Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas

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Description
Fontell Littrell's grandmother was a devout Latter-Day Saint. But when Fontell's father turned to bootlegging and poker to support an extended family of ten during the dirty thirties, her grandmother took it in stride. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, his miracles to perform," she rationalized.

The Litrells' story and those of thousands of others who rode out the dust bowl in southwest Kansas are the focus of Pamela Riney-Kehrberg's study of survival in a drought-ridden decade. Unlike other historians, who have dwelt on those who fled hardship, Riney-Kehrberg concentrates on the majority—three-quarters of the population—who endured.

Examining the social impact of drought and depression, she illustrates how both farm and town families dealt with the deprivation by finding odd jobs, working in government programs, or depending on federal and private assistance. Years of tribulation, she shows, affected standards of living, family relationships, city and county finances, land ownership, farm prices and production, population shifts, and politics (traditionally staunchly Republican, southwest Kansas twice voted for Roosevelt). Looking also at the environmental impact, Riney-Kehrberg presents both the negative and positive sides of farming practices and governmental intervention.

Most Kansans persevered for nearly ten years, Riney-Kehrberg emphasizes, and how they adapted indelibly altered their outlook and plans for the future. More than fifty years later, the devastating dust storms continue to affect agricultural practices and policy and the population of southwest Kansas.

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Comments
This is the table of contents and introduction of Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994.

Recommended Citation
Southwestern Kansas experienced rapid growth and general prosperity from the turn of the twentieth century until the collapse of farm prices in 1931. Unfortunately for residents of the region, the beginning of the economic depression in agriculture coincided with the onset of a drought cycle that would afflict the Dust Bowl counties for the next eight years. As the depression deepened, many farmers and town dwellers in southwestern Kansas began to leave to search for a better life. By 1940 the Dust Bowl counties had lost from one-third to half of their populations. Riney-Kehrberg concludes, un The drought serves as a foreshadowing of what was to come four decades later, but was catastrophic enough in its own way. After unscrupulous developers and a decade of sufficient rain had encouraged settlers to pour in to areas like the western third of Kansas, where population more than tripled between 1885 and 1887, drought struck in 1887 and continued into the 1890s. In addition to historian Worster, two others who have written on the Dust Bowl are especially good: journalist Timothy Egan, whose The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl (2006) won a National Book Award, and historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, author of Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas (1994). The Dust Bowl was the name given to the drought-stricken Southern Plains region of the United States, which suffered severe dust storms during a dry period in the 1930s. As high winds and choking dust swept the region from Texas to Nebraska, people and livestock were killed and crops failed across the entire region. The Dust Bowl intensified the crushing economic impacts of the Great Depression and drove many farming families on a desperate migration in search of work and better living conditions. What Caused the Dust Bowl? Without deep-rooted prairie grasses to hold the soil in place, it began to blow away. Eroding soil led to massive dust storms and economic devastation—especially in the Southern Plains. When Was The Dust Bowl? Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas. University Press of Kansas, 1994. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities. John Steinbeck. The Grapes of Wrath. Viking Press, 1939. Donald Worster. Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s. Oxford University Press, 1979.