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DUST BOWL HISTORIOGRAPHY

HARRY C. McDEAN

In the late 1930s, Undersecretary of Agriculture Milburn Lincoln Wilson organized "Travelling Great Plains Schools," culminating three decades of research and reform work in the Great Plains. The schools brought hundreds of rural social scientists together with scores of federal and state policymakers. The schools were broken into two sections, one dedicated to the southern Plains and the other to the northern. Those who attended spent several weeks making their way through the Plains, with care taken to differentiate problems particular to each of the two regions. In the southern Plains, the school spent several days examining the problems specific to the Dust Bowl area that Wilson's staff clearly delineated on maps provided the students. As the maps showed, the term *Dust Bowl* designated a specific region in the Great Plains, including northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colo-

rado, southwestern Kansas, and the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma.¹

The schools were aided by agronomists, who demonstrated to the students the difference between the soils in the Dust Bowl and those found elsewhere in the Plains. Here were soil groups whose configuration was distinctive: most notably, the Dust Bowl had extensive reddish-chestnut soils that bordered upon brown soils. Although both soil groups were susceptible to depletion, erosion, and blowing, the reddish-chestnut soils were especially sensitive to cultural mistreatment.

At the schools historians and rural sociologists also informed the students of their research in the Dust Bowl. The work of Jesse T. Sanders, Robert T. McMillan, and Otis Duncan in the social and the agricultural history of the Dust Bowl especially explained why its soils were mistreated and how that mistreatment generated the great dust storms of the 1930s. Although this history was complex, the students learned how cultural traits of Dust Bowl residents encouraged excesses by many of its farmers in the 1920s. For while other Great Plains farmers worked radically to revise their farm operations in order to conserve the soil, those in the Dust

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Bowl area thoughtlessly devised dry farming techniques that allowed them to put under the plow those soils with high susceptibility to windblowing. As a result, new dry farming techniques were applied in the 1920s, destroying the natural, regenerative process that had kept Dust Bowl soils fertile and intact.²

Students also learned from the social scientists that the application of the new destructive farming techniques was furthered by several socioeconomic phenomena peculiar to the Dust Bowl in the 1920s. One was the tendency of townsfolk to buy or lease raw land and use the new dry farming techniques to cultivate it. They planned to farm only as long as it was profitable to do so, hoping that all would go well. Another farming development distinctive to the Dust Bowl area in the 1920s was the migratory nature of much of its population. Wage and day laborers routinely took up tenant farming during slack times. Viewing such "farming" as interim employment, they were willing to farm land that was susceptible to depletion. Although they did not destroy the land wherever they went—for they ranged into plains areas whose soil was not so sensitive and routinely wandered into non-plains states like Arkansas—they helped to create the farming culture that violated the tenuous soils of the Dust Bowl.

Social scientists like Duncan, Sanders, and McMillan provided the students of the schools with several possible reasons why these developments were peculiar to the Dust Bowl area during the 1920s. One was that only in the southern Plains was there considerable part-time mining, lumbering, and oil work available in the 1920s—hence the migratory nature of much of its population. Because this transient population felt no sense of permanence or belonging, it expressed little interest in the application of soil conservation measures designed to create a permanently successful farm population in the region. Another reason was that other Great Plains states had opened their land to cultivation in an earlier day and those settling it had failed and abandoned their land during the great northern plains drought of

the 1917–23 era. Hence, northern plains townsfolk already knew what their counterparts in the Dust Bowl region would learn in the 1930s—that farming of sensitive soil groups can have disastrous consequences during times of drought.

The goal of the "Travelling Great Plains Schools" was to pinpoint problems specific to precise areas within the Plains and to suggest resolutions to them. Since they were traveling schools, subsequent meetings were organized. These brought together leading economists, farm management experts, historians, rural social scientists, meteorologists, climatologists, astronomers, astrophysicists, geologists, ecologists, dendrochronologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and geographers. Their mission was to study "to what extent science can produce a program for land use" in specific areas of the Plains, "which, if put into operation, will bring harmony between man and nature."

