Dust Bowl Days: A Study of Women's Lives and Experiences

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Dust Bowl Days:
A Study of Women’s Lives and Experiences

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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“The drouth and dust storms are something fierce. As far as one can see are brown pastures and fields which, in the wind, just rise up and fill the air with dirt.”

Ann Marie Low found her life framed and shaped by the ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. There is scholarly debate over the exact dates, locations, and causes of the Dust Bowl, though the disaster is generally considered to have occurred in the Southern Great Plains, more specifically in a small portion of southwestern Nebraska, the western half of Kansas, the Oklahoma Panhandle, northwestern Texas, eastern New Mexico, and southeastern Colorado, from 1934 to the early 1940s with a peak in 1937, a year which saw seventy-two dust storms. Severe drought, increased wind erosion, and the economic depression of the 1930s intensified the problems already facing American agriculture, including low farm prices and land exhaustion, while the dust storms and their effects shaped the lives of those who inhabited the affected region. The dust itself became a constant presence; one woman wrote, “We’ve been having quite a bit of blowing dirt every year since the drouth started, not only here, but all over the Great Plains. Many days this spring the air is just full of dirt coming, literally, for hundreds of miles.” This dirt greatly altered women’s lives and ideals, causing their daily lives to become struggles for their own survival and that of their families.

The Dust Bowl changed women’s understanding of their lives and reshaped some women’s self-perceptions. The demands placed upon women by the Dust Bowl led to a disruption of conventional gender responsibilities as women became increasingly

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1 Ann Marie Low, Dust Bowl Diary (U of Nebraska Press, 1984), 101.
3 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 95.
responsible for the family’s well-being. These women found themselves explicitly questioning the ideals of freedom and independence that were critical aspects of their family heritage as the drought and dust storms threatened their livelihoods. The lives they knew and loved essentially disintegrated before them as a rise in agribusiness pushed small family farming endeavors and the land itself beyond their limits, leading to a decline in the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal and contributing to an increase in failed farms and thus resettlement. White farm women often found their lives, and what they valued within their lives, changed in tandem with the altering landscape and environment.

Current research on the Dust Bowl is primarily limited to the Dust Bowl itself—its causes, effects, and the implications for those who experienced it. Such discussions focus on those most visibly affected by the disaster: white male farmers on small family farms. Donald Worster, the preeminent Dust Bowl scholar, focuses mainly on the causes of the Dust Bowl, arguing that capitalism led to a destruction of the ecological balance in the Great Plains. The economic expansion encouraged by capitalism caused farmers to view their way of life as a business from which to profit and not simply as a means of survival. Worster argues that plains society lacked any means to limit the growth of commercial farming in the area, which led to the overuse of land and a removal of grasses which, in conjunction with intense drought and wind, brought about the Dust Bowl. Worster explores life in the Dust Bowl, but he addresses women’s lives largely as a means of enhancing the understanding of men’s experiences. R. Douglas Hurt in contrast holds that nature, not capitalism, caused the ecological disaster, though farmers

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5 Ibid., 6.
6 Ibid., 7.
contributed to the erosion rates. He focuses on government programs created to offer relief to Dust Bowl inhabitants and help them fight the dust, drought, and economic depression, and he explores the unique social culture—one with much regional pride—that formed in Dust Bowl communities. Hurt also elaborates on environmental and agricultural conditions and explores the possibility of a recurrence of Dust Bowl conditions. While Hurt’s work focuses on agricultural and social elements of the Dust Bowl, including their political implications, he fails to adequately address women. This failure to explore women’s lives and conditions in the Dust Bowl is not limited to individual works; larger historiographical trends have also excluded women.

The New Western History, a development of the late 1980s and early 1990s, prides itself on its supposed inclusion of women, but an extensive review of its literature yields very little information on women in the Dust Bowl. Studies of Dust Bowl migrants—often labeled as “Okies” despite the fact that many did not migrate from Oklahoma—also focus primarily on men. The lack of discussion surrounding Dust Bowl women suggests a large gap in our understanding of the Great Plains in the 1930s: a knowledge of women’s experiences and perspectives is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the Dust Bowl, for women often provided the strength and skill that kept their families and farms together during the harshest of times.

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8 Ibid.
Dust Bowl Women and Federal Relief

Celebrated by the Roosevelt administration as a program of relief, recovery, and reform for all Americans facing economic hardship in the 1930s, the New Deal ultimately offered aid primarily to white workers and farmers during the Great Depression. The New Deal consisted of new federal agencies, many of which the administration created in the spring of 1933, through which New Deal officials intended to restore hope to America, though white America benefitted the most due to existing social structures and biases that led to job discrimination and an unequal distribution of benefits. Historians Sonya Michel and Robyn Muncy argue that New Deal programs helped maintain differences between men and women and whites and blacks. For example, “the highest paying jobs offered by government employment programs… were usually reserved for white men.”

The Dust Bowl region felt the effects of the New Deal. As the most influential New Deal programs in the Dust Bowl region, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) put young urban men to work to enhance rural infrastructure and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) provided farmers with economic assistance while working to restore farm prices. Dust Bowl women’s views on these programs varied, though, as did their experiences. While Caroline Henderson found the programs beneficial due to the emotional comfort and reassurance they provided Dust Bowl residents, Ann Marie Low thought the CCC and AAA destroyed the land and drove people from it.

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Dust Bowl residents interacted a great deal with federal New Deal agencies. Donald Worster explains that the Dust Bowl area received more federal assistance, in monetary form, than did any other region of the United States during the 1930s; however, many of the inhabitants of the Dust Bowl disliked the types of assistance they received.\textsuperscript{11} Worster claims that rural Americans were much less inclined to ask for assistance than were city-dwellers.\textsuperscript{12} Pride prevented many Dust Bowl residents from openly accepting the assistance offered by the government, as noted by Low when she wrote in her diary that “people were too proud to accept welfare if they could help it.”\textsuperscript{13}

The West was a site of persistent tension surrounding federal and eastern assistance and intervention, and federal intervention sparked Dust Bowl residents’ long-standing concerns regarding the West’s economic dependency on the East.\textsuperscript{14} Despite these concerns, historians Richard Malone and Michael Etulain explain that, while federal influence in the West increased in the 1930s, it “served to underwrite a new prosperity and stability for the region,” for “the Great Depression brought about the crisis of that old, exploitative economic order that was based on the unrestricted taking of the West’s bounty; and the New Deal and World War II signaled the beginning of [a] new order.”\textsuperscript{15} New Deal efforts in the West helped the region become more economically self-sufficient after the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. Despite the retrospective success of the New Deal, federal intervention and its effects brought hope to some women and despair to others.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{13} Ann Marie Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary} (U of Nebraska Press, 1984), 57.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
New Deal programs to benefit farmers and Dust Bowl residents focused on relief and recovery. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, founded on the idea that a free market economy could not adequately restore agriculture prices, originally compensated farmers for reducing the amount of land in production as well as the production of certain items, including wheat, rice, and hogs.\(^\text{16}\) Taxes on the initial processing of items funded the monetary compensation received by farmers.\(^\text{17}\) Farmers previously fought for regulation of the market as a means of raising prices, and Roosevelt responded to their demands by regulating the farmers, not the media through which people, companies, and industries bought and sold goods.\(^\text{18}\) AAA employees met with farmers and encouraged them to voluntarily limit the amount of land under cultivation, offering subsidies in return.\(^\text{19}\) Though declared unconstitutional in 1936, the Agricultural Adjustment Act’s goals of controlling agriculture to fit the public demand and raise farm prices survived through the 1935 Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act.\(^\text{20}\) Through this act the federal government continued to provide farmers with subsidies when they reduced the amount of land devoted to crops—but only for those crops believed to deplete the soil.\(^\text{21}\) The Act encouraged the planting of crops that held soil in place so as to prevent further erosion and limit the amount of dust in the air.\(^\text{22}\)

The federal government also created other programs with the goals of conserving and preserving soil. Overproduction on ill-suited land, in conjunction with failed crops


\(^{18}\) Himmelberg, *The Great Depression and New Deal*, 42.

\(^{19}\) Baskerville, *Nothing Else to Fear*, 52.

\(^{20}\) Hurt, *The Dust Bowl*, 92.


\(^{22}\) Hurt, *The Dust Bowl*, 92.
that lacked roots to hold soil in place, loosened the soil of the Great Plains, and the strong winds of the 1930s proved disastrous to the already fragile ecological balance of the region. The dark brown soil of the Southern plains was not suitable for wheat cultivation, but wheat was the region’s primary crop until the 1930s. Conservationists believed the regression of a portion of the agricultural land with dark brown soil would stabilize the land and thus reduce the amount of dust, and they argued that returning six of the thirty-two million acres of cultivated land in the Dust Bowl to grassland would prevent further erosion. With the implementation of soil conservation efforts, advocates believed the other twenty-six million acres would be arable.23 Conservationists struggled with implementing and enforcing such practices, though, which greatly limited their success. Many farmers could not afford to practice soil conservation, and neighbors’ failures to conserve soil quickly reversed the conservation efforts of others.24 Living in proximity to abandoned tracts of land also reduced the success of conservation efforts because of the large amounts of dust that would blow from such lands; some of the worst dust storms originated in areas where cultivated land accounted for less than half of the total amount of land.25 Dust Bowl resident Caroline Henderson explained, “the helpful effects of the rains [of three quarters of an inch] have been for us and for other people largely destroyed by the drifting soil from abandoned, unworked lands around us.”26

A small percentage of farmers acted to conserve soil on their own. They roughened the land with plows to fight erosion caused by wind or planted drought-resistant grains that would help hold the soil in place. Others, however, found soil

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 30-31.
conservation unnecessary or did not understand how to begin conservation efforts, and many simply could not afford soil conservation practices because of the expensive tools and the amount of labor required to carry out such efforts.\textsuperscript{27}

One of the initial soil conservation programs, emergency listing, was first implemented on the state level in 1935. Emergency listing involved altering the ground’s surface by creating a texture perpendicular to the wind in an attempt to reduce soil erosion.\textsuperscript{28} Most listing laws failed because so many farmers could not afford the tools needed for the process. Officials found it difficult to enforce listing, and recently abandoned tracts of land lacked people to list them, thus limiting the overall ecological benefits of the practice. Despite this, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, passed in 1935, intended to limit the production of farm goods, raise farm prices, and conserve soil. The act also allocated two million dollars for emergency listing and provided farmers access to the tools necessary for the process.\textsuperscript{29} While only minimally beneficial to the environment, listing added to the work required on a farm. This increased women’s duties because they had to assist in extra outdoor tasks while often still expected to complete all of their regular duties, most of which had already increased due to the presence of massive amounts of dust.

