Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck

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Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck

Abstract
I first became acquainted with Mary Knackstedt Dyck’s diary in the spring of 1989, when I interviewed her elder daughter, Thelma Warner, of Syracuse, Kansas. I was working on my doctoral dissertation and listening to the oral histories of dozens of residents of southwestern Kansas, asking them about their experiences during the dust bowl era. I also would ask my subject if he or she had saved any materials from that era that might be useful to me, such as letters, photographs, and diaries. At the end of my interview with Thelma Warner, she turned to me and said, “You know, I have my mother’s diary.” She walked into her living room, pulled out a large potato chip tin, and opened it. Inside were hundreds of pages of lined notebook paper, covered with faded entries, written in pencil. At the conclusion of my visit, Mrs. Warner loaned me several large chunks of the diary dating to the 1930s. It was a very generous act that greatly improved the quality of the dissertation and subsequent book, Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas.

Disciplines
Labor History | United States History | Women’s History

Comments
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Editing Mary Dyck's diary has been a labor of love, but a labor none-theless, and one that could not have been completed without the sup-port and encouragement of a number of people. First and foremost, I wish to thank Mrs. Thelma Dyck Warner and Mrs. Verna Dyck Gragg, who preserved their mother's diary, and so generously allowed me access to it. To them I am profoundly grateful.

A number of other individuals have lent their support to the labor involved in the diary's publication. The following student assistants at Illinois State University gave their time and effort to photocopying and transcription: Lori Mizzuno, Tari Doehring, Gretchen Peters, and Kristine Cooley. I particularly wish to thank Sharon Foiles in the History Department office at Illinois State. Without her tremendous skills, the task of transcription would never have been completed.

Cynthia Miller, former editor-in-chief at the University Press of Kansas, encouraged me first to think about publishing Mary Dyck's journal; Holly Carver, of the University of Iowa Press, saw it to com-pletion. A number of other individuals and groups have encouraged me to seek the publication of this diary: the members of the summer 1993 National Historic Publications and Records Commission his-torical editing workshop; the wonderfully supportive members of the Rural Women's Studies Association; the rural network of the Social Science History Association; and my many friends and valued col-leagues in the History Department at Illinois State University. University Research Grants from Illinois State University made much of my work financially possible.

Portions of the introduction and conclusion have been published previously. I wish to acknowledge the University Press of Kansas, Indiana University Press, Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies, and Agricultural History for allowing me to make use of this material. Full citations for these publications appear in the bibliography.
As always, it has been friends and family who have provided the moral support that I needed to complete this task: the ISU women (you know who you are) who have gathered each month for many semesters to commiserate over lunch or a happy hour; my dear friend, Roberta Trites; and my parents, Norm and Mary Riney, and brother, Scott Riney. But most of all, I thank my husband, friend, and companion, Richard Kehrberg, who continues to believe in me.

PREFACE

I first became acquainted with Mrs. Thelma Warner of Syracuse, Kansas, in the spring of 1989, when I interviewed her for my dissertation research. I was conducting research on the oral histories of women in western Kansas, asking them about their experiences during the dust bowl era. I also would ask my interlocutors to show me any materials from that era that might be available to me, such as photographs, and diaries. At the end of my interview with Mrs. Warner, she turned to me and said, "I have a diary. She walked into her living room, and opened it. Inside were handwritten pages, covered with faded entries dating to the 1930s. It was a very interesting diary, and I expressed an interest in it and a chance to view the materials stored there. I expressed an interest in the diary, and a later date, once the dissertation was completed, I returned to the Warner residence and found a box on my shelf that contained Mary Dyck’s diary, an enormous diary dating from 1936 to 1953. I was to phenologically transcribe from these diaries those sections that led to the transcriptions of the dust bowl years of the diary, from the 1930s.

Those of you who are familiar with the name Thelma Warner and her sister, Anna, are closely acquainted with the name of the woman who had been known as the "first lady of Kansas" for her work in the field of education. Mrs. Warner was a strong advocate for education and was instrumental in the establishment of several schools in Kansas. She was also a religious leader and was involved in the establishment of several churches in the state. Mrs. Warner was a woman of great faith, and her life was a testament to the power of faith and dedication in overcoming adversity. She was a true inspiration to all who knew her, and her legacy lives on through her writings and her work in the field of education.
I first became acquainted with Mary Knackstedt Dyck’s diary in the spring of 1989, when I interviewed her elder daughter, Thelma Warner, of Syracuse, Kansas. I was working on my doctoral dissertation and listening to the oral histories of dozens of residents of southwestern Kansas, asking them about their experiences during the dust bowl era. I also would ask my subject if he or she had saved any materials from that era that might be useful to me, such as letters, photographs, and diaries. At the end of my interview with Thelma Warner, she turned to me and said, “You know, I have my mother’s diary.” She walked into her living room, pulled out a large potato chip tin, and opened it. Inside were hundreds of pages of lined notebook paper, covered with faded entries, written in pencil. At the conclusion of my visit, Mrs. Warner loaned me several large chunks of the diary dating to the 1930s. It was a very generous act that greatly improved the quality of the dissertation and subsequent book, Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas.

When I returned the diary to Mrs. Warner, she commented, “You know, there’s more of this.” That revelation led to a trip to the basement and a chance to view the more than 3,000 pages of manuscript stored there. I expressed an interest in working with the materials at a later date, once the dissertation was complete. In 1991, on one of my first days on the job as a newly minted Ph.D. and assistant professor, I found a box on my shelf in the office, filled to the brim with Mary Dyck’s diary, an enormous manuscript that covered the years from 1936 to 1955. I was to photocopy and return it to its owners, Thelma Warner and her sister, Verna Gragg. Thus began the long process that led to the transcription, editing, and annotation of the dust bowl years of the diary, from October 1936 to May 1941.

Those of you who are familiar with my previous work will be more closely acquainted with the name Martha Schmidt Friesen. This was
Mary Dyck’s diary paints a poignant picture of the mothers and fathers who waved good-bye from the porch as daughters and sons left the dust bowl, often for good. It is a far different story from that of the era’s migrants and one that is far less well known.

For all these reasons, Mary Dyck’s diary is a remarkable historical document. Her words take the reader to a time and place that most of us have never visited and can only imagine. It cannot tell the reader everything that there is to know about the social history of the 1930s, but it provides an unusually intimate view of the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys, of farm life on the southern plains during the Great Depression.
When Mary Knackstedt Dyck died in 1955 at the age of seventy, she left behind a husband of fifty years, two surviving adult children, and the family farm she had lived on for most of her life. She also left behind a diary. Covering the period from 1936 to 1955, that diary is the chronicle of a life lived outside of public view. Dyck was a farm woman, a wife, a mother, and a resident of an extremely isolated farming community. Hers was a life that would have remained outside of the realm of historical scrutiny, had she not chosen to record her days in a journal, and had her family not saved the lengthy manuscript, written in pencil on lined notebook paper.

Mary Knackstedt Dyck grew up in the German ethnic community in McPherson County, Kansas. Her parents, Wilhelm and Margreta (Mata) Knackstedt, were German immigrants. Her mother had been born in Barrien, Germany, and had arrived in the United States with her family as an eight-year-old child. They settled on a farm in Illinois. Wilhelm and Mata married in Staunton, Illinois, then emigrated in 1883 to McPherson County, Kansas, settling near Inman. Their farm was in Little Valley Township, in the southwestern corner of the county. In 1884, they had 160 acres of land. The Knackstedts raised a large family. Eight children, four girls and four boys, were born to the couple. Only one son, Edward, lived to adulthood but all four daughters, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Altophena, survived. On February 17, 1884, twin daughters were born to Wilhelm and Mata, Mary and Altophena, or Phena.