The extent to which these experts succeeded in this mission is difficult to assess. Indeed, the question provides the subject of lively debate among modern scholars, especially historians, who write on the Dust Bowl. Yet, in spite of the robustness of the debate, modern Dust Bowl historians have accurately captured in their works most of the aforementioned facts about the Dust Bowl. Unfortunately, one cannot say the same about some of those who write survey textbooks in American history, for they fail to grasp even the most elementary facts about the Dust Bowl.

As a result, modern Dust Bowl history is schizophrenic. Even the most basic characteristic of the Dust Bowl—its geographic boundary—has two different compositions. The textbook writers locate the Dust Bowl in a variety of places where the Dust Bowl history books do not: in the Great Plains generally, or in states outside the Plains, or often anywhere that the dust blew in the thirties. Most commonly, these writers locate the Dust Bowl by backtracking the "Okies" to their origins, at least insofar as they were described by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁴

Such inaccurate and vague boundary descriptions become more pronounced when the textbook writers seem automatically to associate drought conditions with the Dust Bowl. Bernard Bailyn and associates tell their readers that improved prices for farm goods in the mid-1930s were “caused by a cruel drought on the Great Plains, choking the farmers in vast clouds of topsoil that swept across the region.” Others say that the drought and its corresponding dust storms were even more pervasive. Stephen Thernstrom contends that farm price increases in the mid-thirties “were partly the result of the great droughts and windstorms and turned many wheat fields into little Saharas.” Arthur Link and associates never find a Dust Bowl in their text, contending instead that “a severe drought in the Middle West and Southwest cooperated with the AAA to reduce farm production.” More surprising is the text of George B. Tindall, which covers with precision the regional planning aspects of the New Deal, but fails to find a Dust Bowl. Indeed, in the absence of any appraisal of this area, he contends that the creation of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 “went far to heal the scars of erosion and the plague of dust storms,” wherever they were.⁵

Obviously, these historians live in a different world from that of M. L. Wilson. They seem to view Great Plains regions differently than either Wilson or the specialists in Dust Bowl history. Worse yet, these same historians miss the most important point made by both contemporary social scientists of the 1930s and recent Dust Bowl historians—that the Dust Bowl was not a natural disaster; it was a disaster caused by what people did to nature.

Although every old-timer in the Great Plains realizes that dust has blown there since only God knows when, both the contemporary rural social scientists and recent Dust Bowl historians have shown that a special set of conditions caused the dust to blow massively during one particular time in an exact location. The intent of their work, in fact, was to reveal the complexity of natural, human,

and technical events that combined to cause the great dust storms in the Dust Bowl. Clearly, our textbook writers are ignorant of their conclusions. Why is this? There are several possible explanations.

One reason might be that they have been deceived by books or articles that have *Dust Bowl* in their titles but whose texts cover other subject matter. One such study was favorably reviewed in spite of its misleading title: Walter Stein’s *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*.⁶ Stein neither tells his reader where the Dust Bowl region was nor does he distinguish its problems or its migrants from those in the other areas. To add to the mystery, Stein contends that the migration was but part of a larger migration from the Great Plains which began in the 1920s. To him, “The Great Plains tier of the United States embraces five states from the Dakotas on the north to Texas on the South.”⁷ One wonders which of the remaining seven Great Plains states are recognized as such by Stein. Stein also views the migrants from a perspective different from that of contemporary rural social scientists and recent Dust Bowl historians. For although he concedes that the dust storms were “a man-made catastrophe,” he sees a network of natural, economic, technical, and political conditions converging to create victims—poor, defenseless, Dust Bowl migrants who fled to California.⁸ In fact, it was Stein’s and Steinbeck’s “victims” who did the victimizing; at least some of them helped form the farming culture that created the ecological disaster called the Dust Bowl.

In defense of Stein and more certainly of Steinbeck, one must understand that their works appeared before most of the recent histories on the Dust Bowl were published. Although these two authors could not benefit from that research, our recent textbook writers could have. Why have these historians failed to balance off the work of Stein and Steinbeck against these recently published Dust Bowl histories? Perhaps their inability to do so stems from misperceptions about the region encouraged by the specialists’ varied approaches to it.