Despite the seemingly environmentally-conscious Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act’s goal to hold soil in place while limiting farm production, the act failed to limit production to the extent required to raise prices. As a result federal officials developed a new Agricultural Adjustment Act, signed in 1938, and introduced

\textsuperscript{27} Henderson, \textit{Letters from the Dust Bowl}, 21.
\textsuperscript{28} Worster, \textit{The Dust Bowl}, 40.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
production quotas. Farmers ploughed under crops and killed livestock in order to conform to the quotas and in return received small amounts of monetary assistance. The resulting destruction of food sources seemed counterintuitive at a time when many Americans lacked the resources to either produce or purchase food. Caroline Henderson articulated such sentiment, believing “a country blessed with America’s actual and possible wealth ought to feel humiliated by the thought of a single ragged, undernourished child,” especially when the government essentially mandated the destruction of foodstuff. Historian Robert F. Himmelberg, however, holds that such sentiment emerged only “from those who could not appreciate the farm program’s stated goal of establishing the kind of balance between production and consumption of farm products that would provide better prices and an appropriate standard of living for the nation’s farmers.” Dust Bowl Resident Ann Marie Low understood the AAA’s goals and desired higher farm prices, but she, like Henderson, did not want to see crops destroyed when so many Americans went without food. The AAA also hurt those who farmed but on land they did not own. In an effort to limit the amount of land under production and thus receive subsidies, landowners often evicted tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

Given these drawbacks, AAA programs tended to benefit large farmers and landholders. Problems also surrounded the tax imposed on the processing of farm commodities because it essentially took funding from producers and reallocated it to

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33 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 103.
34 Himmelberg, *The Great Depression and New Deal,* 44.
those who reduced their acreage in cultivation. 35 Farmers made over 1,700 injunction requests within two and a half years from the passing of the act. The Supreme Court found the tax in conflict with the Tenth Amendment and declared the tax, and thus the AAA, unconstitutional in U.S. v. Butler in 1936. 36

Despite such flaws, the AAA did help Dust Bowl farmers by granting subsidies and generating a slow rise in prices of farm-produced commodities. Henderson found “the largest amount of direct cash benefit has come through the rental checks under the wheat acreage control program” that subsidized the reduction of land in cultivation. 37 Although she felt that “such measures are contrary to the whole theory and habitual practice of agriculture” because they encouraged farmers to refrain from producing goods, she also acknowledged that the programs did help raise the market prices of farm goods. 38 R. Douglas Hurt explains that “Dust Bowl farmers particularly benefited from the second AAA program because they could earn payments on any part of their crop lands which contributed to soil conservation instead of on only a few select crops designed to limit production,” thus improving soil while simultaneously raising the prices of farm products through a rise in demand caused by a decline in product availability. 39

To determine the areas most in need, the Works Progress Administration employed investigators to survey the Great Plains region. Their collection of data regarding “precipitation, crop production, status of pasturelands, changes in number of cattle, and federal aid per capita” led to the creation of a “drought distress” index. 40

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35 Baskerville, Nothing Else to Fear, 55.
36 Ibid., 53.
37 Henderson, Letters from the Dust Bowl, 143.
38 Ibid.
39 Hurt, The Dust Bowl, 92.
40 Worster, The Dust Bowl, 35.
government then used the index to determine the amount of aid needed by varying regions.

Henderson viewed federal relief efforts aimed at the Dust Bowl and its inhabitants in a generally positive light. She found the “immediate results” of such efforts “beneficial” to her area and found comfort in federal aid directed toward Dust Bowl inhabitants. In a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace dated July 2, 1935, she wrote, “credit must be given for the continued occupation of the plains country to the various activities of the federal government. Without some such aid as has been furnished, it seems certain that large sections must have been virtually abandoned.”

Henderson attributed her own decision to stay to her deep connection to and love of the land, but she acknowledged the New Deal and its positive effects on other individuals living in the Dust Bowl. The region received more direct assistance through AAA subsidy checks than any other forms of aid, and AAA programs offered hope to a community in despair. Henderson wrote that “the very flexibility of the [AAA] plans, the apparent willingness of those in charge to adapt the program to new or unforeseen conditions, gives us confidence in the sincerity of the purpose to prepare the way for better days in agriculture.”

While some viewed the New Deal as an attempt to increase Eastern influence and federal control in the West, Henderson placed faith in the federal government’s programs because their goals matched her own. She characterized the relief efforts “genuine” in their intent, and this comforted her and those who welcomed federal aid or benefited

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41 Henderson, Letters from the Dust Bowl, 143.
42 Ibid., 142.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 143.
from it. She explained, “there is moral support in feeling that agencies more
comprehensive and powerful than any one person can control are supplementing our
efforts.” The AAA offered Dust Bowl farmers a bit of monetary assistance while also
easing their fears, making it known they were not alone in facing the dust storms and
failed crops. To a region facing drought and depression, federal intervention offered
hope and helped some people remain on their land.

In contrast, Ann Marie Low found federal intervention in the Dust Bowl region to
be harmful to the land and the people on it. The federal government, not Dust Bowl
residents, chose the “best” methods with which to put Americans to work while also
improving the Southern Plains region. Every federal agency had a different plan for the
area, and Low wanted its inhabitants, the farmers and ranchers, to figure out its fate. Low
watched the land she loved transform into something from which she yearned to escape,
and federal intervention, not drought, caused the physical changes that altered her
perspective of the land. She found that federal officials and employees sent to the Dust
Bowl region failed to acknowledge the actual situation of the land and its people. In
February of 1935 Low wrote in her diary of “a man named Nelson, who is hired to
administer federal relief in this country, [who] has taken the unusual step, for a
bureaucrat, of trying to find out what the score is.” Overall, however, the men brought
to the region through New Deal programs did not impress her. Low vented against “the
stupidity and callousness of the land acquisition agents” and characterized “the kind of
men Washington, D.C., sends out [to Stony Brook]” as people “destroy[ing her] faith in

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46 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 113.
As evidence of her claim, she referred to the AAA’s purchasing of cattle, “paying $20.00 a head for cows and $4.00 for calves, and not buying enough to do much good.”

The improvement projects angered Low the most:

The country is overrun with surveyors these days. The Missouri River Diversion Project has three automobiles full of them running around. Others are here about this game refuge idea, and some on a shelterbelt project. The Missouri D.P. people are going to turn this area into a huge lake. The game refuge people are going to let it revert to the wild. The shelterbelt people intend to put in a lot of trees to keep the wind from doing damage to the farms the other two outfits intend to eliminate. The geodetic survey has built a tower on a hill south of us to flash light all night long, though I don’t know why.

Government acquisition agents tried to buy land “at ridiculously low prices,” and some of Low’s neighbors had no option but to sell their land due to an inability to pay their mortgages. The government worked to acquire submarginal land as a means of encouraging farmers to conserve soil and relocate to areas better suited for agriculture. According to Low, the “panaceas divised by the New Deal for relief, such as the Resettlement Administration [and] the Agricultural Adjustment Act… did nothing for the nerves of farmers and ranchers.” These measures caused some women, including Low, to believe the federal government threatened their livelihoods as they watched federal employees tear up the land with which Dust Bowl farmers had formed a deep connection and that was central to their survival.

Low portrays the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in a particularly negative light. As previously mentioned, the CCC put young men to work developing rural areas through conservation projects. Low describes the CCC as having “been established by

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47 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 115.
48 Ibid., 101.
49 Ibid., 102.
50 Ibid., 104.
52 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 158.
the government to give young men work and train them for jobs. A $39,000 headquarters was being built at the southwest corner of Arrowwood Lake. CCCs cleared the ground.” Federal involvement in the Dust Bowl land was, to Low, much more disastrous than drought and the Dust Bowl itself. She exclaimed, “Oh, how I wish the government had stayed out of my Stony Brook country! It is all spoiled.” The government programs ultimately changed Low’s perspective toward the land, causing a shift away from her previous love for the land.

