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Review of *Trees, Prairies, and People: A History of Tree Planting in the Plains States* By Wilmon H. Droze

Richard A. Overfield

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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Whether trees will grow successfully on the Great Plains has been a perplexing question since the early days of settlement, and forestry and tree-planting attempts were numerous before President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed what in 1934 became the Prairie States Forestry Project, or more commonly the Shelterbelt Project. What was unique about the Roosevelt plan was its size, both in number of trees and in area involved. The project ultimately covered a zone about 100 miles wide by 1,150 miles long and stretched from North Dakota to Texas. *Trees, Prairies, and People* is a history of this New Deal program.

Wilmon H. Droze has two background chapters in which he traces tree-planting hopes, successes, and failures in the prairie and plains states prior to the 1930s. Building from these chapters, he concentrates on the genesis of the Shelterbelt Project and on the political, economic, and scientific problems encountered. Although tree planting on the plains was a constant concern to people in the region, the national government had only occasionally demonstrated enthusiasm, most particularly in the period from 1890 to 1905. As a result, by the 1930s little systematic knowledge was available about the shelterbelt zone, a zone that was at best a high-risk region for the growth of trees. The effort of scientists to provide this necessary information constitutes a major part of the study. The author thoroughly covers such topics as soil classification, seed collection and processing, techniques of planting, and rodent and disease control.

Although Droze discusses the concerns and roles of politicians, farmers, nurserymen, and taxpayers, the primary perspective represented in the study is that of the Forest Service. Detail is provided on the interest, capabilities, and limitations of scientific forestry to cope adequately with the Shelterbelt Project. Of particular interest is the account of the dispute among professional foresters both within and outside the Forest Service over the feasibility of the project. To opponents, the project was a high-risk program in which failure would damage an already precarious professional status. The

Trees, Prairies, and People: A History of Tree Planting in the Plains States. By Wilmon H. Droze. Denton, Tex.: Texas Woman's University, 1977. Illustrations, maps, notes, and index. \$9.50.

study is an excellent account of the problems of applied science, particularly when the national government is involved.

Members of the Forest Service started the Shelterbelt Project with ambitions of applying the best of their scientific knowledge to an area greatly in need of their services, and they foresaw a project that would bring all conservation agencies together in a unified effort to restore vitality to the dusty and dreary Great Plains. Starting from the premise of government-owned land covered with numerous, broad shelterbelts, the author skillfully describes how the end result fell far short of these lofty ideals. Although the Shelterbelt Project never obtained congressional support or funds, it operated on the basis of executive order and was financed largely by WPA funds. The government did not own the land and therefore had little control over the belts once planted. As a result, the foresters applied their scientific knowledge in establishing the planting zone, based primarily on rainfall and soil type, but here scientific ideals encountered political and economic realities.

Thus, Droze ably illustrates the immensity of the technical and practical problems encountered in the Shelterbelt Project. The difficulties involved much more than the decision to plant trees, itself a major issue. Despite the numerous problems and shortcomings, Droze concludes that the Shelterbelt Project was a success, and for his conclusion he relies largely on the criterion used by the Forest Service, that is, the survival rate of the trees planted.

More than a history of shelterbelts, this study is also a call for new efforts to bring trees to the Great Plains. With the end of the Shelterbelt Project and the shifting of government tree planting on the plains to the Soil Conservation Service, shelterbelts for the protection of fields gave way largely to smaller farmstead belts, and there was a major decrease in the number of trees planted. Droze ends with the appeal that the shelterbelt plan "is a successful idea whose time has come again" (p. 248).

Overall, this is a good study of an important subject. There is some repetition but in

general the book is presented in a clear and incisive style. Numerous photographs and maps greatly clarify the narrative. The research is thorough, particularly from the standpoint of government records and papers of persons involved in the project.

RICHARD A. OVERFIELD
Department of History
University of Nebraska at Omaha