For example, most historical treatments of the drought of the 1930s fail to distinguish the Dust Bowl from other drought areas. Here, historians of the drought tend to lump all problems, issues, policies, and programs into one package and treat them as a whole. Therefore, for anyone but a specialist in Great Plains studies, reading such work can only suggest that any conclusions that apply in one area of the Plains necessarily apply in another. Several otherwise superior articles on the drought in the thirties encourage the thought that wherever one looks in the Great Plains one encounters similar problems and issues. C. Robert Lambert's "The Drought Cattle Purchase, 1934-35: Problems and Complaints," Van L. Perkins's, "New Dealers and the Drought of 1934," and Mary Hargreaves's, "Land-Use Planning in Response to Drought: The Experience of the Thirties"—all stress the federal policies designed to meet problems widespread in the drought areas at the expense of highlighting problems peculiar to specific areas in the Plains.⁹

Of course, this tendency has been counterbalanced by work that does distinguish the problems of particular areas in the Plains. For example, as early as 1969, Theodore Saloutos, in his article "The New Deal and Farm Policy in the Great Plains," notes that "In the Dust Bowl of the southern Great Plains there was a great need for checking wind erosion, especially on nuisance lands owned by absentee owners."¹⁰ Still, Saloutos's work and that of others suffers from the possibility of misinterpretation.¹¹ True, these works do distinguish clearly the areas in the Plains that they are about. Yet their purpose was to examine the origins and the character of broad federal policies and programs in the Great Plains. Thus it is fair to say that recent "drought" and Great Plains histories tend to dim the distinctive features in the Dust Bowl.

But there is yet another possible reason why our textbook writers misunderstand the Dust Bowl. Perhaps it is because the bias of some Dust Bowl historians has helped create misperceptions about it in the minds of the

textbook writers.

In fact, a major misconception of Stein and Steinbeck provides the basis upon which Paul Bonnifield—the author of the first of three major histories on the Dust Bowl to appear in recent years—builds his work.¹² Although this book should not misguide anyone interested in the region's boundaries (it provides accurate maps of the area), it advances vigorously one of Stein's misinterpretations: that those who left the Dust Bowl were victims of government policy. It even goes beyond Stein to maintain that those who remained in the Dust Bowl were also victimized by the government. This prejudice against the policies of the federal government is argued in an unusual but nonetheless compelling way. Bonnifield maintains there is ample evidence to indicate that, had the migrants not been forced off their farms by government policy, they would have worked out farming systems to prevent future Dust Bowls while earning standards of living comparable to those of other Americans.

Bonnifield's approach is intriguing. He begins by showing his readers that not only is drought commonplace in the history of the Plains, but so is the dust storm. Bonnifield dates dust storms back to the 1850s, noting that the editor of the *Kansas Free State* believed there was a "normal blowing season" in Kansas that "makes anyone exposed to it as 'sooty' as a collier." In discussing subsequent droughts and dust-blowing situations in the true Dust Bowl region, Bonnifield shows that those who didn't leave the region "adapted to the new conditions and continued their business." Moreover, there always existed "a few hardy souls who moved in to continue the task of opening the country."¹³

With this stage in Dust Bowl history set in place, Bonnifield is able to uncover a historical plot. Arguing that "hard times were not new to the old-timers," Bonnifield shows how in the 1930s Dust Bowl "farmers were making genuine efforts to meet the crisis caused by wind and drought." He finds farmers like Charles T. Peacock, who designed a machine that formed "a lister row and placed check

dams at regular intervals.” These and similar farm innovations demonstrate, says Bonni-
field, that “the people of the dust bowl were
not defeated, poverty-ridden people without
hope. They were builders for tomorrow.
During those hard years they continued to
build their churches, their businesses, their
schools, their colleges, their communities.
They grew closer to God and fonder of the
land. Hard years were common in their past,
but the future belonged to those who were
ready to seize the moment.”¹⁴