Low attributed her increasing ambivalence toward the land as due to the presence of New Deal programs. At one point she wrote that she had “never had occasion to meet the kind of lallygagging sidewinders the government is sending here, and [she doesn’t] like them. [She] want[s] to get out of here.” This sentiment joined with her earlier chagrin at the effects of the drought and dust storms, and she no longer saw in the land what she had previously loved. “The country [didn’t] look pretty any more; it [was] too barren.” Low still felt a deep connection to the changed land, though, that intensified when she rode her horse Roany “and thought hopeful thoughts.” She appreciated the natural landscape even when the Dust Bowl tore it apart, and she felt that, despite the persistent drought, the upcoming year could be better. Enjoying Stony Brook in its natural state offered Low comfort. Many Dust Bowl women sought joy in the small things that provided them relief from the intensifying amount of housework facing them at home, the mounting financial difficulties their families experienced, and the uncertainties the future held. Watching the invasion of federal agencies into Stony Brook

53 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 121.
54 Ibid., 122.
55 Ibid., 129.
56 Ibid., 99.
57 Ibid., 134.
country and witnessing those agencies’ lack of respect for the land caused Low’s feelings toward the land to change as its beauty, in her mind, dissolved:

I went for a moonlight horseback ride…. I sat for a long time on a hill southeast of the lake looking over the area [she] once loved so much. Its beauty is gone. CCC roads penetrate coulees where only cattle, Roany, and I used to go. The river is spoiled with their dams. The camp and its activities are everywhere…. the landscape is blotted with that ugly and expensive Refuge Headquarters and even more ugly sprawling set of buildings housing the CCCs. This isn’t home any more.58

The CCC officials and laborers did not value the land as Low had, and their projects drove Low’s neighbors from Stony Brook while ridding the area of its natural beauty. Low thus found New Deal programs detrimental to the land and her community.

While Dust Bowl women deeply felt the New Deal’s effects on their farms and changes made to the land, historians Sonya Michel and Robyn Muncy argue that New Deal programs also assumed and solidified differences between genders, thus limiting women’s potential gains from the programs and within society. At a time when many felt that women working outside of their homes took jobs from unemployed men, New Deal programs encouraged the continuation of tensions between women working for wages or remaining at home full-time. Most working-class women needed to work, whether inside the home through piece work or outside the home in farming or industry, so as to keep their families afloat. The perceived tension between working for wages or remaining at home were ideologically driven and did not reflect the actual experiences or limited options of women at the time.59 Also, for most families, women’s unpaid labor within their homes, especially during the Great Depression, was critical to their family’s survival.

58 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 160.
59 Michel and Muncy, Engendering America.
Despite public concerns that women employed outside the home were “taking” men’s jobs, workplace gender segregation meant that working women took jobs conventionally deemed “female,” such as clerical and teaching positions, and as a result did not take jobs from men. New Deal programs such as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) had ideological roots in the idea that women “were first and foremost mothers who should be ‘protected’ from wage labor.”60 Men who received aid through New Deal programs were viewed as entitled to that aid as a form of unemployment or worker’s compensation because societal norms expected men to work. ADC, originally intended to parallel worker’s compensation entitlement programs, became viewed as charity. With very rigidly defined standards to quality for and continue to receive support, ADC provided aid to very few women and focused almost entirely on those who could not be “blamed” for their situations, such as widows.61 The New Deal’s main impact on Dust Bowl women, however, could be seen in its effects on farms.

Margaret Bourke-White, a photojournalist who described living conditions in the Dust Bowl, also considered New Deal efforts damaging because they attacked the basis of farmers’ lives. She explained farmers’ sentiments in regards to crop reduction and animal slaughtering: “When AAA officials spotted cows and steers for shooting during the cattle-killing days of last summer, the farmers felt as though their own children were facing the bullets.”62 The loss of land, crops, and livestock thus affected farmers in both an economic and an emotional realm. Bourke-White continued, claiming “Kansas… has

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60 Michel and Muncy, *Engendering America*, 162.
no love for the AAA. This year winds whistled over land made barren by the drought and the crop-conservation program." To Bourke-White, relief efforts only intensified the problems caused by drought while also angering Dust Bowl residents. The new federal agencies and the bit of relief they offered through subsidies and slight price raises in farm products did not, in some women’s minds, truly help farmers but instead drove some of them from their homes, causing them to sell their land for low unprofitable prices and finding no alternatives as they fell increasingly into debt and lost their livelihoods. A connection to the land and a commitment to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal and the role of the small farmer within American society helped some resist resettlement.

In 1907 Caroline Henderson left her job as a teacher in the Des Moines public school system in order to pursue an agrarian lifestyle. The editor of Henderson’s letters, Alvin O. Turner, views Henderson’s agricultural pursuits as driven by her dedication to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal. The agrarian ideal, as explained by R. Douglas Hurt, is that “farm men and women live in idyllic and harmonious innocence with themselves and a benevolent nature.” Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian ideal claims that farmers, and especially small or yeoman farmers, are morally superior to the rest of the nation. Hurt elaborates:

The small-scale farmer, or yeoman, who owned his farm and worked the land with his family was, to Jefferson, the most honest and independent citizen. Because farmers lived close to a beneficent nature by necessity, he believed they

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63 Bourke-White, “Dust Changes America,” 91.
66 Ibid., 250.
adopted special values that enabled them to lead wholesome lives and exhibit a personal integrity that would serve the nation well.67

Acquired values included the belief in the virtue of the yeoman farmer, the concept of property ownership as a right, and the idea that a man could have a decent life by working on his or her small family farm.68

Granted, the Jeffersonian Ideal is only an ideal, but some individuals, including women, did strive to live in accordance with Jefferson’s conception of agriculture. Caroline Henderson’s views regarding her agricultural activities and her personal connection to the land on which she lived and worked illustrate the presence of the Jeffersonian Ideal in the Dust Bowl. Henderson and Low seemed to invoke the Jeffersonian Ideal in their descriptions of their lives and relationships to the land, though not always explicitly in the terms and definitions employed by Jefferson in his establishment of an agrarian ideal.

As suggested by Alvin O. Turner, Caroline Henderson was deeply committed to the Jeffersonian Ideal and the concept of a prosperous American society based on middle-class farmers.69 Dust Bowl conditions caused Henderson to become disillusioned, and she realized one could not live by the Jeffersonian ideal in the Dust Bowl. She wrote that “People still toil amazingly…. But it seems to me that the effort grows more apparent…. I am told by a man who is familiar with neighborhood conditions that many farmers once regarded as well-to-do will not be able to put in another crop on their own resources.”70 To Turner, Henderson “recognized she would not be able to establish the quality of life she knew as a child and could see no fulfillment of the Jeffersonian promise in the life

68 Ibid., 252.
69 Henderson, Letters from the Dust Bowl, 5.
70 Ibid., 116.
she had built.”71 Henderson continued her agrarian lifestyle but with an understanding that it could no longer provide the fulfillment she originally anticipated. She remained on the land because of her love for it, not for the individualism and independence it originally promised her but failed to fulfill. Other women and their families lost their love for the land or the resources required to live on it and resettled by choice or necessity.

Falling farm prices and increasing debts prevented Dust Bowl farmers from paying their mortgages, often resulting in foreclosure and resettlement. Some found they simply could no longer live off the land. Others had their land deemed unsuitable for agriculture and watched their farms become part of conservation programs or the public domain.72 Foreclosure and resettlement proved disastrous to normative concepts of manhood. As explained by historians Michel and Muncy, “[d]uring the early nineteenth century American manhood had rested in part on the independence presumably afforded a man by owning his own farm or business… Many men, reduced to wage-earning by industrialization [in the late nineteenth century], had to cope with a loss of such independence.”73 Those who had land but lost it during the Dust Bowl experienced a similar questioning of their manhood.

Women also felt threatened by the loss of their land or the possibility of such a loss. To Henderson, “The greatest cause of anxiety is the fear that [her] country may yet be designated as ‘submarginal’ land and included in the areas now being purchased for public domain.”74 Foreclosure presented a more imminent threat to Dust Bowl farmers.

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72 Ibid., 146.
73 Michel and Muncy, *Engendering America*, 89.
74 Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 146.
As farm earnings and land values fell following World War I, farmers’ equities fell, making the obtaining of loans with which to pay mortgages increasingly difficult for farmers. States with the largest drop in land value experienced the most foreclosures, and such rates were especially high in the Dust Bowl region. Land values per acre in South Dakota, for example, fell seventy-seven percent from 1920 to 1940.\textsuperscript{75} The two-thirds decline in farmers’ cash income from 1919 to 1932 exacerbated the problems caused by low land values. An average of over 96,000 United States farms experienced foreclosure each year from 1921 to 1940, with over 200,000 farms experiencing foreclosure in 1933 alone.\textsuperscript{76}

President Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration (RA) in 1935 to help resettle and revitalize destitute farmers. Farmers who could not obtain any loans or credit received the opportunity to apply for aid. The “rehabilitative loans” they received allowed them to purchase the items they needed to keep their farms functioning.\textsuperscript{77} The Farm Security Administration (FSA) replaced the RA in 1937 and granted “standard loans” to farmers who exhibited the potential to become self-sufficient if provided with the necessary supplies.\textsuperscript{78} The FSA intended to allow farmers to move away from the cash economy.

Those who did not receive RA or FSA assistance and could no longer afford their farms and land often faced foreclosure. Those without mortgages sometimes found themselves selling their land and voluntarily resettling, but resettlement symbolized failure to many Dust Bowl residents. They often blamed the Dust Bowl conditions on

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 886.
\textsuperscript{77} Hurt, \textit{The Dust Bowl}, 94.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 96.
drought alone. As a result, they thought they should be able to overcome the challenges presented to them by the economy and the environment. Henderson understood but resented the economic and environmental constraints placed on Dust Bowl farmers:

To leave voluntarily—to break all these closely knit ties for the sake of a possibly greater comfort elsewhere—seems like defaulting on our task. We may have to leave. We can’t hold out indefinitely without some return from the land, some source of income, however small. But I think I can never go willingly or without pain that as yet seems unendurable.

The federal government offered displaced families a small amount of money to help them resettle, but this served more as a token than actual assistance.

