumping from deep wells. The first group includes the adherents of contouring and terracing methods and also those who abhor the crooked lines and inconvenience of that type of farming but would seek to gain similar results while keeping their fields square and their rows straight. These people are placing much reliance upon the further development of the so-called "basin-type" lister, which has a special device for dumping little dams every ten or twelve feet across the furrows, thus preventing run-off of water in any ordinary rain.

Each irrigationist has his own pet plan
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but the great obstacle in all of them is the initial expense required for the deep wells and an effective pumping system. Some question the feasibility of irrigating comparatively small plots while the surrounding area might be up in the air or drifting in from a wind field or garden. Others wonder whether even our apparently unending supply of deep ground water could stand the drain of continuous pumping through a large extent of territory where supplementary irrigation would be most useful if it were really proved practicable. I haven't myself any technical knowledge regarding either the water supply or the engineering required to make it available. But there have already been some preliminary official surveys which may result in experimental work to provide more definite information about such projects. Some enthusiastic advocates of irrigation believe that eventually the supplies of gas under the Panhandle can be utilized to develop cheap power for pumping. Here again we come up against the hard fact that every material resource comes to an end unless constantly replenished. But at least these various possibilities provide subjects for discussion and some incentive to look forward to happier days.

So we work on caring for the hives and the chickens, the horses and cattle, trying to make our scant supply of feed go as far as possible, filling the days with the innumerable tasks necessary on any farm, hoping somehow as the passing years steal away our strength, to be able to provide easier, more convenient ways of accomplishing the essential tasks.

We were interested in what you said about Mr. Cordell Hull's foreign policies, and we regard him as one of our most useful and far-seeing public men. We hope he may be equal to the great responsibility he now has in the South American conference for strengthening and giving form and direction to the world's desire for peace. Mr. Hull is surely right in thinking of international peace as something not merely to be accepted but to be striven for actively and devotedly. We might think of it as Edgar Lee Masters did of immortality; that it is "not a gift but an achievement."

We especially appreciated the photograph of the terraced rice-fields in Luzon. They make our own endeavors look childish and clumsy. Thanks too for the magazine. We had the idea of the variety of industrial interests in the Philippines or the richness of its mineral resources. And we liked your article about Will Rogers. He was greatly loved. I am glad that he can still go on through the work he has done, giving wholesome enjoyment for years to come.

Will says he recalls the name of Raines in a neighborhood somewhat west of us but was not acquainted with the people. As Eleanor's medical work has been at the University of Kansas, it is doubtful whether she knew your nephews. On the day before Thanksgiving we received word of her appointment to an intership in Minneapolis for next year. That relieves us of a great anxiety for she had been a little fearful that she might not find a place to complete her training. We expect her and her husband home for the holidays and are worse than children in our eagerness for their coming. They were married here on Jan. 4 (1931).

I had hoped to send this letter in time for Christmas but all sorts of delays have

occurred, so I'm sure it will not reach you until some time in the new year. Will joins in thanks for your letter and in the hope that 1937 may be for you a year of accomplishment and generous fulfillment. If ever you come back to look over those homesteads of earlier years, just take another step and look up ours too. We have set back that old cornerstone as you desired and shall probably not wander far away from it of any length of time.

So be sure of a welcome here from the Hendersons.

CAROLINE A. HENDERSON.

Note—Because we have Mrs. Henderson's letter this month, the remaining notes from another reader on how to travel and what to see during a trip from

Manila through other parts of Malaysia are deferred to February. Nearly all our readers will recall Mrs. Henderson as the author of *Letters From the Dust Bowl* that first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and afterward in book form—unquestionably the most vivid and accurate narrative of the ravishing consequences of repeated and prolonged droughts in the semiarid region of America, outside the scientific reports themselves. Further, Mrs. Henderson's own observations are far from the unscientific: one of the beauties of her calm authority in the midst of so much personal distress is that there is no wishful thinking in it—she draws the thing as she sees it for the gods of things as they are, and heaven forgive us for an allusion to a poet whom personally we don't admire, yet here he fits.—Ed.

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