At the time of the Knackstedts' arrival, McPherson County was an interesting mix of cultures and nationalities. Swedes congregated in
the north central portion of the county, in the area around Lindsborg. The county was also home to a large German-speaking population. Much of that population belonged to the Evangelical Church, a branch of the Lutherans. Another community in the county consisted of Russian Mennonites, also German speakers, who had found their way to McPherson County from a parent settlement in Jansen, Nebraska. They settled largely in the southern and eastern portions of the county and in 1875 established the Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church near Inman. Many within the Mennonite community had been born in Russia, and emigrated to the United States as adults.3

On September 1, 1904, Mary Knackstedt married Henry Dyck. Although Mary was an Evangelical, she married into the Mennonite community of McPherson County, as did her twin sister. The two, in fact, married brothers. For the first year of their marriage, Mary and Henry lived with his parents. Their first child, Clarence, died of "summer complaint" in August 1905.4 They buried him in the cemetery of the Evangelical Church and soon afterward joined more than ninety other Russian Mennonite households in their trek to Lamont Township, Hamilton County, Kansas.

The early years of the twentieth century were a time of growth and rebuilding for the counties of the southern plains. After the devastation caused by the drought, grasshoppers, and depression of the 1890s, farming families began to settle on lands that had been vacated at the end of the previous century. This burst of development coincided with the creation of a number of Mennonite settlements throughout the West. Beginning in the 1870s, Russian Mennonites had found homes in central Kansas, seeking land and the proper environment for the creation of their distinctive religious and ethnic communities. By the turn of the century, land in central Kansas was becoming scarce and expensive, forcing some members of the community to found daughter settlements farther west. These migrating families, often younger and poorer than those remaining, created fifty-three new congregations between 1892 and 1940. Eight of these new Western District Conference congregations were in western Kansas.5

One of these settlements was Menno, Kansas. Mennonite leaders from central Kansas scoured the countryside for appropriate settings for new communities farther to the west, examining land in Stanton County as well as Hamilton County.6 The lure of cheap land in Hamilton County led migrating families to take up claims in the homestead lands of Lamont Township, in set of the Arkansas River Valley. Her development as a farming community, leading industry in the area. They grew milo, broomcorn, kafr corn, and growing to grow winter wheat.7

The founding of Menno met for Lamont Township. The town eastern corner of Hamilton County suspiciously by a few scattered ranchers, census, taken prior to the Mennonite households, four composed of six persons; four people, in an area encompassing cattle outnumbered the township margin.8 The agricultural practice of those of the county as a whole. Farmers planted winter wheat in the early spring. By contrast, ranchers sold cattle for slaughter.9

An article published by the Mennonites' choice of land in these areas to the more fertile valley lands; based on account of high values, and the lands, lying far and away above twenty inches of rainfall may be of plants, and 'dry farming' motivational materials lauded the Mennonites and faith, guaranteed success and thrift" of the young settlers.10 The Mennonites' arrival brought a change. Between the state census in 1910 the population achieved previous heights, with 495 persons appearing in the residents enumerated in the township and the township had become 103 persons, forming twenty-settlers.11

Menno itself was a diverse group, those who might be expected in a frontier setting a home there was fairly you
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Menno, Kansas. Mennonite leaders countrysides for appropriate settings e west, examining land in Stanton y. The lure of cheap land in Ham- to take up claims in the homestead lands of Lamont Township, in semi-arid sand hills twenty miles south of the Arkansas River Valley. Hamilton County was just beginning its development as a farming county; cattle ranching was actually the leading industry in the area. Those few farmers in the area generally grew milo, broomcorn, kafir corn, and sorghum and were just begin- ning to grow winter wheat. 7

The founding of Menno meant change on a revolutionary scale for Lamont Township. The township was located in the far southeast- eastern corner of Hamilton County and had been occupied previ- ously by a few scattered ranching families. The 1905 Kansas state census, taken prior to the Mennonites' arrival, found only nine households, four composed of single men. There were only twenty-four people, in an area encompassing nearly 100,000 acres. The 347 cattle outnumbered the township's human residents by a considerable margin. 8 The agricultural practices of these ranchers conformed with those of the county as a whole. In 1905, there were only 170 acres of winter wheat planted in the entire county, and 659 acres of broom- corn. By contrast, ranchers sold more than 60,000 head of livestock for slaughter. 9

An article published by the Santa Fe Railroad explained the Mennonites' choice of land in these terms: "These people do not object to the more fertile valley lands; but valley lands were out of their reach on account of high values, and so they choose the free homestead lands, lying far and away above the valleys, where only the scant twenty inches of rainfall may be depended upon for the nourishment of plants, and 'dry farming' must be practiced." 10 The railroad's promotional materials lauded the Mennonites' efforts as acts of courage and faith, guaranteed success because of the "virtue, piety, industry, and thrift" of the young settlers. 11

The Mennonites' arrival brought a new day to Lamont Township. Between the state census in 1905 and the federal census in 1910, the population achieved previously unknown and never replicated heights, with 493 persons appearing in the decennial census. None of the residents enumerated in the 1905 state census remained in 1910, and the township had become overwhelmingly Mennonite. Only 103 persons, forming twenty-seven households, were outside of the Menno community. 12

Menno itself was a diverse grouping of individuals and families. As might be expected in a frontier settlement the "average" family mak- ing a home there was fairly young and in the early stages of family
Mary Dyck's Kansas and Colorado.
A Woman and Her World

formation. The average male head of household was thirty-seven years old, his wife thirty-five, and their family included three children. In fact, the largest group of residents in the township were children, 257 in all. Although this was the average family, there was a wide variety of household structures within the community. Fifteen single adults, settling alone, made their home in Menno, eleven of them men, four women. A widower raised his son alone. At the other extreme was the family of Jacob and Eliza Kaufman and their twelve children, ranging from daughter Eliza, age twenty-eight, to daughter Hilda, age two. The youngest head of a household was a single male, age seventeen, while the oldest was a married man, age seventy-two. Despite the preponderance of young people, it was a community of the young and the old, of children, parents, and grandparents, male and female, with the common goal of establishing a successful Mennonite community.13

It was not immediately apparent that the Menno community was destined for failure. Settlers such as Henry and Mary Dyck began developing their farms and putting down roots. Their choice of crops reflected a certain sensitivity to the dry climate in which they lived. Most farmers planted broomcorn, kafir corn, and varieties of sorghum, all of which were drought resistant. Some planted hard winter wheat. Although the Mennonites probably could not be credited with all of the change, the farmers of Hamilton County were becoming involved in the production of crops. Winter wheat acreage increased from a mere 170 acres to 2,464, and the production of broomcorn from 659 acres to 10,878.14 The Mennonites raised beef cattle, milk cows, swine, and chickens, attempting to create farms that would provide a family self-sufficiency as well as a profit.

The built landscape showed signs of change as well. In the earliest days of the settlement, the first structures families erected were barns that sheltered both them and their animals.15 Their next homes, sod houses and dugouts, were a logical choice, given the lack of timber in the immediate vicinity. By 1908, visitors from central Kansas were commenting on the building of “new square houses” of frame construction, new windmills and wells, and the planting of trees for windbreaks.16 The residents conducted church services in the local school until they raised the more than $1,000 needed to build their own church. When the community dedicated the Ebenflur (Prairie) Church in May 1908, the editor of the local paper hailed the event as a sign of the growth and prosperity in the county. “The building of this church is the final notice that it is not a prophecy, it is a fulfillment that will never return. It means that the advance in the ways of civilization will change the cattle ranges into farmland.” The Ebenflur Church was not the only church; the young community; there was a growing number of churches.

As this flurry of activity might suggest, the Menno community was not content to stay in their new home. Kansas Mennonites trekked west and reported on the progress of the new settlement. The Inman Review, a local paper, commented on the building of “new square houses” of frame construction, new windmills and wells, and the planting of trees for windbreaks.16 The residents conducted church services in the local school until they raised the more than $1,000 needed to build their own church. When the community dedicated the Ebenflur (Prairie) Church in May 1908, the editor of the local paper hailed the event as a sign of the growth and prosperity in the county. “The building of this church is the final notice that it is not a prophecy, it is a fulfillment that will never return. It means that the advance in the ways of civilization will change the cattle ranges into farmland.” The Ebenflur Church was not the only church; the young community; there was a growing number of churches.