Those who did not mortgage their farms did not face foreclosure but often could not afford to continue farming, especially when drought continuously caused crop failure. Low explained that the government land acquisition agents “running all around trying to buy all the land around the lakes and river at ridiculously low prices…. can’t get Dad…. [because] he has not mortgaged his land.” Low was keenly aware of her family and larger community’s economic situations and originally felt a sense of pride in her family’s ability to hold onto their land despite the harsh conditions. In January of 1935, however, her father signed a deal with a land acquisition agent:

[H]e could get a little more than twenty-two dollars an acre and could stay until May, 1936. [Low] didn’t like it much, but Mama wanted him to sell…. At least he would be paid for his hay meadows, had a chance at another crop of hay and grain, and could dispose of his livestock and machinery at a leisurely way at the best price available in the next fifteen months.

Resistance to resettlement, pride, and an emotional attachment to the land could not overpower economic desperation.

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79 Worster, Dust Bowl, 42.
80 Henderson, Letters from the Dust Bowl, 149-150.
81 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 104.
82 Ibid., 113.
Some of the most iconic Dust Bowl images are of migrant families traveling West with the hope of survival or laboring in Western industry and agriculture in an attempt to make a living. Those fleeing the Dust Bowl offer a poignant picture of the hardships faced as a result of the ecological disaster, but the popularity of Dorothea Lange’s photography and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* oversimplify the experiences of Dust Bowl migrants.

The migration of the 1930s can be attributed not only to the aforementioned foreclosures and crop failures found throughout the Dust Bowl but also to landowners’ tendencies to evict their tenants and sharecroppers. As previously mentioned, large landowners could receive AAA subsidies by reducing their acreage in production and often did so by evicting those who worked on their land. These large landowners then consolidated the land into more efficient agricultural enterprises, often replacing human labor with machinery. The people displaced as a result of these transitions, as well as those who lost their own small farms, were often quite poor. Historian James Gregory believes the migration that resulted from the Dust Bowl differed from earlier westward movement in that it mainly consisted of poor people pushed from their homes by the difficult conditions present there, not people pulled by the attractions offered by their destinations, though California appealed to many.

Westward migration from the Dust Bowl is often skewed in the public perception and general history texts. For example, California’s population grew by over one million people in the 1930s, but only 15,000 to 16,000 of those people came from the Dust

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84 Ibid.
The majority of migrants to California consisted of displaced agricultural laborers, not Dust Bowl migrants. These displaced agricultural laborers also migrated to the West in the 1920s when farm prices dropped and an agricultural crisis ensued. About 250,000 southwesterners moved to California in the 1920s, a migration only slightly smaller in scale than that of the approximately 315,000 Dust Bowl migrants and displaced agricultural laborers that migrated to California in the 1930s. Also, it should be noted that the majority of Dust Bowl migration consisted of individuals and families who moved to counties or states neighboring those in which they already lived. Those who did turn to California did so not because of the promises of opportunity it previously offered but because of the sheer possibility of survival many felt the state could offer as compared to where they already resided. Those who already lived in or migrated to California wrote to relatives, sharing the opportunities (though limited) offered by the state. Some residents used poetry to articulate their experiences in California: “When I first came to California, / Was in the year of thirty-seven, / From what I read in papers, / I thought it was poor man’s heaven.” Dust Bowlers and displaced agricultural laborers thought California would offer them possibility and relief. Scholars James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle also explain that, “because the trip [to and from California] was not difficult… relatives returned home to visit” and brought with them stories of experiences in California. The manageability of the trip to and from

86 Davidson and Lytle, After the Fact, 296.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 298.
89 Ibid., 297.
90 Ibid., 304.
92 Davidson and Lytle, After the Fact, 305.
California made the migration seem only temporary to some; they intended to return to their farms once the tough conditions subsided.\textsuperscript{93}

California’s economy was much more stable than most other regions of the country, in part due to a diversification of crops that protected the state from the low prices hurting agriculture elsewhere.\textsuperscript{94} The state could not handle the influx of laborers, and many migrants found themselves disappointed by the lack of opportunity. As one song explained, “They said in California / that money grew on trees, / That everyone was going there, / Just like a swarm of bees.”\textsuperscript{95} California did, however, offer substantial relief efforts to those unable to find work, averaging forty dollars per month as opposed to the more general southwestern allotment of ten dollars per month.\textsuperscript{96} These benefits, however, were often limited to men.

While the majority of Dust Bowl residents decided to remain in the region, those who chose to migrate mainly did so with their family unit, and they quickly realized that every family member needed to seek work so the family could survive. Some women who previously worked full-time on their farms when relocated to urban areas worked in canneries and packing houses alongside their husbands and sometimes even their children, disrupting the region’s traditional labor patterns by displacing the workers, primarily Mexican Americans, who previously resided there.\textsuperscript{97}

Migrant women had very little or no experience with factory jobs. One such woman, Stella Baxter, had only worked inside the home while living in Texas. Once in

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{96} Davidson and Lytle, After the Fact, 304.
\textsuperscript{97} Gregory, American Exodus, 84.
California she worked in a Kaiser shipyard with her husband, brother, sister, and nephew. Working in the shipyard required her to commute 120 miles round-trip and leave her children alone at night.98 Baxter found the shipyard job necessary in order to help provide an adequate life for her family, though it required that she defy normative ideals of womanhood and conceptions of “women’s work.”

Most migrant women who worked for wages outside the home were single, divorced, or widowed. Census reports show that 38% of these women were employed outside the home while only 12% of married migrant women worked outside the home.99 Married migrant women who worked outside the home did so out of extreme need. Like Stella Baxter, Lucinda Coffman worked outside her home to earn income to support her family, including her husband and some of her children.100 Coffman’s husband’s poor health prevented him from working regularly, and Coffman obtained jobs in a pea-packing plant and as a maid so as to keep her family afloat.101

Migrant wives most often worked outside the home when the seasons required a particularly large labor supply. Canneries hired women during the summer, and some married women worked in the fields picking summer crops where their children sometimes joined them.102 Providing for a migrant family required the work of all family members, and the dedication and actual labor of migrant wives helped their families survive.

98 Ibid., 177.
100 Gregory, American Exodus, 48.
101 Ibid.
102 Gregory, American Exodus, 69.
The “Domestic” Realm: Dirt and Housework

Life in what the newspapers call ‘the Dust Bowl’ is becoming a gritty nightmare.\textsuperscript{103}

Drought and dust complicated the lives of those living in the Dust Bowl. While crop failures caused distress in the fields and within families’ economies, the infiltration of dust in the home added much labor and stress to women’s housework and chores. Remnants of Victorian ideology, most notably the gendered ideological division of society into the public male sphere and the private female sphere, held women responsible for housework and the care of the family throughout the 1930s.\textsuperscript{104} Most members of American society could not uphold these ideals because they lacked access to middle-class life: “All family members, including children, were expected to contribute to the household coffers.”\textsuperscript{105} Having women and children participating in wage labor did challenge middle-class gender norms, but in the 1930s many people believed the prescriptive ideal that “homemaking remained the wife’s main duty and function,” as explained in a 1930s sociological study.\textsuperscript{106}

Expectations of personal and household cleanliness increased during the early twentieth century. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan explains that “sheets, underclothes, [and] table linens are changed more frequently; floors, carpets, [and] fixtures are kept

\textsuperscript{103} Ann Marie Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary} (U of Nebraska Press, 1984), 98.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 11.
freer of dust and grime,” and these standards extended beyond the wealthy.107

“‘Increased standards of cleanliness’… essentially mean[t] ‘increased productivity.’

Women have always been responsible for keeping their families and their homes clean…
[and] they became responsible for keeping them even cleaner” with the new standards.108

Grimy Dust Bowl conditions, then, required women put more time and effort into the
home than previously needed to fulfill their expected duties and maintain the standards of
cleanliness established by the sanitation movement and Germ Theory.

Upper and middle class women, particularly white women, experienced mounting
pressure throughout the early twentieth century to devote increasing amounts of time and
effort to housework. The economic historian Joel Mokyr attributes this change to
scientific revolutions of the later nineteenth century. An understanding of the connection
between disease and uncleanliness led to a sanitation movement and the development of
epidemiology, the study of disease, including its transmission and control, which
supported “the close relation, long suspected, between consumption patterns, personal
habits, and disease.”109 Life in the Dust Bowl made this conclusion a reality, as seen in
cases of “dust pneumonia” and acute respiratory infections caused, in part, by the dust.110

Scientific developments and their accessibility to the public placed greater
pressure on women to maintain social standards of cleanliness. In the late nineteenth
century Germ Theory legitimized an emphasis on cleanliness by offering ideas regarding
disease itself, as well as its causes and symptoms.111 Bacteriology, or the study of

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107 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open
108 Cowan, More Work for Mother, 89.
bacteria, strengthened the emphasis on cleanliness within the home by consolidating
germ theory and effectively disseminating the basics of germ theory throughout society in
the printed media of magazine articles and advertisements.\textsuperscript{112} Women’s magazines,
including \textit{Good Housekeeping} and \textit{Ladies Home Journal}, explained to their targeted
audience (white middle-class women working full-time in the home) the connections
between dirt, or pathogens, and illness, encouraging their readers to keep their homes

clean for the sake of their families’ health.\textsuperscript{113} The broad distribution of information on
germ theory publicized the idea that diseases could be prevented if households adapted to
new standards of cleanliness, which placed blame for family members’ illness on
women.\textsuperscript{114} Women thus faced increased pressure to maintain their homes’ cleanliness
because they believed their housework and the levels of cleanliness they attained through
housework directly affected the health of their family members. The infiltration of dust
during the Dust Bowl increased this pressure by essentially making a clean house an
almost impossible achievement. Watching neighbors die of dust pneumonia and
suffocation only worsened the pressure; women had no reprieve from their domestic
labors because dust constantly worked its way into the home, and emerging theories of
disease suggested that failing to clean the home and properly care for one’s family
directly placed family members’ lives in danger.

