Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas

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In writing this book, I have accumulated debts too numerous to mention. Nevertheless, at this point in my work, I would like to make an attempt to thank those who have made this project possible.

For research support I wish to thank the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, which provided an Alice E. Smith Fellowship. I would also like to acknowledge the Madison chapter of the AAUW, which awarded me their Martha L. Edwards Fellowship. The Kansas State Historical Society supported a research trip to their facilities with an Alfred M. Landon Historical Research Grant. While at Illinois State University, I have been the recipient of a University Research Grant, which aided in the revision of this work, as well as a Travel to Collections Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

For aid in my research I am greatly indebted to the staffs of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and especially the Kansas State Historical Society. Both facilities are indeed first-class research institutions. I also wish to thank Joyce Boswell, fellow researcher at the Kansas State Historical Society and more-than-helpful archivist at the Central Plains Branch of the National Archives. David Haury, then archivist at the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, was also a great help. There are individuals too numerous to mention who gave freely of their time and expertise in a multitude of county libraries and historical societies across southwestern Kansas. I am particularly grateful to the many survivors of the Dust Bowl who completed questionnaires, gave interviews, and mailed bits of information, many of which are included in this book.

Last, but not least, are personal debts of gratitude for support rendered during this project. The book began as my doctoral dissertation, and the direction I received while at the University of Wisconsin–Madison was
superb. My academic advisors were truly wise and patient. I especially thank Allan G. Bogue, who allowed me to embark on this project and insisted that I perform to the best of my abilities, Diane Lindstrom, who listened to it all, and Bob Ostergren, whose classes inspired a good bit of the early research on this topic. Also, thanks to the other members of my committee, Margaret Beattie Bogue and Stanley Schultz. The graduate students in the History Department of the University of Wisconsin were willing to listen to years of musings about the Dust Bowl; I particularly thank the members of the American caucus dissertators’ group. Cynthia Miller, Editor-in-Chief of the University Press of Kansas, has provided enormously useful advice.

My family, and people whom I have come to think of as family, have been tremendously helpful. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my grandmothers, Margaret Collier Thompson Barnes and Elsie Swafford Riney, who inspired this project and who each, in her own way, supported my work. I dedicate this book to them. I thank the many people who took me in while I researched—my aunt and uncle, Sandra and Rod Williams of Elkhart, George and Laurie Copeland of Ness City, and particularly the Hiller-Briggs family (Karen, Glenn, Bryan, Michael, and Neil) of Topeka. You each made my research trips easier. My parents, Norm and Mary Riney, and brother, Scott Riney, have always believed in me and have been ever so patient.

But most of all, I wish to thank my husband and partner, Richard Kehrberg. He now knows more and has seen more of southwestern Kansas than he ever cared to discover and has hardly complained. Bless you.
INTRODUCTION

The thing that impressed me the most was probably not the dust storms but the devastation on the land. . . . There would just not be any vegetation at all on the land for maybe half a mile in any direction. . . . I don’t know how anyone survived.

I suppose it was living one day at a time. We never had all of the, I call them, luxuries. We had nice homes, but it was nothing fancy. Carpet sweepers and our washing machines was the kind that takes manpower. I think getting the washing done was a major operation. To get them dry before they got dust, because we hung them out on the line. . . . It was rough.

We knew there wasn’t anything going on but another dust storm. It would come from one direction one day, and then the next day it seemed like it came back from the other direction. People got so they knew just about what part of Kansas the dirt storm was coming from by the color of the dirt.¹

The 1930s were grimly memorable years for the people of the United States. The decade was marked by economic collapse, resulting in bank failures, staggeringly high unemployment, and widespread, persistent poverty of a type previously unknown in the history of the United States. The Great Depression plunged many an individual, family, and community into despair. Although the depression’s impact was variable, affecting families and communities with different severity, no state or region remained untouched.

Throughout the nation’s heartland, the problems of the 1930s took on a particular urgency. As if the Great Depression were not hardship enough, a prolonged drought also afflicted the Great Plains. Year after year, the rains failed to come, and farmers watched their crops wither.
The drought, accompanied by high winds and unusually high temperatures, desiccated the soil, driving it into the air in enormous, seething clouds of dust. The choking, all-pervading dust wreaked havoc on agricultural communities already staggering from conditions almost too difficult to bear. The residents of the plains, in a broad swath from western North Dakota south through west Texas, suffered the indignity of the worst sustained environmental and economic disaster ever to affect the United States. The people of sixteen southwestern Kansas counties were trapped in the heart of the Dust Bowl.  

When the story of the Dust Bowl is told, it is most often the story of those who left—the impoverished and discouraged multitudes who departed for California, Oregon, and Washington in the darkest days of the 1930s. Hoping for jobs and opportunities outside the region, many residents of the farms and towns of southwestern Kansas quit waiting for the rain to fall. By the late 1930s a significant number of the area's population were searching for new homes. Their story captured the imagination of the American public, in part because of the stirring writings of John Steinbeck, particularly *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joad family, although not true Dust Bowl refugees, came to represent all of the Americans displaced by the economic and environmental dislocations of the thirties. The loss of their rented farm, their difficult journey to the unwelcoming West Coast, and the poverty and humiliation of migratory farm labor stirred the hearts of many readers. This was the most common Dust Bowl story and the one with which most Americans were familiar.  