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Menno community was as Henry and Mary Dyck began down roots. Their choice of crops the dry climate in which they lived, kaflir corn, and varieties of sor- resistant. Some planted hard winter probably could not be credited with Hamilton County were becoming homes. Winter wheat acreage increased and the production of broomcorn Mennonites raised beef cattle, milking to create farms that would prosper. At the Voeh home he found “two of the liveliest, chubbiest little boys I met, who evidently think that to live with mamma in a dugout is the finest lot in the world.” The night he spent camped on the floor at settler Lizzie Richert’s dugout was no hardship but “snug.” Heinrich Janzen, a leader in the settlement, commented to one of the local papers that the Mennonites were successfully adapting to their new environment. Their crops were planted, some of the first profits were in, and the Mennonites were ready to make a com-mitment to Hamilton County.

It became clear early in the settlement process, however, that there would be tension and difficulties between the Mennonites and their neighbors. Local ranchers evidently felt some resentment at the influx of farming families. “The herds of the stock raisers have been doing some damage to the crops of the new settlers, but some of them have been invited and compelled to pay damages and the good naturedly retreat before the host of homesteaders, who indemnify them liberally by making them [sic] lands of the ranches more valuable.” Whether the stock growers felt that the increase in land values in the county justified the loss of open rangelands, they did not say. The ranchers
were perhaps not the only Hamilton County residents who harbored some prejudice against their new neighbors. Heinrich Janzen believed that a goodly number of those in the county looked “askance at the German settlers.” He attempted to justify the Mennonite presence to those elsewhere in the county by asserting that they were hardworking American citizens who were just as willing as their neighbors to work for the good of the county.23

Some of the settlement’s residents believed that anti-Mennonite prejudice manifested itself in poor provision of services to the southeastern corner of the county. Lamont Township lacked sufficient roads, and farmers found that transporting their products to the rail line at Kendall was a trial. In 1908, in spite of repeated requests, the county commissioners failed to authorize a new road through the sand hills from Syracuse to Kendall.24 In 1912, proper roads still did not exist. An observer from the central part of the state noted: “It is certainly a fine place to raise cattle, chickens, milo maize, kaffir corn and some broom corn but it is not easy to market anything but cattle. Hogs grow just as fat and fast there as anywhere but there isn’t a car load of fat hogs in the county at one time so there is no sale for them.”25

The loss of a bridge in 1909 seemed a further sign that all was not well between the Menno settlement and the rest of the county. The bridge at Kendall washed out and was not repaired immediately, delaying the mail and other business. The “Menno Happenings” column in the local paper took on a decidedly militant tone. “If things don’t move soon now people here are talking of getting up a petition and sending it to headquarters; then we will see if they can keep putting Kendall off. We want our mail and are entitled to it, as much as anyone else.”26

The biggest problem facing the new settlement, however, was conflict not with neighbors or a hostile county government but with the environment. The southern plains have always been a dry and somewhat difficult land to farm, and the Mennonites had settled on their new lands near the beginning of a short period of drought. As early as 1908, farming families were succumbing to the vagaries of the western Kansas climate. That summer, they discovered two of the common denominators of southwestern Kansas weather, “very hot winds and no rain nowadays.” Although some locals were beginning to harvest what they deemed an acceptable crop of wheat, others were arranging with the federal government for leaves of absence from their land or moving back to centering ministers from Russia and California. “They very much enjoy humor and hang to the country. Systems worse than this in their settlement, the exodus continued through shipments of relief supplies from rived in Menno. Although the comments from non-Mennonite were not entirely positive, “we rather generation this county.”28

The community’s problems continued into 1909, more settlers returned to the doubt this phenomenon troubled community and see it prosper. A spokesman for the settlement, ex-local papers. He asserted that the desert. I believe that this country him comfortable and in this healthy, vigorous family.” He felt were there to stay, and to prosper a commitment to the Menno common money I have in this county, I am and am for Hamilton county, first.

Despite the opinions of boosters continued to be less than wholly with few crops harvested, although we do raise is good stuff.”31 The 1911. There was little rain, and s illness during the hot, dry summer during harvest, “as there is but repressed, the notices of families increased in frequency.

By 1912, the demise of the belief the country neighboring agents for county, and encouraged a number to move. Many had relocated to Kansas.33 Although there had been movement was overcoming the comm
County residents who harbored neighbors. Heinrich Janzen believed the county looked "askance at the justification of the Mennonite presence to asserting that they were hardworking and willing as their neighbors to work.

In 1911, proper roads still did not connect central part of the state noted: "It is not easy to market anything but it there as anywhere but there isn't any time so there is no sale.

The community's problems continued as the years progressed. In 1909, more settlers returned to their families farther to the east. No doubt this phenomenon troubled those who wished to remain in the community and see it prosper. Heinrich Janzen, as an unofficial spokesman for the settlement, expressed his opinions in one of the local papers. He asserted that the area was not, nor had ever been, "a desert. I believe that this country was intended to feed the community and make it comfortable and in this hardy climate be able to raise up a healthy, vigorous family." He further claimed that the Mennonites were there to stay, and to prosper. Janzen affirmed that he had made a commitment to the Menno community. "I shall invest all the spare money I have in this county, I am here to stay. I have cast my lot here and am for Hamilton county, first, last and all the time."}

9

A Woman and Her World

...
We are . . . sorry that several of those who have left have made it hard on those of us who remained, because most everyone had a good well and they invariably rent their places to some “big bug” who is an owner of lots of stock. The stockman can water his stock there, then let it graze in the same neighborhood, and as we need all the grass there is — it also suffered during the drought — we are inclined to the opinion that they should help us and keep the cattle men out.34

The stockmen and their herds seemed to be swallowing up the township. The reports from visitors to the county lacked their previous jaunty tone. A writer for McPherson County’s Inman Review found conditions dismal. Transportation was terrible, the Russian thistles were on the verge of taking over the township, and the loneliness of the area was oppressive. Poverty seemed to stalk the settlement, with “fewer fine farm houses and smaller barns” than those to be found farther east. He, too, noted that the cattle ranchers were taking over the county. The Mennonites of Hamilton County remained brave despite their hardships, but the maintenance of the settlement, to this observer, seemed hardly worth the trouble.35

In the midst of these disappointments, internal dissension was forming, between those who wished to leave Menno, and those who desired to continue their residence in the township. A dispute arose over the rights to the Ebenflur Church, the center of the Menno settlement. In December of 1913, those church members leaving the community, led by Heinrich Janzen, gathered and voted to disband the church and sell the property for approximately $150 to a Methodist congregation at Mitchell, in neighboring Stanton County. Although Janzen had previously been a staunch community booster, he now believed that the congregation had come to the end of its existence. They stripped the Ebenflur Church of its fittings, sold its contents, and prepared the building to be moved.36

The Dycks were at the center of this controversy. Within days, those who had elected to remain in Lamont Township expressed their outrage. Henry’s father, P. H. Dyck, a merchant and the postmaster for Menno, requested and received a restraining order against those who were selling the church. The use of an injunction in the dispute was a rather extreme example of the degree to which the community had fragmented. Mennonite tradition prohibited community members from resorting to secular authorities to resolve conflicts within the group. Dyck and his fellow and individuals in Syracuse had done funds to build the church, that families in the churchyard, and the to sell the building. Furthermore, residents of the Menno community of the spiritual center of the settlement. Those selling the property be longer being conducted at the site remaining trustee, claimed the authority. Janzen argued that of the settlement, “some are too women and children who are too and some never were members twenty-three belong and can vote, to which the congregation was ap proved the sale.38

After much mudslinging and papers, the Hamilton County Republican Journal, the dispute was settled of the Menno settlement. The Mennonites of Hamilton County remained brave despite their hardships, but the maintenance of the settlement, to this observer, seemed hardly worth the trouble.35

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After much mudslinging and papers, the Hamilton County Republican Journal, the dispute was settled of the Menno settlement. The Mennonites of Hamilton County remained brave despite their hardships, but the maintenance of the settlement, to this observer, seemed hardly worth the trouble.35