During the 1930s, women’s responsibilities thus included not only cooking,
cleaning, and other household tasks, but also caring for one’s children or siblings. “The
symbols of decent living,” as expressed by Cowan, “were symbols that the labor of a
housewife and her assistants [if she had any] could provide,” or were expected to be able

\textsuperscript{112} Mokyr, “Why ’More Work for Mother’?”, 16.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 17.
to provide.\textsuperscript{115} Such symbols included children who regularly attended school.\textsuperscript{116} School attendance made a social statement; the family did not need the children’s labor at home and could afford to have their children educated. Cowan explains that those “[p]arents who could not afford to live ‘ decently ’ could not guarantee anything for their children, not even regular meals.”\textsuperscript{117} Those facing economic distress were more likely to have children die or experience permanent injuries.\textsuperscript{118} Economic hardship and harsh environmental conditions led to increased childhood death rates in the Dust Bowl. The silica in dust, for example, affected the body in a manner similar to lead poisoning.\textsuperscript{119} Inaccessibility to adequate health care, whether due to limited financial resources or geographical distance, intensified the negative effects of health problems. Death put great emotional strain on women, especially when dominant societal norms ultimately held them responsible for the mortality rate within their families.

Dust Bowl women found ideal standards of cleanliness almost impossible to uphold. Dominant cultural standards held that family members wear properly-fitting clothing, and owning white clothing suggested to neighbors that one had a laundress and that the children were clean and well-behaved.\textsuperscript{120} Economic limitations, mainly from crop failures and mounting debts, prevented women from meeting such expectations.

The emergence of domestic science helped educate the public on germ theory and the dangers of a dirty home. Home economics portrayed the home as a “microbial environment” that women needed to control.\textsuperscript{121} Ellen Richards advanced the science of

\textsuperscript{115} Cowan, \textit{More Work for Mother}, 171.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{119} Hurt, \textit{The Dust Bowl}, 51.
\textsuperscript{120} Cowan, \textit{More Work for Mother}, 159, 172.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 18.
home economics in the United States, explaining, “when a pinpoint of dust could yield three thousand living organisms, not all malignant but all enemies of health, cleanliness was a sanitary necessity of the twentieth century whatever it may cost.”\textsuperscript{122} A woman’s implied control over her family’s health pushed her to dedicate extra time to cleaning her house and ridding it of dirt. Cleanliness was no longer important for middle-class white women solely out of pride and the image the home presented to visitors but more importantly for the sake of one’s health and that of her family members.

An emphasis on nutritional science accompanied the rise of home economics, which reached its height in the 1920s and 1930s. Dominant cultural ideals prescribed that women should serve meals at set times with a varied diet so as to help maintain the family’s health.\textsuperscript{123} Midwestern farm women struggled with providing and affording the goods necessary to prepare and provide balanced diets. The United States Department of Agriculture conducted a nationwide survey on farm women’s hardships beginning in 1913, and results suggested farm women’s desire for domestic science education.\textsuperscript{124} Women who responded to the survey worried about mortality rates and poor health in rural areas, believing nutrition, sanitation, and public health education could help reduce the threat of such issues. Passed in 1914, the Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension Service (CES). A legislative victory for agricultural scientists, the act and the CES provided farm women with home economics education programs.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} Mokyr, “Why ‘More Work for Mother?’,” 18.
\textsuperscript{123} Cowan, \textit{More Work for Mother}, 159.
\textsuperscript{125} Babbitt, “Legitimizing Nutrition Education,” 146.
The Smith-Lever Act and CES programs reflected Americanization programs directed toward Mexican immigrants during the previous decades. Pioneered by California Governor Hiram Johnson in 1913, the Americanization programs implemented by California’s Commission of Immigration and Housing, as well as similar programs found throughout the Midwest and West, targeted Mexican women and children with the hope that assimilation would continue through the generations. California’s Home Teacher Act, passed in 1915, allowed school districts to employ teachers to instruct in homes, teaching children and their parents English and normative American standards of sanitation and household duties. Historian George J. Sánchez explains, “Americanization programs sought to maintain the structure of family life while transforming familial habits, especially those concerning diet and health.” Home teachers taught that “a clean body and clean mind are the attributes of a good citizen,” and diet helped maintain health as well. Sánchez concludes, however, that assimilation efforts only provided Mexican immigrants with idealized visions of American life, for immigrants often lacked the resources necessary to live by the guidelines presented to them if they did, in fact, choose to live in accordance with the aspects of American life essentially forced upon them.

Dust Bowl women also found themselves presented with unattainable ideals. Despite their desire for education in home economics, farm women did not welcome the female Food Administration employees who traveled to teach home economics; they

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127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 102.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 105.
viewed the employees as outsiders trying to force their eating habits on others. The Federal Relief Emergency Administration adopted and promoted an emergency food budget capable of feeding a family of five for about five dollars a week, and farm women tried to follow these dietary recommendations so as to ward off illness. The menu, comprised to both meet farm workers’ physical needs and minimize cost, consisted primarily of whole grain bread, milk, fruit, potatoes, and beans while recommending the consumption of small amounts of meat only two to three times a week. Women paid closer attention to what they fed their families and the cleanliness of the tools used to prepare meals because of these guidelines.

Dust made food preparation more difficult because it infiltrated every nook of a Dust Bowl home, and drought and crop failure forced alterations in the diets of Dust Bowl residents. Like women in previous eras who tried to survive off of unsuitable land while living in relative poverty, Dust Bowl women turned to gathering as a means of supplementing their diets. Vera Bosanko “picked berries that growed out in the wild.” Low found that “weeds [gave her] greens for salad long before anything in the garden [was] ready. [She used] dandelions, lamb’s quarter, and sheep sorrel,” liking sheep sorrel best. Many women also attempted to produce more food by expanding their vegetable gardens and increasing their poultry and dairy production and output.

131 Sánchez, Becoming Mexican American, 147.
134 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 95.
Some farm families literally survived off of women’s labor in the Dust Bowl. Milk and egg money sometimes provided a family’s only income. Martha Schmidt Friesen, a resident of McPherson County, Kansas, sold $75 worth of milk and $350 worth of poultry in 1935 and used 100 pounds of butter as a form of currency.\textsuperscript{136} The use of butter, eggs, and other goods to “pay” for items suggests a challenge to capitalism on the Plains, though this challenge of the economic system developed due to people’s need to obtain items necessary for survival. In many ways this challenge was located in some women’s return to an economic system seemingly based more on bartering than cash values and exchange. Some Dust Bowl women blamed their economic, environmental, and agricultural problems on capitalism, and capitalism did not seem capable of alleviating these women’s struggles and hardships, so they incorporated a system of trading into their business dealings. Bartering provided an effective means of obtaining necessary goods and services without increasing one’s financial debt. Jewell Forrest, a Texas farm women during the Dust Bowl, “even paid for a tonsillectomy with butter one time.”\textsuperscript{137}

Those who continued to participate in a cash economy often relied on the fruits of their labor to obtain cash. Low noted, “some farm wives made butter to trade at the stores or sell to private customers in town.”\textsuperscript{138} Women often kept milk cows, hogs, and/or chickens as well.\textsuperscript{139} Reva Koonce of Texas explained that eggs often sold for a nickel a dozen during the Dust Bowl, but the “work didn’t lighten up even when prices

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{138} Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary}, 14.
\bibitem{139} Stapp, “Surviving Depression and Drought,” 8.
\end{thebibliography}
dropped to nothing.’’ Marta Friesen’s egg sales totaled $221.85 in 1935, and she sold chickens for a total of $42.15. After deducting the cost of feed, Friesen’s poultry led to a profit of $181.91 in 1935 alone. These funds obtained through women’s labor often provided for families’ living expenses.

Successful gardens allowed families to divert funds from the purchasing of fruits and vegetables to other items and offered the possibility of an additional source of income. Women held responsibility for these gardens, though Dust Bowl conditions prevented gardens, and especially successful ones, from being feasible endeavors for many women. Martha Friesen did not have a garden due to a lack of irrigation and her location in the center of the Dust Bowl. The intense dust, wind, and heat did not allow for gardens in McPherson County, Kansas. Dust Bowl women with gardens, however, found their resulting ability to at least partially provide for their families instilled in them a sense of pride. Caroline Henderson had a garden and was proud to provide for her family with the fruits and vegetables from her garden and the poultry to which she tended. The results of her labor provided for at least seventy-five percent of her family’s needs throughout their years on the farm.

With or without a garden, women canned fruits and vegetables as soon as they ripened so as to have food for the winter or seasons with failed gardens or crops and thus a reduced income. Friesen did not have a garden, but she canned produce purchased at low prices during the summer. In 1937 she canned about twenty gallons of peaches,

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eighteen gallons of tomatoes, twenty-eight jars of jams, one gallon of peach butter, sixteen jars of pickles, and forty-nine cans of fruit. One woman recalled that she “canned everything that wasn’t movin.’” Women spent much of the summer preserving food items, for the process of food preservation consumed large portions of time, but their work allowed for dust-free food items and helped ensure their families would not starve during the most difficult times. If necessary, canned goods could also be sold or bartered.

