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Review of *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* By Craig Miner

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Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940. By Craig Miner. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. xx + 371 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

In this delightful book, historian Craig Miner of Wichita State University narrates the history of western Kansas, a sixty-county region lying west of Highway 81. Written as a sequel to his 1986 *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890*, this volume traces the area's history up to 1940. Constructing a richly detailed, lively, and thoroughly engaging narrative, Miner draws on extensive research in thirty-five local newspapers and over twenty manuscript collections in the Kansas State Historical Society.

Newspaper reporters and editors were some of the most trenchant observers of life in their communities. But they often championed or condemned causes as they attempted to shape public opinion. Frequently they functioned as civic boosters. Thus their reports must be sifted and weighed carefully. Miner evaluates his newspaper evidence judiciously and guards against the biases of individual editors by using newspapers from dozens of communities along with manuscript materials.

Eschewing "overbroad paradigms" and presentist agendas that can compress evidence into an artificial mold, Miner seeks to recreate the "richness of real experience" and to show the interface between ordinary people and changing circumstances. Far from being an antiquarian exercise, Miner's book intersects with and illuminates significant social and economic changes including mechanization, commercialization of agriculture, and the

extended reach of mass culture. He shows that Populism's leftist ideology, talk of municipal ownership, and pessimism alienated most residents of western Kansas, and he finds that most western Kansans embraced modern consumer and popular culture. Miner argues that Kansans sought a measure of stability or control in response to the erratic prairie weather patterns and economic gyrations they experienced; they experimented with technological, political, and economic innovations from pluviculture and tractors to irrigation and combines. Mistakes were made, but people learned from them. Gradually they adjusted their land use and outlook to reflect "patience, hope, and temperance."

Miner alludes to concerns regarding the sustainability of commercial agriculture and materialistic consumer culture on the High Plains, citing the work of Deborah Fitzgerald, Hal Barron, Wendell Berry, and Thomas Frank. As an academic whose relatives have been wheat farmers, Miner admits that he can sympathize with "both camps." Ultimately, he sides with his relatives and "the Kansas Farm Bureau, the Kansas Chamber of Commerce, and the average Rotary speaker." He judges the region's economy to be "sound enough" and praises farmers for adapting to environmental limits. "Great Plains residents have been environmentalists on purpose or in spite of themselves," he argues, "because that is the only way to survive there."

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