Given these conditions and attitudes, why
then did anyone leave the Dust Bowl? Because
“despite statements to the contrary, the federal
government was involved in removal and steps
were being taken to force people out. It was
planned to return the majority of the land to
grazing under government control.” And who
specifically designed this plot? Apparently, the
schemers were Lewis C. Gray of the National
Resources Board, Hugh Bennett of the Soil
Conservation Service, and M. L. Wilson of the
USDA. Bonni-
field particularly blames Wilson
who, as undersecretary of agriculture, “had
several years’ experience in promoting his
program [and] was in a position to carry out
his concept of rational land-use program on a
grand scale.”¹⁵

What was Wilson’s most lethal weapon in
the scheme? The Soil Conservation Districts
Act, which, says Bonni-
field, the farmers in the
Dust Bowl viewed as a “scheme of reorganizing
their society and drastically changing their
land ownership.” The result, he said, was that
“they dealt a big blow to the scheme . . . by
voting down the proposed Soil Conservation
Districts.” This was important, says Bonni-
field, in part because it was the chief weapon in
Wilson’s arsenal to redesign life in the Dust
Bowl. The districts, had they been created,
would also have given the Soil Conservation
Service greater power in the Dust Bowl, and
no sensible farmer wanted that. It would have
been particularly bad, says Bonni-
field, because
“not a single new implement or technique of
preventing wind erosion was developed by the
Soil Conservation Service.” What farmer

would want to work with that organization?
More important, “the advancements by the
farmers in developing new implements and
techniques were not emulated by the Soil
Conservation Service.” Finally, their methods
were costly.¹⁶

Anyone who finds Bonni-
field’s conclusions
convincing is cautioned to read other recently
published articles and books on the Dust Bowl
as well as studies from the thirties.¹⁷ Should
Bonni-
field himself read this body of work, he
would then understand that Wilson believed
that federal, state, and local experts needed to
work closely with local farmers to recognize
and resolve problems specific to their farm
area. To the extent there was any grand design
in the Soil Conservation Districts Act, that
was it.

Bonni-
field’s conspiracy theory aside, the
strength in his book builds from its detailed
discussion of how “the farmers did take
unnecessary chances and in general were
careless about protection against wind ero-
sion” in the Dust Bowl. In spite of the
advances in “scientific dryland farming [that]
were designed to conserve moisture,” Bonni-
field shows why “the dry surface of moist soil
will blow” anyway. Therefore, to stop the
blowing “it was necessary to develop tech-
niques and technology aimed specifically at
wind erosion.”¹⁸ Thus, even the harshest critic
of New Deal planning agrees with other recent
Dust Bowl historians on one point: the great
Dust Bowl of the thirties was created by
people, not by drought and wind.

Although Donald Worster’s history of the
Dust Bowl, the second of three major books to
appear in recent years, agrees with Bonni-
field on this one point, it does so for reasons that
stem from a bias antithetical to Bonni-
field’s.¹⁹ It is Worster’s belief that the Dust Bowl grew
out of, and was worsened by, the inability or
unwillingness of the federal government to
curtail the exploitive tendencies of capitalist
farmers.

It is possible that Worster’s bias unwittingly
contributed to our textbook writers’ miscon-
ception of the Dust Bowl. For all the merits of

his book, which won the Bancroft Prize, Worster blurs the distinctiveness of the Dust Bowl region through his strenuous effort to convince his reader that American culture created the people who make Dust Bowls. As Worster puts it, there "are ecological values taught by the capitalist ethos." These values, he says, created the Dust Bowl. "It came about because the expansionary energy of the United States had finally encountered a volatile, marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there." What did it was not the people's plows, but their "social system, a set of values, an economic order," or "those elements of capitalism."²⁰

This proposition is perhaps the most engaging of any presented by recent Dust Bowl historians. And the history Worster weaves around this line of reasoning is presented so compactly that one feels compelled to believe it. Yet Worster's panoramic view of American culture and the value it places on exploitation tends to compromise his work. For he carries his message beyond the boundaries of his study and encourages the thought that Dust Bowls might occur virtually anywhere, regardless of the character of the people and of the land.