Many families could not feed themselves on their own. The Red Cross supplied Dust Bowl inhabitants with food, but these efforts proved inadequate. Low knew of a woman who received “one cabbage and three carrots” for herself, her husband, and their six children. Low-income farmers spent, on average, two-thirds of their net income on food items. The average value of their annual food supply was $293 in 1935, where home production accounted for about $244 and $49 went towards purchased items. The middling strata of farmers of the era, with an annual income of $1,000 to $1,250, produced about two-thirds of their food supply with a value of about $343 and spent an average of $194 on other food items. Residents of 1930s family farms could not consider themselves self-sufficient, especially when multiple crop failures and environmental catastrophes greatly limited the output of farm labor and land.

Farm families’ meager food resources prevented women from following the previously mentioned “home economics” guidelines advocating a balanced diet, as

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148 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 159.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid., 853.
suggested by nutritional scientists. As a result women placed an even greater emphasis on keeping their homes as clean as possible in an attempt to positively influence the health of their family members and demonstrate to the outside world that they were, in fact, taking care of their children and other family members. Because housewives were normatively expected to be able to attain the symbols of a decent life, including maintaining a clean kitchen, wearing clean clothing, and having children regularly attend school, Dust Bowl women worked hard to show others that their families were well cared for, though the women may have “fallen short” in meeting some of society’s standards. As Cowan notes, “The housewife who belonged to the poorer part, no matter how hard she might labor, was constantly undermined by forces over which she had no control.”

The limited financial resources and presence of dust put most agricultural Dust Bowl women on a similar level in regards to housework, and they found themselves almost constantly working to clean their homes or at least present the image of a clean home to others.

The Dust Bowl brought clouds of dust into homes, and women worked for hours every day to remove that dust and keep the dust outside from infiltrating their homes. Families sealed windows and doors with tape, putty, felt, and soaked rags in an attempt to keep their homes free of dust. Wet sheets, thought to capture and hold the dust, covered doors and windows. Women clearly put much effort into their attempts to dust-proof their homes. Despite such efforts, small dirt particles permeated Plains homes, structures usually constructed without insulation. Women waved wet dishtowels in the air in an

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152 Cowan, More Work for Mother, 172.
attempt to collect the dust that had already worked its way inside.\textsuperscript{154} They covered furniture with sheets to preserve the upholstery and kept the pieces of place settings, including plates and cups, turned upside-down on the table until the moment they served the meal.\textsuperscript{155} Meals were ideally to be served on clean plates, but keeping dishware upside-down did not always guarantee their cleanliness, requiring women to wash dishes after meals but also just prior to meals.\textsuperscript{156} Women covered cooking ware so as to limit the amount of dust that found its way into food, though cooking wear could require multiple washings as well, and they stored liquids in mason jars with the lids tightly attached. Some women even mixed dough in bureau drawers in a futile attempt to keep it out of the dry and dusty air.\textsuperscript{157} That air carried static electricity in addition to dust particles, and women took precautions to avoid receiving painful electric shocks from their cooking utensils and other household items.\textsuperscript{158} The large amount of labor required of women to maintain household cleanliness and go about their daily chores, as caused by dust, severely complicated and constrained women’s lives.

The increased amount of housework required of women due to the infiltration of dust in their homes challenged and drained women. Household tasks and outdoor work filled the daily lives of Plains women prior to the Dust Bowl. The thought of her “usual” chores alone exhausted Ann Marie Low: she could not “feel any enthusiasm as [she thought] of all the washing, ironing, and baking to be done at home.”\textsuperscript{159} Dust storms intensified her exasperation. She complained that dust “sifts into everything. After we

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\textsuperscript{154} Worster, \textit{Dust Bowl}, 21.  \\
\textsuperscript{155} Hurt, \textit{The Dust Bowl}, 49.  \\
\textsuperscript{156} Cowan, \textit{More Work for Mother}, 159.  \\
\textsuperscript{157} Hurt, \textit{The Dust Bowl}, 49.  \\
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 50.  \\
\textsuperscript{159} Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary}, 88.  \\
\end{flushright}
wash the dishes and put them away, so much dust sifts into the cupboards we must wash them again before the next meal.” Elements of women’s household labor literally doubled as a result of the dust: women repeated chores because the dust erased previous accomplishments when it re-soiled what women had only recently cleaned.

Dust literally covered every bit of a house’s interior. After one dust storm “the mess” in Low’s home “was incredible! Dirt had blown into the house all week and lay inches deep on everything. Every towel and curtain was just black. There wasn’t a clean dish or cooking utensil.” Homes became dark and oppressive places of never-ending work for some women, and the outside world sometimes failed to provide comfort because it, too, was overcome by dust.

The constant presence of dust necessitated cleaning before the completion of most other tasks. Low elaborated, explaining, “every room had to have dirt almost shoveled out of it before we could wash floors and furniture.” Washing clothes and other such items, already a time-consuming task for most rural women, became even more tedious. Low already had much work to do in both her home and the fields, and she struggled with the extra chores required of her to meet the demands caused by the dust:

We had no time to wash clothes…. I had to wash out the boiler, wash tubs, and the washing machine before we could use them. Then every towel, curtain, piece of bedding, and garment had to be taken outdoors to have as much dirt as possible shaken out before washing.

Drought further complicated women’s household labor. Low “had to carry all the water… needed [for household chores] from the well,” for the cistern was dry. The

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160 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 95.
161 Ibid., 96.
162 Ibid., 97.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
“everlasting drudgery” of housekeeping that resulted from the drought and dust storms caused Low to lose hope in the future.165 Unable to keep dust out of her family’s home, she knew that “after each [dust] storm [she] had an all-day job cleaning everything in the house.”166 Low became more resistant as the Dust Bowl years progressed. She found the combination of intense heat and dust disheartening, as seen in a diary entry she wrote while “lying on the living room floor, dripping sweat and watching the dirt drift in the windows and across the floor. [She had] dusted [the] whole house that day and [would not] do it again.”167 Dust Bowl women began to find some of their work pointless, for a house could not be clean when dust constantly worked its way inside. Despite such feelings, a day without a dust storm became a day of cleaning:

The same old business of scrubbing floors, washing all the woodwork and windows, washing the bedding curtains, and towels, taking all the rugs and sofa pillows out to beat the dust out of them, cleaning closets and cupboards, dusting all the books and furniture, washing the mirrors and every dish and cooking utensil. Cleaning up after dust storms [had] gone on year after year…. [Low was] getting awfully tired of it. The dust [would] probably blow again [the next day].168

This continuous cycle—ridding the house of dust only to have a new coating of dust to remove the next day—gave women a sense of despair. Their hard work, particularly as manifested in the cleaning of dust that piled on top of their other household duties, lost its value when it needed to be repeated on a daily basis.

Keeping homes clean became increasingly labor-intensive with the dust storms, and taking care of oneself and one’s social duties became a chore in itself as dust accumulated. Low recalled an evening when “the wind died down” and her friend “Cap

165 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 101.
166 Ibid., 118.
167 Ibid., 152.
168 Ibid., 156.
came to take [her] to the movie. [They] joked about how hard it [was] to get cleaned up enough to go anywhere.\textsuperscript{169} Though Low laughed about it, getting oneself put together for social activities sometimes seemed too overwhelming, especially after a strenuous day of work while knowing the following days would be physically demanding. Dust also influenced social activities themselves. Henderson received a letter from a friend who described attending a dinner where “the guests were given wet towels to spread over their faces so they could breathe.”\textsuperscript{170} Women chose to fight the dust in an attempt to keep elements of their lives as uninterrupted as possible.

Factors other than dust contributed to an increase in women’s household labor throughout the early twentieth century. New technology led to labor-saving devices created to assist with housework, but women only ended up dedicating more time to their household chores. A nationwide decline in domestic servants forced some women to take care of more household chores on their own. The historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan explains that, with the Great Depression, unemployment (both of women and the men in their families) made increasing numbers of women available for hire as servants (married women lost their jobs under the patriarchal assumption that their presumably employed husbands provided for them, and single women struggled to find work in a society that favored white men for the few available jobs).\textsuperscript{171} The decline of families’ incomes, however, prevented many households from hiring these unemployed women. Despite this, Low’s sister Ethel managed to find work in a family’s home: “the work [was]
mostly cooking, with some laundry and cleaning. Ethel knew how to do those things and [had] all the conveniences of a city home with which to work. The pay was good.”

Rural farm women, however, rarely had access to domestic servants. Cowan explains that “really doing [housework] yourself had once been considered demeaning, but attitudes were changing. In the early decades of the century, women’s magazines repeatedly offered advice to housewives who were, for one unfortunate reason or another, coping with their homes singlehanded.” Housework became increasingly respected, at least among women and their literature. After World War I, articles in women’s magazines implied that housework was an “expression of the housewife’s personality and her affection for her family.” This literature encouraged women to embrace their increased workload out of dedication and love for their family members.

The amount of women’s work also increased when women chose to produce instead of purchase goods. Limited capital encouraged women to turn to home production; Low’s mother, “who sewed beautifully, could, at little expense, make [Low] some dresses for the start of school.” As noted in the 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture, farm families with an annual income in the range of $1,000 to $1,250 in 1935-1936 spent an average of $104 on clothing expenditures for the entire family. This budget allowed a wife to purchase a $16 winter coat to wear for five years, a $4.50 rayon or silk dress to last two years, a $1.35 cotton dress to be replaced annually, and two $3.00 pairs of shoes to be purchased annually as well. The tough economic and agricultural times forced families to reallocate some of their funds, and home production allowed women to divert

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172 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 71.
174 Ibid.
175 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 23.
176 Monroe, *Patterns of Living*, 858,
funds from ready-to-wear clothing to other necessities, including food and medical bills. Home production did, however, add to women’s lists of household chores and required them to dedicate more time to their work while also encouraging them to make additional sacrifices for their families by shifting family or personal funds from women’s own needs, including clothing, to the needs of the entire family.

