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Review of *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* By Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

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Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas. By Pamela Riney-Kehrberg. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. Introduction, maps, tables, black and white illustrations and photographs, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 249 pp. \$25.00.

Few environmental disasters match the drought years of the 1930s. Drought extended well beyond the Great Plains for most of the decade, but was particularly intense in southwestern Kansas. Fiction writers and historians have generally concentrated on those who fled the drought stricken Plains, or written accounts condemning farmers and government programs for converting the southern Plains into a dust bowl.

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg transforms farmers from villains in a man-made environmental disaster into stubborn optimists with heroic perseverance. She acknowledges that many avoided the economic depression in Kansas, or at least the drought, by simply abandoning the state, but notes that nearly 75% of those who lived in the heart of the dust bowl were still there when the dirty thirties finally ended.

The farmers who remained in southwestern Kansas through the dust bowl years devised sometimes desperate and imaginative methods to survive. Most raised chickens, hogs, and milk cows to provide for their families and produce something to sell. Some butchered their livestock and sold meat in the surrounding towns door to door. Nearly everyone at one time or another depended on federal programs for work or relief assistance. Many resented their dependence on government assistance and remained convinced that "next year" would be better. In retrospect, most said they had stayed in southwestern Kansas because they had nowhere else to go and had made too large an investment in their farms to abandon them.

Riney-Kehrberg challenges historians who have described farmers in southwestern Kansas as willful destroyers of a fragile environment. "They were ordinary people," she writes,

"trying to support their families under extraordinarily bad circumstances" (p.128). While some may take exception to Riney-Kehrberg's uncritical dismissal of previous accounts, it is difficult to argue with her characterization of southwestern Kansas farmers as persistent and determined survivors.

Rather than learn from the experience, however, once the dry years abated, farmers in southwest Kansas abandoned dryland farming techniques, opting for a more capital intense agriculture and the rapid exploitation of the Ogallala aquifer. The result in the years after 1940 has been an equally serious, but different kind of environmental problem for which a solution is not yet evident.

The strength of Riney-Kehrberg's study lies in a skillful use of oral history. The people of southwest Kansas come alive in her book, with recognizable personalities, foibles, and prejudices. Rather than dismissing earlier accounts, she would have strengthened her argument by offering a thoughtful critique of more environmentally oriented scholars. Nevertheless, Riney-Kehrberg has produced an excellent social history of that extraordinary time and a welcome addition to the literature.

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