Worster's cataclysmic view of American culture is pushed relentlessly upon the reader. Contending that Americans have "a greater resource hunger than others, greater eagerness to take risks, and less capacity for restraint," Worster concludes that they made a marginal land into a Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl was "the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth. The entirety of the Great Plains is threatened: "the region," warns Worster, "may be in the most serious ecological trouble it has ever seen." And anyone who thinks he is safe because he farms not only outside the Great Plains but outside the United States altogether should take heed of this warning: the expansion of American farming culture "to other nations has already begun to create a new chain of environmental disasters."²¹

Worster's forebodings aside, his approach persuades his readers to overlook the fact that in the Dust Bowl there were natural conditions specific to that area. Moreover, it does not permit the reader to understand that these natural conditions encountered a particular farm culture—likewise specific to the area—in the 1920s and the 1930s. And that, together, they created the Dust Bowl.

Rather, Worster's approach leads the reader to ask: "Why study the Dust Bowl at all?" After all, is not American farm culture headed toward the "inevitable," the creation of widespread dust bowls and "ecological disasters"? For, as Worster himself says, the purpose of the book is "to explain why the world is facing a future of dust bowls."²²

Yet this conclusion ignores some of the research done in the Plains by rural social scientists during the 1920s and early 1930s.²³ For example, in Oklahoma these researchers found a phenomenon that profoundly affected the farm economy of their state—a "culture of migratoriness." As Sheila Manes describes this phenomenon, it was a "peculiar [to this specific area], impoverishing system . . . that moved mostly locally, but also in slightly wider circles, back and forth" among several southwestern states, including the area that became the Dust Bowl.²⁴ Not only was it made up of numerous workers who viewed farming as part-time or interim employment, but its volume ebbed and flowed with the tide of nonagricultural work in the area. Hence, Manes's work (and that of others) shows how this migratoriness combined with other cultural traits peculiar to those who farmed in this region to help create the ecological disaster called the Dust Bowl; farm conditions in the Dust Bowl were not only peculiar to this one specific area but also to a specific period in time, roughly between the two World Wars.²⁵

Moreover, these conditions and the farming practices that created them were clearly out of step with the vanguard of farming systems being developed elsewhere in the Plains by the pure scientists and social scientists who worked for the experiment stations,

the agricultural colleges, or the USDA itself. Their scholarly publications during the twenties and thirties help to explain why a Dust Bowl never occurred elsewhere in the Plains. They demonstrate clearly how some plains states were far more attentive than others to recognizing and resolving their specific farm problems.²⁶

Montana was especially advanced in making significant reforms in land conservation and management. The publications of M. L. Wilson, Elmer Starch, E. J. Bell, and Dwight Sanderson are among the many that explain how Montana's public institutions cooperated closely with both federal and private agencies (like the Rockefeller Foundation) to recognize and resolve the particular problems of farmers and farming areas in Montana.²⁷ These efforts resulted in new soil conservation technologies—like the duckfoot cultivator that formed a clod rather than a dust mulch, furrow drills that listed wheat, shelter belts, dry land irrigation systems, strip farming, and farm diversification. As Montana historian Robert G. Dunbar points out, these soil conservation techniques were widely adopted in the north-central part of the state when the drought of the thirties came.²⁸

Additionally, scholars might look closely at the efforts of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics to persuade the Great Plains states to address their problems. For example, early in the 1920s the BAE sought to identify “pathological farming areas” in the Great Plains.²⁹ This was official jargon for “diseased” areas—those with a combination of natural and human factors at work creating a sick farming culture.