In the midst of these disappointments, internal dissension was forming, between those who wished to leave Menno, and those who desired to continue their residence in the township. A dispute arose over the rights to the Ebenflur Church, the center of the Menno settlement. In December of 1913, those church members leaving the community, led by Heinrich Janzen, gathered and voted to disband the church and sell the property for approximately $150 to a Methodist congregation at Mitchell, in neighboring Stanton County. Although Janzen had previously been a staunch community booster, he now believed that the congregation had come to the end of its existence. They stripped the Ebenflur Church of its fittings, sold its contents, and prepared the building to be moved.36

The Dycks were at the center of this controversy. Within days, those who had elected to remain in Lamont Township expressed their outrage. Henry’s father, P. H. Dyck, a merchant and the postmaster for Menno, requested and received a restraining order against those who were selling the church. The use of an injunction in the dispute was a rather extreme example of the degree to which the community had fragmented. Mennonite tradition prohibited community members from resorting to secular authorities to resolve conflicts within

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and individuals in Syracuse had donated a considerable portion of the
funds to build the church, that they had buried members of their
families in the churchyard, and that Janzen and others had no author-
nity to sell the building. Furthermore, they asserted that many former
residents of the Menno community would be returning and in need
of the spiritual center of the settlement.37

Those selling the property believed otherwise. Services were no
longer being conducted at the site, and Heinrich Janzen, as the sole
remaining trustee, claimed the authority to conduct a vote and sell the
property. Janzen argued that of the twenty-three remaining members
of the settlement, “some are too far from the church to go, many
women and children who are too far away and would have no vote,
and some never were members at Ebenflur, and only three of the
twenty-three belong and can vote.” The Western District Conference,
to which the congregation was affiliated, also appeared to have ap-
proved the sale.38

After much mudslinging and contradictory stories in the two local
papers, the Hamilton County Republican and Syracuse News and the Syra-
cuse Journal, the dispute was settled in favor of the remaining members
of the Menno settlement. The Methodists in Mitchell had been un-
aware of the problems within the Menno community, and had no
desire to be a part of the feud. In March, the Western District Con-
ference returned to the Methodist congregation its money, as well as
reimbursing the church for court costs. The Syracuse Journal reported
that “this was done in the interest of peace among the Mennonites
who yet remain in that neighborhood, and is the best solution of the
whole matter under the circumstances.”39 The building would remain
a church until 1923, when the Menno Community Club purchased it.
During the 1930s, it would be demolished to make way for a Works
Progress Administration-sponsored building project, erecting a new
community center on the site, built of native stone.40 Henry Dyck
would take an active role in this project.

With the dispute settled, Menno more or less faded from the his-
tory of Hamilton County. In the months that followed, the remaining
residents of the township tried to put the best possible face on the
situation, claiming that the outward migration was temporary, and
that their friends and neighbors would be returning. The Hamilton
County Republican and Syracuse News was “reliably informed” that the
migrants were expected to return, and that “the settlement is here to
In March, the paper printed letters from former residents, bemoaning the day they ever left Hamilton County. A month later, the paper published an advertisement for the community, with a picture of the settlement’s members standing in front of their church in earlier, more hopeful days. The caption read “In the German Mennonite [sic] settlement. Good [sic] houses, good schools and a fine church make it the best improved settlement in the county.” What the ad failed to mention was that very few of those pictured in the photograph remained, and that as an organized unit, Menno no longer truly existed.

In 1915, only ninety-nine persons lived in Lamont Township, in twelve households. The drought had destroyed the farms of Mennonite and non-Mennonite alike; of the twenty-seven non-Mennonite households existing in 1910, only five remained in 1915. Only seven Mennonite households remained. Among the Mennonites, most of those who persisted were relatively old; only two of the heads of households were under forty-five. Most were over fifty-five. Only one young couple remained, Henry and Mary Dyck. Although the Mennonite community had more or less disappeared, a small presence would continue to exist in the county, in the form of a small cluster of related families. In 1979, the county’s official history commented, “The only mark left by the Mennonite colony was the change from range land to farm land and their name and example.”

It was perhaps not surprising that the Dycks stayed behind, while other families left. The Dycks’ marriage was an interfaith union. Although Henry had been born and raised a member of the Hoffnungsauf Russian Mennonite community in McPherson County, Mary was not a Mennonite. She had been born and raised an Evangelical. Although Henry and Mary migrated with the Hoffnungsauf Mennonites, neither of the Dycks were ever active participants in Lamont Township’s Mennonite community. Church records indicate that the family did not attend the Ebenflur Church, and Mary remained a devout Evangelical at the time of her death. The religious convictions and community ties that bound others to migrate with the group did not seem to be shared in the Dyck home.

Although without a supportive community, the young couple set about creating a farm of which they could be proud. In 1915, their family was complete. Henry was twenty-eight, Mary thirty-one, and their three surviving children included Thelma, six, Ervin, two, and Verna, an infant. Their farm was not a large one, consisting of only 160 acres of rented land. Henry 1911 but had sold it in 1914, probably. After the departure of the Menno rather thinly settled, with only two remnants. Eventually, Henry’s brother Peter turned to farm nearby.

The 1913 agricultural census diversified farm. The Dycks grew grasses. They produced 105 tons of $285 worth of milk and cream, 75 and eggs. Their livestock consisted of six cattle, and eight swine. Desp were really still at the beginning of farming.

For the next eleven years, their farm would increase steadily, the Dyck crops diversified. The Dycks produced broomcorn, sorghum, milo, and slowly into winter wheat production, regarding the flock of cows and the swine. Their livestock consisted of six cattle, and eight swine.

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...letters from former residents, Hamilton County. A month later, for the community, with a picture standing in front of their church in Jefferson. The caption read “In the German Menno houses, good schools and a fine settlement in the county.” What very few of those pictured in the picture were over fifty-five. Only one was Mary Dyck. Although the Mennonite colony was the change from and example. The Dycks stayed behind, while the Hoffnungsau Mennonites, a small cluster of families, was an interfaith union. All raised a member of the Hoffnungsau Mennonites, Mary was born and raised an Evangelical. Al with the Hoffnungsau Mennonites, five participants in Lamont Township records indicate that the family was still at the beginning stages of developing their farm. For the next eleven years, their enterprise remained relatively small. Some years the Dycks farmed as much as 240 acres, but just as often they farmed 160 acres or less. While the size of farms in the township moved steadily upward, the Dycks held their ground. Their choice of crops remained relatively conservative as well. They generally planted broomcorn, sorghum, milo, and pasture grasses, and moved very slowly into winter wheat production. Mary was very active in home production, regarding the flock of chickens as her sole responsibility, and sharing responsibility for the milk cows with Henry. Milk and cream sales, as well as sales of poultry and eggs, were an important source of income for the family. The real innovation was the family’s purchase of both a tractor and an automobile. Their tractor was one of only four, in a township of fifty-three farmsteads. In 1925, they again became landowners when Henry purchased a quarter section in the far southeastern corner of Lamont Township. The innovation and growth of the Dyck farm continued at an even greater pace in the years leading up to the Great Depression and drought. In 1927, they began renting a considerable amount of land in addition to the acres they owned, bringing their farm size up to 800 acres; in 1928, they farmed over 1,000 acres. Into the 1950s, they would cultivate 1,000 acres or more most years. Farmers in this part of Kansas regularly rented a large portion of the land they cultivated. In an arid climate, this was a means of managing risk. Henry also began experimenting seriously with the production of wheat, and made further investments in mechanical technology. In 1929, the family was able to purchase two tractors, a Caterpillar and a McCormick Deering, a new truck, and two cars. By 1927, Mary enjoyed the use...
of a radio, one of only three in the township, and often listened as she went about her daily chores. While the farm homes of the Great Plains were late to receive improvements of any kind, nearly three-quarters of Kansas farm homes had a radio by 1940. Radio made life much easier for women who spent long hours working alone in their farm homes, and Mary Dyck discovered that earlier than most.53

Although the 1920s had been a decade of growth and prosperity on the Dyck farm, their experience of the 1930s would be much different. As a decade, it had little to recommend it. In 1931, farmers in the Dycks' corner of Hamilton County harvested a fantastic crop, as much as forty bushels to the acre, just in time for the market to fail.54 Prices for wheat and other farm products crashed to all-time lows in 1931, the same year as an unprecedented drought and record-setting temperatures began to afflict the region. Terrible dust storms accompanied the drought. Between 1931 and 1940, the residents of southwestern Kansas, as well as those of other areas of the Great Plains, saw their topsoil and their neighbors scattered to the winds.