The financial statistics regarding clothing expenditures presented in the 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture seem too high for the economic situations of Dust Bowl farm families, for these families often directed their resources towards needs other than that of clothing. Low frequently commented on the sacrifices she made in regards to clothing. She “won’t use Dad’s money for shoes and other things [she] need[s]” and wants to be financially independent so as to not place additional strain on her family.\(^\text{177}\) Her desire for shoes, and the ability to pay for them herself, illustrates her desire to move beyond the socioeconomic restrictions placed on farm women during the Dust Bowl. Low later found a part-time job in a library and made “twenty-five cents an hour. That bought a few things Ethel and I needed, such as hairpins, notebooks, and stockings,” but not shoes.\(^\text{178}\) While in college Low “sold two of [her] old books for enough to buy a pair of shoes.”\(^\text{179}\) Once she received a steady income, a sense of duty caused Low to give much of her income to her family. In March of 1935 she wrote, “I’ve kept only $7.00 from my pay since Christmas and am almost barefoot again—gotta buy some sturdy shoes.”\(^\text{180}\) She watched her pay go to family medical expenses, farm needs, and tuition bills, and she

\(^{177}\) Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 15.
\(^{178}\) Ibid., 46.
\(^{179}\) Ibid., 58.
\(^{180}\) Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 115.
became “tired and cross, penniless and destitute for clothes.” 181 Her mother could make her dresses “but not shoes and stockings.” 182 Low put her brother’s needs before her own, too, explaining that she “can get along a little without new shoes and [is] waiting to see how much money Bill will need.” 183 Though she desperately felt a need for new clothing items and especially shoes, which could not realistically be produced at home, Low always put her family’s needs before her own.

Societal expectations during the time guided Low’s self sacrifice. A 1930s study by sociologist Katharine Dupre Lumpkin, in which she studied attitudes towards gender roles, revealed that men and women “had no doubts that the woman’s part was to take care of the home and children whatever other duties were thrust upon her.” 184 Low’s mother often experienced illness and Low essentially took over her mother’s role in the household as a result. Dupre Lumpkin noted that “there are a few instances of women who expressed satisfaction in a new-found independence and interest from having a position and their own wages,” and Low found much pride in her ability to earn an income working in the library and as a teacher. 185 According to social standards, though, her position within her family dictated that she put her family’s needs before her own. The importance of being able to educate one’s children (and the high standards of living implied by having educated children) pushed Low to follow social expectations of women to first and foremost care for the family and thus direct her income towards her siblings’ education when her father could not afford to cover the costs. Low’s duties to her home existed even while away from home.

181 Ibid., 123.
182 Ibid.
183 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 171.
184 Dupre Lumpkin, “What the Husband and Wife Ought to Do and Ought to Feel,” 163.
185 Ibid., 164.
At home, though, women found housework overwhelming, and especially when efforts to maintain a dust-free home offered slim possibilities of success. Friends and neighbors used prescriptive ideals to measure a clean, dust-free home as a symbol of a woman’s devotion to her family and her complete dedication to its well-being (as implied by society, germ theory, and the science of home economics), so social norms increased the pressure one felt to maintain standards of cleanliness. If attained, a dust-free household rewarded a woman for her hard work (and, presumably, her luck, for a guaranteed method of “dust-proofing” a house did not exist). Historian R. Douglas Hurt shared the story of one Kansas woman who succeeded in keeping her home at least temporarily free from dust, for she

… dragged her rocking chair into the middle of the living room and sat down filled with a satisfying peace because the tape over the window frames was holding out almost every bit of dust. That was, she thought, ‘a condition under which almost any housewife could have died happily.’ Occasionally, she turned off the lights to see whether the windows were admitting any light, but all she could see was a dark mass of curtain with no visible motion.186

She found satisfaction in the minimal amount of dust in her home, which, to her, held more meaning than did the catastrophic amount of dust outside.

Caroline Henderson placed her experiences with dust in a larger social and environmental context. She complained about “‘dust to eat,’ and dust to breathe and dust to drink… to say nothing of the heaped up accumulation on floors and window sills after one of the bad days,” but she found such “personal inconveniences” to be of “slight moment as compared with the larger effects of the persistent drought and wind erosion.”187 Henderson’s economic and environmental concerns effectively place her

186 Hurt, *The Dust Bowl*, 3.
hardships in a larger context, illustrating how her experiences and those of other women in the Dust Bowl coincided with and resulted from larger issues facing the American Midwest and Plains. Dust affected so many elements of life that women constantly found themselves adjusting to their new situations, including an increase in illness throughout the Dust Bowl region.

Illness accompanied the dust storms and became increasingly prevalent and burdensome. The soil particles found throughout the air held a high silica content that essentially poisoned bodies by weakening immunity and aggravating the respiratory system.188 The distress on the immune system left people more susceptible to illnesses and contributed to outbreaks of contagious diseases in the Dust Bowl states. When a flu epidemic reached Low’s town, “within four weeks everyone had been sick at one time or another. Several people… died.”189 Dust itself caused medical problems; historian R. Douglas Hurt explains that the dust “did contribute to acute respiratory infections such as sinusitis, pharyngitis, laryngitis, and bronchitis, particularly for the very young or very old. The dust also increased the number of deaths from pneumonia.”190 Low commented, “newspapers [said] the deaths of many babies and old people [were] attributed to breathing in so much dirt.”191 Her brother Bud contracted pneumonia, and her uncle was presumed to have died from pneumonia.192 Dust Bowlers and their physicians identified “dust pneumonia” as illnesses caused by or consisting of “respiratory irritation and choking.”193 Doctors treated dust pneumonia, prevalent in the

188 Hurt, The Dust Bowl, 51.
189 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 177.
190 Ibid.
191 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 95.
192 Ibid., 77.
193 Hurt, The Dust Bowl, 51.
Dust Bowl region, as regular pneumonia. 194 Children were especially vulnerable to dust pneumonia and suffocation; a search party found a seven-year-old boy from Kansas, away from his home when a 1935 dust storm hit, smothered in dust the day after the storm. 195

Illnesses and other problems could not always receive the care they required, though, due to a lack of resources and the inaccessibility of adequate medical care. The Red Cross tried to make health care more accessible to those in the Dust Bowl and opened six emergency hospitals in the Dust Bowl states in 1935 where it distributed dust masks and cared for those struggling with illnesses caused or enhanced by the dust. 196

Most rural areas still lacked hospitals, and many existing rural hospitals were too small or poorly staffed or funded to provide adequate care. Distances from hospitals and health care centers prevented families from receiving the medical care they needed. 197

Women’s labor increased when family members fell ill, for they needed to care for the sick and help cover the ill person’s chores in the home and fields while still holding responsibility for their own large amounts of work. Low’s mother worried “that Bud and [Low had] too much to do, especially when she [was] sick.” 198 With her mother ill,

In the morning… before [Low and Bud] left for school at eight o’clock, [they] had to go half a mile for the milk cows, drive them home, grain and milk them, separate the milk, wash and dry the separator, feed and water nine calves [and the other animals],… prepare and eat breakfast, and get cleaned up to drive the seven miles over bad roads to school. If [they] had a few minutes left, [they] swept

194 Ibid., 52.
195 Hurt, The Dust Bowl, 51.
196 Ibid., 52.
197 Monroe, Patterns of Living, 859.
198 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 30. 
floors, made beds, did the dishes, and emptied the cream into a can for shipping.\textsuperscript{199}

Low’s workload clearly intensified when her mother could not work, for she and her brother became responsible for their mother’s work in addition to their own. At a later date her mother’s varicose veins improved “due to staying strictly off her feet.”\textsuperscript{200} Her mother’s bed rest made Low “very busy… [with] the cooking for Dad, Bud, two hired men, Mama, and [herself], a nine-room house to keep clean, the washing, ironing, baking, churning, tending a big garden, canning fruits and vegetables, and raising chickens and turkeys.”\textsuperscript{201} With her mother unable to work, Low picked up the work society deemed “feminine” for which her mother previously held responsibility.

Illness also tried women from a financial standpoint. Low watched her personal income dwindle as it paid for her family’s medical expenses; she regularly made sacrifices in order to cover such costs. “The expenses of [her] Grandma’s illness [had] taken every penny everybody in the family could possibly scrape up.”\textsuperscript{202} When her “Dad was worrying about Bud’s doctor and hospital bill of two hundred dollars,” Low diverted her income to help cover those costs even though she “was tired and cross, penniless and destitute for clothes.”\textsuperscript{203} She found her sacrifices underappreciated by her parents who always demanded she do more to help her family, but her income was essential to her family’s survival.

Some women found a bit of relief when their families faced especially hard times. The Red Cross offered limited assistance to those in need, particularly in Kansas. Red

\begin{footnotes}
\item[199] Ibid.
\item[200] Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary}, 121.
\item[201] Ibid.
\item[202] Ibid., 143.
\item[203] Ibid., 123.
\end{footnotes}
Cross funds allowed the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee to hire twenty carpenters to seal windows in one room of select “demonstration homes.”\textsuperscript{204} The Emergency Relief Committee chose these homes based on need and family illness.\textsuperscript{205} This gave select families a jump-start in dust-proofing their homes and offered the women of those homes a slight reprieve in their labor. The emotional toll experienced by women during the Dust Bowl, especially as caused by their increased amount of work and its seemingly never ending status, could not be assuaged by a bit of assistance. Some felt unfulfilled optimism regarding the potential for cleanliness and an end to the Dust Storms while others experienced a loss of hope and a sense of despair. Such sentiments caused women to turn to the “little things,” such as horseback rides, letters from friends, and visits to family members, to bring comfort into their increasingly busy housework routines.