Perhaps the BAE should have picked a better phrase than *pathological farming areas*, for some states resented its application to certain of their sections. The agricultural college in Kansas so resented these designations that it steadfastly refused during the 1920s to cooperate with the BAE in recognizing problems peculiar to these areas in Kansas and in seeking to solve any recognized problems. In fact, William Jardine—who served as

director of the agricultural experiment station, as dean of the college of agriculture, and finally as president of Kansas State College—was made secretary of agriculture in March 1925 in part because President Calvin Coolidge and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover knew that Jardine would relish firing Henry C. Taylor, the man who directed the BAE and launched the “pathological farming area” efforts.³⁰

One should not belabor the point that separates Worster from Manes and the rural social scientists who lived in and studied the culture of Dust Bowl area residents in the 1920s and 1930s. But this commentary does suggest another reason why our textbook writers and other scholars continue to believe that the drought created the Dust Bowl: It is quite possible that they have not read this body of work, or at least have not read it carefully.

This suspicion is furthered by the fact that the third book-length history of the Dust Bowl to appear in recent years—that of R. Douglas Hurt—has no discernible bias running through it.³¹ Hurt provides such a well-balanced and straightforward account that one cannot read it and fail to understand the character and causes of the Dust Bowl.

Yet in spite of Hurt's work, not only do the misconceptions of the survey text writers persist but even specialists in western history provide accounts of the Dust Bowl that continue to present misconceptions of the Dust Bowl, their declarations implying knowledge of Bonnifield, Worster, and Hurt not withstanding. Here, a recent book by Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West*, comes to mind.³² Lowitt devotes two chapters to the Great Plains, yet the Dust Bowl does not appear until near the end of the second of these chapters. One encounters it in an unusual way. Lowitt explains that throughout the Plains “the wind whipped the topsoil into great drifts,” often causing minor streams to disappear “and major ones, such as the Red River along the eastern boundary of the Dakotas,” to become “hardly more than a

creek." But, says Lowitt, "the brunt of these storms fell on western Kansas, eastern Colorado, western Oklahoma, the Texas panhandle, and parts of New Mexico. This area soon became known as the Dust Bowl, but dust swirled over the entire area of the Great Plains."³³

Lowitt's choice of words here, ("these storms fell on") betrays his lack of understanding of the Dust Bowl. It is his view that identical forces were at work throughout the Great Plains; it is just that the Dust Bowl got the worst of them. Throughout the thirty pages of text dedicated to the Great Plains, Lowitt fails to find any problems that were unusual to the Dust Bowl area. Save for one brief paragraph where he dedicates a few sentences to soil conservation practices applied in the Dust Bowl area, Lowitt makes no effort to review the natural or the human conditions that were specific to that area.

Because Lowitt views the problems in the Dust Bowl and the Plains as one and the same, he is led to draw some peculiar conclusions. He says that throughout the Plains there were "conditions and practices fostering erosion and drought." Just which conditions and practices fostered drought we are never told. But Lowitt does explore those that fostered erosion. Apparently, he agrees with the report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee, which he quotes as saying "the basic cause of the present Great Plains situation is our attempt to impose upon the region a system of agriculture to which the Plains are not adapted or to bring into a semi-arid region methods which are suitable, on the whole, only for a humid region." In fact, Lowitt contends that this assumption became "official New Deal Gospel." Having coined a phrase, Lowitt then proceeds to show how it resulted in only "fragmented reforms" in the Plains, another phrase of Lowitt's whose meaning one wonders about. After all this, one is not surprised when he ends his chapters on the Plains by asking if the "historic cycle . . . of adequate rainfall and drought would begin anew."³⁴

It is difficult to understand how Lowitt

arrived at such conclusions in view of his statement in a footnote that "the best, most balanced and most comprehensive study is by R. Douglas Hurt, *Dust Bowl*," for Hurt's book does not support Lowitt's contentions.³⁵ Hurt begins by carefully delineating the Dust Bowl area. Having clearly established these boundaries, he then shows how dust blowing occurred throughout the Plains as far back as recorded settlement reveals. This being the case, Hurt closes his first chapter by observing that in the Dust Bowl area these storms were exacerbated by "the adoption of a *new* [my emphasis] agricultural technology."³⁶ In the second chapter, aptly titled "Causes of the Dust Bowl," Hurt takes great care to identify the "composition" of the "major soil groups" specific to the area that, together with "the settlement of man, were responsible for the creation of the Dust Bowl."