The problems of Hamilton County were very much like those of other dust bowl counties, beset by drought and depopulation. Between 1930 and 1940, the population of Hamilton County fell from 3,328 to 2,645, a reduction of 21 percent. The farming population fell even more drastically, from 1,692 in 1930 to 1,160 in 1940, 31 percent fewer farm residents.55 The same depopulation was occurring in the Dycks' neighborhood. The township's population tumbled from 269 to 159 during the decade. Many of those who left were young people, facing the decade without productive land or jobs, or the opportunity to obtain either.56 A 1937 description of what a visitor would see in Lamont Township easily explains why so many were leaving. "After two years of practically no production, the area will present a bleak appearance to visitors from the eastern part of the state . . . visitors will drive through sage covered sandhills from the north, along road ditches drift level with dust. Fields will be as barren as a school playground, and heaped with dust behind each thistle clump. From the south his eye will behold the same desolation and barreness."57 There was no soil to hold the grass and no prospects to hold the area's young people.

In October 1936, the point at which the preserved portions of her diary began, Mary Knackstedt Dyck was fifty-two and the mother of adult children. She and Henry managed the family farm, while their oldest daughter, Thelma, lived on a nearby farm with her husband, Cliff Warner, and two children, Peter, Verna, was often working away found what temporary employment on and farther afield. Mary's small farm. In 1935, the acreage amounted to 1,300 acres, with 100 acres in sweet sorghum, 15 in sudangrass, and $75 worth of milk and $350 worth of butter. They owned 144 hens, an unspecified number of pigs, and one combine. Theirs was a large ninety-one farm households in operations.58

Although Mary and Henry remained during this difficult period, their finances diminished significantly. Mary's most consistent income was what she corresponded a state away in Hutchinson, Kansas. The 1937 description of what a visitor would see in Lamont Township easily explains why so many were leaving. "After two years of practically no production, the area will present a bleak appearance to visitors from the eastern part of the state . . . visitors will drive through sage covered sandhills from the north, along road ditches drift level with dust. Fields will be as barren as a school playground, and heaped with dust behind each thistle clump. From the south his eye will behold the same desolation and barreness."57 There was no soil to hold the grass and no prospects to hold the area's young people.

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Radio made life long hours working alone in their homes. In 1931, farmers in Dickey harvested a fantastic crop, as just in time for the market to fail. Drought and record-setting Terrible dirt storms accompanied the 1930s. The farming population fell from 1,160 in 1930 to 1,160 in 1940, 31 percent of Hamilton County fell from percent. The farming population fell in 1930 to 1,160 in 1940, 31 percent. The population tumbled from 269 to 259 in 1930. The population of Hamilton County fell from 269 to 259 in 1930, 31 percent and a state away in Hutchinson, Kansas. Lizzie would later migrate to Oregon, as did many from central and western Kansas. In 1931, Mary's sister Altophena, her only sibling living in close proximity, died. Henry's brother, Pete, and his son, Elmer, remained close at hand, spending a great deal of their time in and around the Dyck home. They provided a good bit of paid labor at times when the Dycks' son, Ervin, was away. The Dycks' children were also among those who left the area during the 1930s, unable to make an adequate living. Instead of handing their farm over to the next generation, Mary and Henry watched them leave, unable to support an extended family in their difficult circumstances.

In spite of the departures suffered by rural Lamont Township, the Dyck diary paints a picture of a remarkably active small community. The Bishops, longtime friends and neighbors, came to visit. Between migrations, the Dyck children were constantly in and out of the home, and Mary's daughters shared her work. Mary occasionally went to quilt at a neighboring farm. Mary and Henry went to some community events such as dances together, although Henry sometimes went alone. The automobile, which appreciably shortened the distance between widely scattered farms, allowed more visiting than otherwise might have been possible. One issue does become clear, however, when careful examination is made of the visitors to the Dyck farm: daughters aside, most of the Dycks' visitors were men. The mobility
afforded by the automobile was more easily enjoyed by males, who were generally unfettered by the constant round of repetitive daily chores that tied the area's women to the farmhouse. The forces of nature could also conspire to create isolation for all, in spite of modern transportation technology. Dust storms often made it difficult and unpleasant to leave the farm, although it was sometimes necessary to venture out into them. The blizzards of late 1939 and early 1940 filled the roads with impassable drifts and stranded the Dycks in their home for days. The immense spaces and extreme weather that had always defined life in western Kansas continued to exist, although technological change allowed some relief to isolated people. A strong family life was a woman's most important protection against loneliness and isolation. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the thirties threatened Mary Dyck's supportive web of family connections.

Ervin, the couple's only surviving son, probably would have been his parents' choice to inherit the family farm, but he would not live to take on this task. During the middle years of the 1930s, he made regular forays away from the family farm, looking for work. When he was home, he helped his father and brother-in-law with their tasks, but he was absent more often than he was present. In 1936, he picked cotton in Arizona and New Mexico, work that was not always pleasant or easy for a young man accustomed to working in the wheat fields of Kansas. In December 1936, Ervin returned from cotton picking in the Southwest feeling the ill effects of his labors. His mother remarked in her diary, "Ervin's hands have very big sores on them yet, from the Cotton field effects," and "Ervin lunched all day long, for good measure, after being on a cheap diet in the Cotton fields." After Christmas in 1936, Ervin resumed his travels. The early days of 1937 found him working for the Civilian Conservation Corps. This federal program furnished jobs, room, and board to young men whose families were on relief, and sent the larger part of their wages to their parents. Later that year, he and a friend ventured to California to work as migrant farm laborers. In his last move, Ervin made use of family connections in the Northwest, and traveled to Oregon to work as a logger. It was an unfortunate choice, and one that would cost him his life. In May 1941, Ervin died of injuries he received in a sawmill accident. He would never return to his parents' farm in Hamilton County.

The middle years of the decade also found their elder child, Thelma, and her family on the move. She had married Clifford War-
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A Woman
and Her World
Children on the move.

Ervin, Thelma, and Verna’s challenge in Mary Dyck’s life. Although she mentioned the issue specifically in her diary, her challenges were numerous. She lost her daughters’ company, and she spent many days alone. Verna did not always stay home, and longer periods away. When she would leave the family, Verna would reside in Syracuse, the court house, distant from her parents’ farm.

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Days spent at home alone were challenging, with Ervin’s work often at home. There was no companion at work was the reason, and the static electricity generated by the storms themselves made Dyck’s life. Her daughters’ absence regularly undoing her attempts to rid her house of the pests.

Her daughters’ absence became a challenge when Mary was ill. Her deteriorating health could encompass any number of issues, including her “cripled up” after a day of work. The pain caused by bad teeth. A local dentist, Dr. McPherson, treated her dental problems. Her dentures regularly gave her a great deal of trouble.
school graduation, she worked on farms in neighboring counties, and also in Hutchinson, occasionally returning to her parents' farm. By the late 1930s, she was working as a beautician and hoping to open her own shop. When Verna was home, she was a great help to her mother, doing much of the family's baking, sewing, and cleaning. Mary commented frequently upon her industry. "Cleaned up dust some in fore-noon. Verna did most all of it." "Verna helps Mo out her misery." When Mary was ill, Verna often came home to help her mother and father. She would continue her pattern of periodic visits home, and longer periods away, until her marriage in the mid-1940s, when she would leave the family farm for good. She and her husband would reside in Syracuse, the county seat, approximately twenty miles distant from her parents' farm.

