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Review of *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* By Paula M. Nelson

Jean Choate
Northern Michigan University

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The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust. By Paula M. Nelson. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xxiv + 250 pp. \$27.95.

This is a story of a dream that died. Between 1900 and 1915 over one-hundred thousand people moved into western South Dakota, the area west of the Missouri River, hoping to settle the land and develop it so that it would become a thriving area of small farms and prosperous communities.

These settlers—farmers, ranchers, storekeepers, bankers, doctors, and lawyers—were pounded and buffeted by adversity, not once but three times in three separate periods. They faced a severe drought in 1910 and 1911. Many settlers left then but those who stayed believed that “next year” things would be better. Encouraged by high prices in farm products, farmers and townspeople expanded during World War I, but in 1920 prices fell and the area experienced a depression. Western South Dakota was especially vulnerable since the recently settled area had fewer reserves to fall back on. The third crisis was the worst of all. The 1930s brought drought, dust storms, grasshoppers, and lower prices for farm goods.

An important part of this story is the role of the federal government in the 1930s and western South Dakota reaction. In response to the drought, a cattle buyout program was established which led to depleted ranges. Then the federal government declared that thirteen west river counties were “submarginal” and established programs to move families out of the area. Foreclosures continued and more South Dakota families moved west to California, Washington, and Oregon.

Those who stayed resented their area being called “submarginal.” They resented the “New Deal image of the pioneer as destroyer.” They had always thought of themselves as pioneers, as settlers who were building something up. They also resented their loss of independence

as they accepted the regulations which accompanied the government programs.

In the years following the Depression, western South Dakota became a different place. Massive government programs of land purchase and individual land sales depopulated the area. This was difficult for many to understand since they had worked so hard originally to build up the area and increase the population. Town populations also decreased in the region. Schools and churches became smaller and some disappeared altogether. County agents worked to encourage farmers to change their operations to ranching.

Many left western South Dakota in the years of crisis. For those who stayed, there were difficult adjustments to make. For many there was a strong residue of hatred and contempt for the federal government. Even though they continued to accept government aid in federal farm programs, they wanted to believe that they were independent, self-sufficient pioneers opening up new country just as their forefathers had.

Paula Nelson has written a perceptive account of the problems of the settlers in the west river country. Although the circumstances which these settlers faced were more extreme than those faced by farmers in other areas of the Middle West, some of the problems and "solutions" are very similar.

JEAN CHOATE
Department of History
Northern Michigan University