The migrants' story, however, is only a small part of the larger history of the Dust Bowl. While a quarter of the population of southwestern Kansas joined the Dust Bowl migration, fully three-quarters of the area’s residents struggled on.  

While migrants faced the painful task of creating a life in a new location, those who remained behind faced the equally difficult problem of survival, pitting their stubbornness and ingenuity against both economic depression and environmental collapse, as well as the unsympathetic response of many observers—not an easy task. The lives of those who endured the decade in southwestern Kansas were unique and individual, but many bore the stamp of endurance and determination. Opal Musselman Burdett was in her teens when dust pneumonia took her father's life. She and her sisters had no choice but to let the bank repossess the family farm. For her, the thirties were years of hard work, exchanging her housekeeping skills for room and board and working for the National Youth Administration, which provided jobs to
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hard-pressed students. Hers was not an ideal childhood, but one filled with hard work, a common denominator in the lives of many of those who grew up during the thirties.  

George and Laurie Copeland married in 1931, determined to make a success of farming. After several years on George's father's farm, they purchased their own in 1934 with the aid of the Federal Land Bank. Keeping their farm enterprise afloat was a struggle. Crops failed, and those that did not brought poor prices in the marketplace. Their cattle had to be sent to the eastern part of the state for pasture. Laurie taught school for three years to supplement their meager farm income, in addition to raising and preserving food and sewing clothing. They lost a baby, and Laurie endured a serious illness. Nevertheless, they held onto their farm and eventually made it into a paying enterprise.  

Ona Libertus was a married woman with children when the Dust Bowl and depression struck. She was also a landowner, who in 1913 had homesteaded her own claim in Hamilton County. On 160 acres, she and her husband grew broomcorn and other crops. The family of seven lived in a sod house, built over their original dugout. They papered the interior with newspapers. In 1935, she ceased to be a farmer when circumstances forced the family to sell the land for only $300. As she said, they essentially “gave it away.” It was a bitter disappointment. The Libertus family was forced to begin again in a home of their own construction in Coolidge, only sixteen miles south of the farm they had lost. They, like many other Dust Bowl families, had to start over in their own backyards, rather than migrating to greener lands farther to the west.  

Unfortunately, little has been written about the ways in which individuals and families such as these adapted to the challenges of the 1930s. Other historians have focused on federal policy, agricultural practices, and environmental considerations, leaving largely untold the history of the individuals, families, and communities that survived this economic and environmental crisis. The circumstances of the decade thoroughly disrupted and altered the pattern of life for thousands of individuals and their communities. The drought, depression, and dirt storms created a kind of poverty and hopelessness previously unknown to the people of the region, except perhaps during the shorter period of drought and depression during the 1890s. The Dust Bowl also altered the relationship between humans and the land, when the soil that they depended upon refused to support them. Although the Dust Bowl years were but a decade in the history of the
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southern Great Plains, that decade reshaped life for the residents of southwestern Kansas and prompted them to reshape the land to meet their desire for stability and continuity in the face of recurring environmental desolation.

An important factor in this story was the recent settlement of the region. Although the area had experienced depopulation during the 1890s, farming families and other settlers flooded into the area in the years following the turn of the century, particularly during and after World War I. Many of the newcomers had little or no experience with the vicissitudes of the western Kansas climate. Often they had formed very few attachments to their localities. The cooperation and mutuality that strengthened many older agricultural communities during the Great Depression was in its formative phases throughout much of the Dust Bowl. Those who had developed this spirit benefited enormously; those who had yet to discover the virtues of neighborliness suffered seriously from the decade’s blows, often succumbing to the urge to migrate.

This story is about those who chose to stay, despite the hard times, and the accommodations they made to the problems of the decade. The townspeople also had to adjust to diminished incomes, due to loss of trade with the area farmers. Conditions forced city and county administrators to find ways to create a relief network that would allow people to feed and clothe themselves. These administrators often discovered that these costs meant bankruptcy for their counties, a problem that remained through the decade’s end. The farmers, who formed the basis of this society, had to devise the means of saving their land, in spite of terrific hardships. Without government aid, very few would have been able to remain farmers throughout the decade.

Success or failure at meeting these challenges shaped the migration of the 1930s. Larger towns, which were able to garner large government aid packages and attract business from outlying towns, were better able to retain their populations and reach the year 1940 with their populations and economic importance to the region relatively intact. Farmers who were able to draw upon the resources available within families, such as emotional and financial support, and who were unable or unwilling to sell their land survived to enjoy the bounty of the Second World War. But before they could reap the rewards of their endurance, the southwestern Kansans who had been such enthusiastic settlers in the early years of the twentieth century were tested in ways that they could hardly have imagined during the boom times following the turn of the century.