Ervin, Thelma, and Verna's moves represented a significant challenge in Mary Dyck's life. Although she never complained about this issue specifically in her diary, her work no doubt became more onerous. She lost her daughters' company as she worked her way through her daily chores, and no other woman, neighbor or kin, replaced them. She was much more reliant on friends and neighbors coming to visit than was her husband. Mary's chores tied her to home and hearth, while Henry's work often took him into Syracuse or Kendall. Days spent at home alone were often "very blue & cloudy." Her only companion at work was the radio, which was frequently disrupted by the static electricity generated by dust storms. At times, the dirt storms themselves made Dyck's work almost unbearably difficult, regularly undoing her attempts to keep a tidy house. In the spring of 1937 in particular, her mounting dismay was evident as she worked in vain to rid her house of the persistent dust.

Her daughters' absence became an even greater problem because of Mary's deteriorating health. She often complained of feeling "tuff," which could encompass any number of ills. Rheumatism often left her "cripled up" after a day of washing. She experienced ringing in her ears and dizziness on a regular basis, and suffered from severe pain caused by bad teeth. A local dentist removed all of her teeth in September 1938, but that measure failed to resolve completely her dental problems. Her dentures never fit properly, and she spent a good deal of time nursing a sore mouth and gums. Without her daughters to spell her at her chores, she suffered through her routine as best she could. Eventually the Dycks hired household help.

Most seriously, Mary Dyck suffered emotionally from the forced
A Woman and Her World

separation from her children. Their centrality to her thoughts and concerns is easily visible in each day’s record. She wrote letters to each of her children three or four times a week, and faithfully noted the letters she had received. With the receipt of each letter, she noted the name and location of the sender, as if by naming and placing each child, she could keep watch over him or her. Naming and placing her children, whether they were in Hutchinson, Kansas, Duff, Nebraska, or Dexter, Oregon, seems to have reassured Mary that they were indeed accounted for and safe.

Despite these comforting rituals, the absence of Thelma, Verna, and Ervin depressed Mary. Their periodic departures were occasions for mourning. The box of Post Toasties sitting on the dining room table reminded Mary of Ervin’s departure for Duff, Nebraska. “And another very lonely day to content with since the vacancy of Ervin. Our Toastie eater we certenly miss him. All the emptyness is staring Mo in the face every where she goes . . . Mo cant keep from sobing.” When Mary and Henry took Verna back to Hutchinson after a visit home, she experienced the same emotions. “Ma had a lump in her throat that she couldnt swallow eyes where full of mist that she couldnt see the way ahead. It took her all that day to come out of such state of mind.” The Warner family’s departure for Oregon was particularly trying. “They packed all fore-noon and at 2 P.M. They where bound for Oregon. And now the junkie Basement and Hydron the little [children’s] Battle field where they always fought their battles, look so very lonesome.” Mary and Henry were still feeling their loss two months later when she wrote that “the lonesome couple enduring the Dust Bowl rolled in the Hay at 9:30.” The Dyck home was too quiet without the reassuring sights and sounds of children and grandchildren. Much of the period covered by Dyck’s diary was one of watchful waiting, and hoping for children to return home to the farm in western Kansas.

The pain of separation was amplified by the economic struggles of the decade. The Dycks kept their farm going, although it was not an easy proposition. The decade was marked by regular crop failures. In 1937, crops on 700 of the farm’s 1,040 acres failed. In 1938, 1,000 acres of crops failed, and in 1939, 600 acres failed and another 400 were left fallow. In 1940, the last of the dust bowl years, 400 acres of their crops failed, while they chose to leave another 500 acres fallow. Given the dismal precipitation, high winds, and persistent dust, there was little the Dycks could do to improve their luck. In 1935, at the height of the dust storms, the cultural equipment available to them was not sufficiently developed to improve their luck. The Dycks were left to rely on the resources they could find. One of the programs they participated in was the construction of the old Ebenflur Church. It was built and constructed by the federal government in the 1930s, as part of the New Deal’s effort to create jobs and rebuild the economy. The Dycks participated in the construction project, and they were able to build the church with the help of the federal government. For example, in 1935, when the church was under construction, they received an $800 grant to help with the construction costs. This was a substantial sum of money, and it helped the Dycks to complete the church. The church was extremely important during the Great Depression, as it provided a place for the community to gather and worship. The Dycks attended services at the church, and they also helped to build the church. Mary’s work around the farm was also extremely important during the Great Depression, as she had to preserve food for the family. She had to purchase vegetables, pickles, jams, and jellies, and she often had to purchase the
their centrality to her thoughts and her record. She wrote letters to each of them, and faithfully noted the receipt of each letter, she noted the names as if by naming and placing each in her mind. Naming and placing her brothers, Kansas, Duff, Nebraska, reassured Mary that they were in Kansas.

Periodic departures were occasions for Duff, Nebraska. “And with since the vacancy of Ervin is him. All the emptiness is staring back to Hutchinson after a visit. All that day to come out of such a departure for Oregon was par

The Dycks were left to piece together an income from whatever sources they could find. One of these was work relief. Henry Dyck participated in the construction of a community building on the site of the old Ebenflur Church. It was made of native stone, and its construction spanned many months. This was a Works Progress Administration construction project, and Henry worked in a supervisory position. They also received government commodities, particularly meat. During the time that Ervin worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps, Mary and Henry received income from their son’s employment, as stipulated by the agency. Ervin earned $25 a month; $5 went to him and the remaining $20 to his parents. The Dycks also participated in the programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. For example, in 1935, the only year for which farm accounts are available, they received an $18 hog allotment, a payment for animals they agreed not to raise. They also participated in the crop reduction program. In 1937, they received $1,941 from the government. This was a substantial payment, based on the large number of acres that the Dycks farmed. The amount of the government grant, however, needs to be put into perspective. The Dycks were farming a thousand acres of land. When the wind blew they sometimes needed to run tractors nearly around the clock to keep the dirt listed and on the ground. Listers dug deep furrows in the land that encouraged dirt to blow into the furrows rather than into the sky. This was an expensive proposition, which required that they purchase gas, tractor repairs, and labor. While this was a large federal payment, the Dycks still had to watch their budget very carefully. Another important element in the federal farm program was the Soil Conservation Service, which provided financial assistance to farmers engaged in conservation work. The Dycks were active participants. Henry regularly attended soil conservation meetings, received seed loans, contoured his land, and cooperated with the local agricultural extension service.

Mary’s work around the farm, always a source of income, was extremely important during the thirties. Although the dirt storms foiled attempts at gardening and killed the orchard, she still was active in preserving food for the family. Each year she canned gallons of fruits, vegetables, pickles, jams, and jellies for home consumption, although she often had to purchase the produce for these efforts. She and...
Henry also canned meat and rendered lard from home-butchered livestock. Her efforts in 1935 also demonstrate the importance of her poultry flock to the continuation of the farming enterprise. In that year, she sold eggs worth $221.85, and chickens for $42.15. A restaurant purchased most of the chickens she sold, but neighbors also bought them. This, however, was not pure profit. She bought nearly $70 worth of chicken feed, and the chicks themselves cost $15. Her profit, however, was $181.91, nearly enough to cover the family’s grocery bill. Cream and milk, which she and Henry cooperatively produced, added another $51.26 to the family income.

The receipts from Henry’s enterprises help to put the importance of Mary’s contribution in perspective. In 1935, Henry sold two loads of wheat for $134. He also sold livestock worth $141, while purchasing a bull for $50. The expenses involved in maintaining his side of the farming operation were also substantial, $390.60, the largest cost being $274.07 expended on the upkeep and fuel for the family’s tractor. The expense of maintaining the crop and livestock operations of the farm was greater than the income produced. Like most of his neighbors, Henry Dyck’s operating expenditures exceeded his profits, and the Dyck farm survived only because of an adequate combination of the husband and wife’s efforts, plus a generous dollop of federal aid.