Only after carefully examining the Dust Bowl's soils and the special new agricultural technologies employed there during the 1920s does Hurt move on to provide a view of broader issues, such as the climate of the Plains in general and the federal homesteading policies. Even here, Hurt provides insights into agricultural techniques peculiar to the Dust Bowl area. For instance, he draws upon Leslie Hewes's work on suitcase farming to explain how this type of farmer was endemic to the Dust Bowl area. He had "flexibility. If a crop failed, a suitcase farmer still had another income, and his livelihood did not depend upon him remaining on the land. If a wheat crop did not look profitable, a suitcase farmer could abandon his fields to the mercy of the wind. When suitcase farmers abandoned their land, they seldom returned to apply the proper soil conservation techniques to keep it under control."³⁷ Hurt then proceeds to provide a detailed analysis of how, beginning in the late 1930s, farmers worked with federal, state, and local officials to create particular agricultural technologies designed to meet problems specific to the Dust Bowl area. By the 1950s, says Hurt, "the Dust Bowl farmers understood the relationship between soil conservation and

successful farming.”³⁸

As a result of Hurt’s study—and of others discussed above—we now have a clear understanding of the parameters and causes of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Those who write textbooks of American history and monographs on the Great Plains need only to take heed of their contributions. Beyond that, scholars might also want to note that recent Dust Bowl histories provide instruction in the problem of marginality in modernizing societies: they show us how marginal people operate in a marginal economy. Here are people whose abilities do not square with the needs of modernizing societies—their abilities do not fit into the emerging technostructure. They are therefore left to carve out for themselves a life in the margins—those areas of the ecostructure where modern economic institutions do not choose to venture. These are usually areas where the returns are small and the risks are high—such as in the Dust Bowl.

NOTES

1. M. L. Wilson to President C. A. Lory, Colorado State College, 21 July 1939, in the National Archives, Record Group (hereafter cited as NA RG) 16, Washington, D. C.; M. L. Wilson, memorandum for Dr. E. C. Auchter, 1 July 1939, NA RG 54.

2. Wilson, Memo for Dr. Auchter, NA RG 54; Philip M. Glick to Morris L. Cooke, Chairman, the Great Plains Committee, 23 November 1936, in NA RG 83; M. L. Wilson to Dr. V. Bush, President, Carnegie Institution, 14 June 1939, NA RG 16.

3. “Conference on Man and Nature in the Great Plains . . . September 1939” in M. L. Wilson, Speeches and Papers, in the files of the History Section, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.; M. L. Wilson, Memorandum to Mr. C. A. Taesch, Program Planning Division, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 7 February 1939, in NA RG 16.

4. Joseph Conlin, *The American Past, Part II: A Survey of American History Since 1865* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 699; John M. Blum, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., William S. McFeely, Kenneth M. Stampp, Edmund S. Morgan, and C. Vann Woodward, *The National Experience, Part Two: A History of the United States Since 1865* (San

Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 688; Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, William M. Tuttle, and William J. Brophy, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, Vol. 2, Since 1865 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 393.

5. Bernard Bailyn, David Brion Davis, David Herbert Donald, John L. Thomas, Robert Dallek, and Gordon S. Wood, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1985), p. 738; Stephen Thernstrom, *A History of the American People*, Vol. 2, Since 1865 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 645; Arthur S. Link, Robert Remini, Douglas Greenberg, and Robert C. McMath, Jr., *The American People: A History*, Vol. 2, Since 1865 (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1984), p. 415; George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 1072.

6. Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 6–7.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–32.

9. Lambert’s piece is in *Agricultural History* 45 (April 1971): 85–93; Perkins’s was delivered to the meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Los Angeles, April 1970; Hargreaves’s is in *Agricultural History* 50 (October 1976): 561–82.

10. Saloutos’s work appeared in *Agricultural History* 43 (July 1979): 345–55.

11. Harry C. McDean, “Social Scientists and Farm Poverty in the North American Plains, 1933–1940,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 3 (Winter 1983): 17–29; “Federal Farm Policy and the Dust Bowl: The Half-Right Solution,” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 40 (Summer 1980): 21–31; see also n. 16.

12. Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 18, 20–38.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 153, 155, 202.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 170.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 155–56, 166–67.

17. Harry C. McDean, “M. L. Wilson and the Origins of Federal Farm Policy in the Great Plains,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 34 (Autumn 1984): 50–59; Philip M. Glick, “The Soil and the Law,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 20 (May 1938): 430–47; “The Soil and the Law,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 20 (August 1938), 616–40; “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program,” *Yale Law Journal* 44 (June 1935): 1324–79.

18. Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl*, pp. 44–45, 153, 155, 39–60.

19. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern*

Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 6. Notice that even this title could mislead the casual reader.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 239, 240. Worster contends elsewhere that the disasters of the thirties did advance the application of ecological concepts in agricultural development. See his "Grass to Dust: The Great Plains in the 1930's," *Environmental Review* 3 (1977): 2-13.

22. Worster, *Dust Bowl: Southern Plains*, p. 242.

23. Guides to these publications are offered by the experiment stations in each of the Great Plains states. For example, see "List and Indexes of Montana Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletins and Circulars, 1894-1958," (Bozeman: Montana Agricultural Experiment Station, 1959), pp. 1-70.

24. Sheila Manes, "Pioneers and Survivors: Oklahoma's Landless Farmers," in *Oklahoma: New Views of the Forty-Sixth State*, ed. Anne Hodges Morgan and H. Wayne Morgan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), pp. 93-132.

25. Harry C McDean, "The 'Okie' Migration as a Socio-Economic Necessity in Oklahoma," *Red River Valley Historical Review* 3 (Winter 1978): 77-92; see also McDean, "Dust Bowl" cited in n. 11.

26. See n. 23.

27. Edward J. Bell, Jr., "Montana Agriculture and the State University, 1893-1968," (mimeo, Department of Agricultural Economics, Montana State University, Bozeman, 1967), pp. 1-19, and "Montana State University: Instruction, Research and Extension in Economics and Sociology, 1893-1968 (mimeo, Department of Agricultural Economics, Montana State University, Bozeman, 1968), pp. 1-43. The effort to plan agriculture and conservation in Montana during the twenties was both general and specific. For an example of the general, see "An Agricultural Program for Montana," Montana Extension Service Bulletin no. 84 (May 1927), pp. 4-45. For an example of the specific, see "A Program for the Development of

Agriculture in Fergus County, Montana," (Lewis-town, Mt., July 1927), pp. 1-45. For an overview of these efforts, see Roy E. Huffman, "Montana's Contributions to New Deal Farm Policy," *Agricultural History* 33 (October 1959): 164-67. One of the most exhaustive testimonies of the work done in Montana is deposited in Archives of the Center for Great Plains Studies, Lincoln, Nebraska. It is the book manuscript of Elmer Starch, "The Saga of a Sage."

28. Dunbar kindly lent his manuscript "Agriculture in Montana" to the author. Dunbar's assessment of Montana's land conservation practices appears on pages 17-20 of this manuscript.

29. M. L. Wilson to E. A. Duddy, 12 May 1924, in the Papers of M. L. Wilson, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, Montana, M. L. Wilson to H. R. Tolley, 25 October 1924, NA RG 16.

30. "H. C. Taylor's Conference with Secretary Jardine, April 30, 1925"; "typescript of hand written notes found on Dr. Taylor's desk, after 4:30 April 19, 1925"; W. E. Grimes, professor of agricultural economics, Kansas State Agricultural College, to H. C. Taylor, 17 November 1923; H. C. Taylor to Hon. Herbert Hoover, 16 August 1934, all in the Papers of Henry C. Taylor, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

31. R. Douglas Hurt, *Dust Bowl* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981).

32. Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 42-46, 55-63.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

36. Hurt, *Dust Bowl*, pp. 15-16, 30.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-29. The reference is to Leslie Hewes, *The Suitcase Farming Frontier: A Study in the Historical Geography of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973).

38. Hurt, *Dust Bowl*, p. 154.