Despite their financial concerns, the Dycks kept their farm, rather than migrating to the West. This, however, was not a foregone conclusion. They questioned their ability to keep on farming, particularly in the spring of 1937. That year was one of the worst of the decade in terms of the number and duration of dust storms. In the first six months of that year alone, Dyck recorded nearly 100 days when dust clouds filled the sky. It was also the year in which two of their children left for Oregon. The elder Dycks thought about joining them in the West. They were lonely and frustrated with the problems of home and farm making in the heart of the dust bowl. In May 1937, Mary commented on her poor physical condition, and blamed it on the weather. “I spose she’s filled with dust enduring these duststorms 5 days in succession. Then 2 days of piece, and nuther 5 days of it in succession with out eny let up.” The same day, Henry came in from the fields to announce that the time had come for a change. “Mo pack your Suit Case lets go, and get clear out of the Country. Moving along . . . the River isn’t far enough.” Eventually, their desire to stay won out, and the Dycks remained during the summer of 1937.

In the spring of 1938, it appeared a move west. On May 29, to get these Eggs to Nite she cer & all empty. She felt like shed herself up by the roots & is plan she was worried about a short time is unclear. They settled for a while, returned in April, and resumed the depression. They succeeded until 1936, the year after Mary’s 1935, sold his land, and moved daughter, Verna. His children did not remain in the family. Had the Dycks’ farming enterprise Depression while many did not relatively good condition financially rooted to the area. Their operations were able to withstand the doubts. It is likely that they knew everything for which they had values in Hamilton County fairly a lifetime of work invested in a viable option.

For their children, the situation lived their lives in Hamilton County, resources, and their parents’ income to support an extended family farm as well. Verna moved Thelma lived and worked on the Dycks, the farm moved to town only after her porting the Dycks, the farm Dyck retired.

The depopulation of rural areas well before the 1930s. The depression affected the young of farming accelerated rate of family farm failure decade. Many of the farms that
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In the spring of 1938, it appeared that the Dycks were again contem­plating a move west. On March 30, Mary wrote “When Mo went to get these Eggs to Nite she certenly found the Henhouse lonesome & all empty. She felt like sheding tears. It seems as if she’s taring herself up by the roots & is planting them some where else.” Whether she was worried about a short trip, or a relocation of longer duration, is unclear. They settled for a visit to their children in Oregon. They returned in April, and resumed their struggles with the dust bowl and the depression. They succeeded, and their farming enterprise lasted until 1976, the year after Mary’s death. Henry then retired from farm­ing, sold his land, and moved to Syracuse to live with his younger daughter, Verna. His children did not take over his farm, and the land did not remain in the family. Henry Dyck died in 1963.

The Dycks’ farming enterprise survived the dust bowl and Great Depression while many did not. The family had entered hard times in relatively good condition financially. They were well established, and rooted to the area. Their operation was large, and fairly prosperous. They were able to withstand the troubles of the 1930s in spite of their doubts. It is likely that they knew that if they left, they would lose everything for which they had worked. During the depression, land values in Hamilton County fell drastically. They never would have recovered a fair price for their land and years of labor. For them, with a lifetime of work invested in Lamont Township, staying was the only viable option.

For their children, the situation was somewhat different. They had lived their lives in Hamilton County, but they lacked their parents’ resources, and their parents’ farm did not generate a great enough income to support an extended family. Ervin chose to look for a job, and perhaps a better life, on the West Coast. He would not live to inherit the farm. His sisters followed their husbands away from the family farm as well. Verna moved to town after her marriage, and Thelma lived and worked on her family’s own land in Kearny County, moving to town only after her husband’s death. After decades of sup­porting the Dycks, the farm passed out of their hands when Henry Dyck retired.

The depopulation of rural communities was a well-established fact well before the 1930s. The drought, depression, and dust bowl, which affected the young of farming families particularly, guaranteed an ac­celerated rate of family farm failure and rural depopulation during the decade. Many of the farms that survived, like that of the Dycks, would
succumb in later decades. Children followed a path away from the family farm during the thirties and continued to do so in the decades thereafter. The circumstances of the decade meant the beginning of the end for the Dyck farm, and for many a family farm in south- western Kansas.

The Dyck farm, although large, was much like others in southwestern Kansas. The problems the family faced, given the drought and dust bowl, were much like the problems of the surrounding region. Poor prospects and family dislocations were common elements in the lives of many of their friends and neighbors. What makes the Dycks uncommon is that Mary Dyck kept a detailed, almost daily diary, and her daughters preserved it. While historians may surmise how the problems of the decade affected families throughout the plains states and may speculate on the impact of these stresses on the interior lives of families, the Dyck diary provides an intimate look at the life of a family under tremendous stress.

Historians know a great deal about the impact of rural depopulation on affected communities. As young people left the farms and rural areas, small towns lost their tax bases, then their schools, and often their identities. Small farms disappeared into larger farming units as families relinquished their holdings. Small towns became ghost towns as their populations and businesses moved on to the next bigger town down the road. The facts about this process are relatively well known. What historians know very little about is the impact of those events on the families who watched their children leave home. There are very few documents recording these events from the perspective of those who were left behind when rural communities disintegrated. Mary Dyck’s diary is a record of the impact of trying times, from the perspective of the family.

When scholars contemplate the major historical events of the twentieth century, such as the Great Depression and dust bowl, their tendency is to read history from the outside in. They move from the larger, seemingly all-encompassing event, in to the lives of those experiencing the event. While personal writings such as diaries and letters are extremely useful in such a project, they also challenge the reader to examine these historical phenomena from the inside out—from the perspective of the individual living the moment, and perhaps not perceiving themselves as engulfed in historical cataclysm. Mary Knackstedt Dyck’s experience allows the reader a unique opportunity to view rural life in the midst of the dust bowl through the lens of the farm home, and from the perspective of family through droughts, depressions, and family dislocations. Dyck’s extensive daily writings are important in her world, and how everyday elements in her life interacted in the midst of the decade’s troubles.

**THE DYCK DIARY**

It was during the turbulent years of the dust bowl that Mary Dyck evidently began to write. Warner remembered that her mother, Mary, had kept a fairly simple document, recording these items, but other family members were not so relaxed. She began to write about the pro and goings of family members, times of the thirties. As the years accumulated, Mary Dyck’s experience begins to record these events from the perspective of those who were left behind when rural communities disintegrated. Mary Dyck’s diary is a record of the impact of trying times, from the perspective of the family.

When scholars contemplate the major historical events of the twentieth century, such as the Great Depression and dust bowl, their tendency is to read history from the outside in. They move from the larger, seemingly all-encompassing event, in to the lives of those experiencing the event. While personal writings such as diaries and letters are extremely useful in such a project, they also challenge the reader to examine these historical phenomena from the inside out—from the perspective of the individual living the moment, and perhaps not perceiving themselves as engulfed in historical cataclysm.

The origin of the diary as a means of self-expression, such as Dyck’s practice of referring to herself as “she,” “Mo,” or “Mama,” is relatively rare and often appear to be signalled by quantity of language. References to herself as “I” in the diary is also signalled by quantity of language.

In late April, she went to Hurley to tend to the farm. She was gone, she did not write...
followed a path away from the farm home, and from the perspective of a woman who had lived through droughts, depressions, and rural depopulation previously. Dyck’s extensive daily writings allow the reader to explore what was important in her world, and how the continuation of the ordinary and everyday elements in her life may have helped to anchor her in the midst of the decade’s troubles.

THE DYCK DIARY

It was during the turbulent years of the Great Depression and dust bowl that Mary Dyck evidently began keeping a detailed diary. Thelma Warner remembered that her mother had kept a diary for a number of years previously, simply noting weather conditions and daily work schedules. The diary had a place of prominence, on the kitchen table, available for consultation by family members. These early writings, however, no longer exist. The preserved portion of the diary, for unknown reasons, begins abruptly in October 1936. At some point prior to this date, the diary became a more elaborate document, not just recording these items, but other information that interested Dyck. She began to write about the programming on the radio, the comings and goings of family members, and her family’s reactions to the hard times of the thirties. As the years passed and the trials facing this family accumulated, Mary Dyck’s writing became more personal and less detached. Even as the diary became more individual, it remained a fairly simple document, written in simple language. Judy Nolte Lensink’s generalized comments about rural women’s diaries hold true for Mary Dyck’s writing as well: “intensity of experience is usually signalled by quantity of language rather than by metaphor.”

The origin of the diary as a family “story” may account for some of its idiosyncracies, such as Dyck’s use of the third person in reference to herself. During the 1930s and early 1940s, she generally wrote of herself as “she,” “Mo,” or “Ma,” and her husband as “Po” or “Pa.” References to herself as “I” in the early portions of the diary are relatively rare and often appear to be momentary lapses of attention. In one entry, written on June 17, 1937, she referred to the document she was writing as “the family Diary.” On another occasion, she wrote that making the family’s log was “her duty.” The best evidence that she thought of this journal not as a personal document but as a family’s or farm’s account is found in her writings in the spring of 1937. In late April, she went to Hutchinson, Kansas, to visit family. While she was gone, she did not write about her own experiences in Hutch-
A Woman and Her World

Instead, when she returned home, she questioned the resident men about what had happened while she was away and wrote about the events that had occurred in her absence. Predictably, these entries are spare.

Mary Dyck’s diary has other idiosyncrasies as well. Clearly, she wrote throughout the day and often completed the entries for one day the following morning. This is the only way that she could record the time at which each family member retired, particularly when others often went to bed after she did. Her own notations indicate that she wrote during the day whenever the opportunity presented itself, writing early in the morning while she waited for Henry to come in for breakfast, during the day while the bread rose or a meal cooked, or during the evening as the family gathered around the radio. The journal is really a rolling account, developed throughout the course of a day, or often two. Sometimes she revisited a portion of the diary weeks or months later, in order to revise messy or incomplete entries. It is impossible to know what might have been added or deleted in the process.

Dyck’s spelling, punctuation, and grammar were quite erratic and consistent with her education and background. She spoke German in the home as a child and had only a third- or fourth-grade education. The eccentricities of her spelling and grammar are reproduced here because they say a good deal about the writer. As Judy Lensink wrote in her introduction to the diary of Emily Hawley Gillespie, the way in which a diarist wrote was most likely the way in which he or she spoke. The preservation of Mary Dyck’s own, uncorrected, highly individual writing is part of an attempt to recover and preserve the “voice” of a shy and retiring woman, who seems to have expressed herself freely only in her journal.

Radio drama often occupied a line or more of each day’s entry, and Dyck often referred to the characters on dramatic radio serials, otherwise known as soap operas, by their first names, without transitions indicating that they were purely fictional creatures. For example, on October 15, 1936, Dyck moved without punctuation from a discussion of mending her husband’s trousers to the announcement that “Bob is making plans to get his Marriage Lisense tomorrow,” and back to the day’s weather. Since none of the men in her family or her neighborhood were named Bob, it is most likely she was discussing Betty and Bob, her favorite soap opera. Although they are not usually reproduced in this edited version of her diary, she often provided detailed descriptions of those involving romantic content, life, and she may very well have put those in the heart of the depression possession.

The portion of the diary from October 1936 to May 1941. During this period, she learned to adapt to the hard times. Although Dyck’s marriage endured when the same conditions continued, she left farming for good. Although Dyck’s marriage endured when the same conditions continued, she left farming for good. Although Dyck’s marriage endured when the same conditions continued, she left farming for good. Although Dyck’s marriage endured when the same conditions continued, she left farming for good. Although Dyck’s marriage endured when the same conditions continued, she left farming for good.

EDITORIAL METHOD

The transcription of this diary is not perfect. Mary Dyck was a German speaker, and her spelling, punctuation, and grammar are somewhat erratic. Consequently, the grammar of the diary is sometimes quite readable. The transcription of the diary is fairly easily understandable, and it has been preserved as it appeared in the diary. Annotation has been added to clarify points. I have also included portions of the diary for which I have no other entries in order to provide a daily summary of the weather conditions.

The voluminous nature of the diary makes it difficult to decide which portions to include. Some entries have been omitted in order to include a daily summary of the weather conditions. A log of the day’s weather is usually also included.
home, she questioned the resident who she was away and wrote about absence. Predictably, these entries disorded as well. Clearly, she then completed the entries for one the only way that she could record her retired, particularly when oth-er. Her own notations indicate that the opportunity presented itself, she waited for Henry to come in the bread rose or a meal cooked, he gathered around the radio. The developed throughout the course of he revisited a portion of the diary revise messy or incomplete entries. It has been added or deleted in

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vided detailed descriptions of the plots of her “episodes,” particularly those involving romantic content. Radio provided the spice in her life, and she may very well have agreed with many other Americans in the heart of the depression that her radio was her most valued possession.71

The portion of the diary presented here covers the period from October 1936 to May 1941. During these years, Mary Dyck's children left home, and she learned to adapt to their migrations. She and her husband struggled against the environment and the economy, and endured when the same conditions forced many of their neighbors to leave farming for good. Although these were difficult years, they were filled with the small pleasures of visiting grandchildren, soap operas on the radio, jokes shared with Henry, and occasional respites from hard times. Although Dyck's mood was often grim, a ray of hope persisted in her daily writings.

EDITORIAL METHOD
The transcription of this diary is as close to a literal transcription as it can be. Mary Dyck was a German speaker as a child and had a limited education. Consequently, the grammar and spelling within the document are sometimes quite creative. Most of the time, however, the writing is fairly easily understandable, if read phonetically, and has been preserved as it appeared in the diary. Where words require a great deal of creative reading, I have inserted the correct term in brackets. Annotation has been added where necessary in order to clarify points. I have standardized daily headings throughout the diary, the one place where I have departed from a literal transcription. Do note, however, that the dating of entries is occasionally erratic, reflecting Mary Dyck's somewhat loose concern with the calendar.

The voluminous nature of this diary required that I carefully select portions of the diary for publication. What is published here is roughly a third of the writing done from October 1936 to May 1941. Some entries have been omitted entirely. Within entries, I have used ellipses to indicate my editorial omissions. I have presented several complete entries in the appendix, so that readers may have a better idea of the appearance of the larger work. Most unedited entries include a daily summary of the weather, including temperature readings and conditions early in the morning, near the middle of the day, and late in the afternoon. A log of the work done by all resident family members usually also appears. Dyck often recorded the dishes she
served at each day’s meals. She also noted who visited the farm. Dyck generally concluded a day’s entry with the time family members went to bed.

A day’s writing might also include the number of eggs the chickens laid, the radio programs to which the family listened, and other entertainment they enjoyed. Dyck would record any correspondence written or received. When any family member left the farm to go to town, that event would be recorded as well. She attempted to make as full a record of the day’s events as possible. While hens and cows were producing, Saturday entries would include the number of eggs she sold, the price she received, and the volume, quality, and price she received for cream. The entries might also include a list of the groceries and supplies she had purchased in town.

My selections from this vast amount of writing reflect my own judgments about what in this diary is most important historically and what was most important to the diary’s author, Mary Dyck. I have included all references to dust bowl conditions, since drought and blowing dirt so thoroughly shaped the life of the family and the surrounding community. I have also included extensive descriptions of Dyck’s work and that of those around her. Family relations were the core of Mary Dyck’s world, and I have paid particular attention to her relationship to her husband and her children. Where the Dycks’ lives intersected the larger issues of the day, such as the depression, the New Deal, and the Second World War, I have also chosen to include that material. Any selection from a larger document is bound to be subjective, but I have attempted to provide to the reader material that most thoroughly and successfully describes Mary Dyck and her world.

2. WORK, FAMILY, AND...

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11
... Mo & Ervin went to the kid home & almost noon the kids ch to the church at P.M. to see Thelma took Verna back to Mr. & tore his Car down & worked on the family groupe this afternoon.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12
... Ervin has worked on his Wheat on the old 80 all day.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13
... Mo churned. Baked Bread & Cupboard & wrote a letter to sis by Kendall. Has been cloudy & an exciting time to-day. Hens laid

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14
... Henry drilled Wheat A.M. Lemon Pies at P.M. and washed Oil Stove...

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15
... Mo Fried down some Meat, & cleaned dust, the rest of the 4 Mr. Henry. . . Henry headed apeared on the sene, while I w