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\textsuperscript{204} Worster, \textit{The Dust Bowl}, 52-53.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 53.
\end{flushright}
Coping Strategies

The conditions presented to women in the Dust Bowl allowed few opportunities for respite. Carolyn Henderson wrote a letter to Maryland farmer Evelyn Harris in which she stated, “Perhaps you wonder whether, amid all our futile efforts and disappointments, we do find any flowering islands, any place of rest and refreshment for continuing the struggle. Yes, we do.”206 The “flowering islands” helped women retain optimism during the most difficult of times when their hard work seemed to be in vain and they faced the potential loss of their family farms. From elements of nature to radio shows and letters to and from friends, the comfort women received from the small joys in their lives and the optimism they strove to retain helped them cope with their daily challenges.

Writing offered women a means to stay in touch with friends and family and also reflect on their own situations. Letters from her children Thelma, Verna, and Ervin enhanced Mary Knackstedt Dyck’s optimism for the future. A farm wife from Kansas, she always noted the arrival of such letters in her diary. Having her family together offered her even greater assurance. Knackstedt Dyck enjoyed having her family together for the Christmas of 1936 with “every body having a great time with the Xmas Spirit piece on Earth & good will to men.”207 A family Christmas gave Knackstedt Dyck an optimism that helped her positively welcome the new year. Despite the hard times, she felt she had not appreciated the past year as much as she should have, claiming that the

207 Mary Knackstedt Dyck, *Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 41. Knackstedt Dyck’s original spelling and punctuation is preserved.
year had “been so good to us, but we not being so good to you. So now the New one, we’re going to be more cheerful to you.” It is as if she realized the past year could have been much more difficult and hoped the best for the new year, determined to appreciate the more positive elements of it.

Caroline Henderson’s actual letters and essays provided her with a sense of ease as well, as suggested by Henderson’s editor Alvin O. Turner, for Henderson “treated letter writing as a literary effort but also used it to find comfort amid the struggles that threatened her dreams and her happiness.” Turner later elaborates that Henderson “seemed to use her discussion of area wildlife, family pets, and even the livestock to remind herself of the things she still enjoyed.” The small comforts from which Caroline Henderson drew a positive perspective regarding the future are explicitly described in her letters and essays. Beautiful elements of nature reassured women during a time when nature often appeared a destructive force. Henderson found her “greatest inspiration and encouragement in the blossoming plants in [her] windows.” She jokingly commented that “even more cheering than our tax receipt was the life-restoring rain,” a rain that made it seem “as if the earth breathed a great sign of relief.” It is likely that Henderson, too, breathed a sigh of relief, for rain made a successful crop much more likely while also reducing the presence of dust. Henderson understood the blossoming plants and brief rains were “insignificant little things… [but] they have seemed to reassure [her] that sunshine and rain, the laws of life and growth, seedtime and harvest, are in a general way dependable; that our earthly heritage is still rich in

208 Knackstedt Dyck, Waiting on the Bounty, 43.
209 Henderson, Letters from the Dust Bowl, 4.
210 Ibid., 29.
211 Ibid., 107.
212 Ibid., 114.
possibilities.” These “little things” assured Henderson that the agricultural lifestyle to which she entirely dedicated herself could still offer a sense of fulfillment.

Ann Marie Low also drew optimism from elements of nature. “In spare time [she and her brother Bud] rode horses for pleasure and to enjoy the countryside,” for horseback riding helped her escape from the harsh realities of her life, including endless hours of housework and struggles to stretch paychecks as far as possible. One warm day Low “rode many miles in [her] beloved hills” and “rode again” that night. She contemplated the nature she witnessed while on her rides and experienced in her home, reveling in natural beauty and finding encouragement within it:

Last night I stayed awake a long time enjoying the coyotes singing up in the hills. Their songs are beautiful and unique. They seem to throw their voices—they can sound far away or very near, and just one coyote can sound like several part of the time, and like a single singer the rest of the time.

Low truly appreciated nature and the beauty it held, describing “spring evenings” as “glorious—still and misty with sleepy birds calling.” Times of little or no dust offered Low a respite from her struggles, allowing her to appreciate the “peace and hopefulness” found in Stony Brook. Without dust the “evening was so beautiful it hurt.” Low did not “get homesick for people, but… for spring in the Stony Brook country.” Nature offered Low reassurance when she taught in the Badlands, too. She “went for a walk in the misty moonlight,” exclaiming, “Oh, it’s wonderful to be out in the midst of these weirdly shaped buttes all alone at night when the moon is full and the coyotes serenading

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213 Ibid., 107.
215 Ann Marie Low, Dust Bowl Diary (U of Nebraska Press, 1984), 5.
216 Ibid., 17.
217 Ibid., 32.
218 Ibid., 117.
219 Ibid.
220 Ibid., 82.
221 Ibid.
it.”222 Beauty in nature encouraged Low to retain an optimism that helped her cope with family struggles and her exhausting work schedule.

Knackstedt Dyck also found pleasure in the beauty of nature that helped her cope with Dust Bowl life. She especially loved snow and the lack of dust it signified, “a consolation for all of us for a change.”223 One diary entry described a morning as “beautiful out of doors ground is full of white frost; Trees are full of Ice ciciles are looking very pretty.”224 Appreciation for this type of weather increased when people were so used to dust and wind storms. Knackstedt Dyck also found relief in the peaceful creatures she witnessed in nature, describing the “mocking birds” as “very lively to day are singing the more beautiful Songs this morning…. There seem to be mostly a dozen of them. How beautiful they are.”225 Knackstedt Dyck also welcomed a week’s reprieve from dust storms, a time during which “pastures greened up so nicely. And it sorta makes one feel like he’s on the Sunny side of life.”226 Her diary entry for Thanksgiving, 1937, described “a beautiful day, no wind, just breeze. This day was certenly beautiful without anything else to be thankful for.”227

Positive weather conditions also brought Knackstedt Dyck hope, helping her remain optimistic about the future. In February of 1937 she mentioned in her diary that “this is the 7th day now that we’re enjoying wonderfull piece.”228 Early April of the same year she noted, “To day is a nice quiet day for a change. Its quiet appreceation for all of

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222 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 166.
223 Knackstedt Dyck, Waiting on the Bounty, 52.
224 Ibid., 49.
225 Ibid., 74.
226 Ibid.
227 Ibid., 95.
228 Ibid., 53.
The lack of wind offered comfort to women and gave them a slight break in their housework: women did not have to constantly fight dust within their homes because a lack of dust storms meant a lack of or reduction in dust.

Low found comfort not only in nature’s beauty but also in her love for the land and the potential she found within it. While in a Rural Sociology class of thirty students the professor asked how many of the students thought they would spend the rest of their lives in a rural area. Low described the class’ response in her diary:

I was the only one. I’m not seeing the country from a glorified view, either. The Lord knows I’ve tasted its hardships, hard work, poverty, loneliness, cold, heat, and inconvenience. But I love the Stony Brook area and want to live there. I can do some good there and make a worthwhile life for myself.230

Even during the dust storms and drought Low’s thoughts turned to the land and what she hoped to accomplish with it. Granted, this optimism for Stony Brook declined as Low watched federal projects transform the land (as previously discussed), but she then felt a sense of hope for what the Badlands could potentially offer her.

Caroline Henderson also found her optimism rooted in a love of the land. She wrote of Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth*, explaining that “it is rarely that one finds a person able to understand and sympathize with the primitive feeling of kinship with the earth…. Still more rarely can such a person express that feeling so that other people may realize and possibly share it.”231 Knowing that others understood her love for the earth and experienced a similar sensation gave Henderson an increased sense of hope regarding the future. She also found strength in federal agencies’ relief efforts in the Dust Bowl region, for “the people [she] know[s] are meeting a hard situation with vigor, and

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230 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 84.
individual resourcefulness. Yet there is moral support in feeling that agencies more comprehensive and powerful than any one person can control are supplementing our efforts.\footnote{Henderson, \textit{Letters from the Dust Bowl}, 146.} This moral support helped Henderson remain positive during her struggles with Dust Bowl conditions while other women found support in somewhat mundane aspects of life.

Elements of daily life helped Low maintain a sense of optimism throughout the Dust Bowl. She enjoyed stuffing and mounting small animals for display, though she became quite upset when her mother sat on one of these projects.\footnote{Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary}, 83.} Low became especially happy when her work or dedication led to increased financial profit for her family. For example, she ordered chicks and “the poultry companies add two or three chicks to each hundred to take care of death losses during shipment. Pronto[, a horse,] and I got home with 103 chicks alive and healthy!”\footnote{Ibid., 22.} Low also enjoyed baking, a pastime she turned to especially when bored. She “amused [herself one] cold, stormy morning by trying a new recipe, a whipped cream cake, which was so popular it was half gone by noon.”\footnote{Ibid., 79.} Her baking thus offered her family a source of comfort as well.

While at home Low found amusement in one of her mother’s favorite pastimes: gossip. As a traditional “female” mode of communication, gossip provided women with entertainment, information, and a sense of power. Scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks generally defines gossip as “idle talk about other persons not present” but also argues that, through gossip, a woman could choose “to assert her own kind of authority: the
authority of talk, and of female association.”

Listening to telephone conversations served as one of the primary means of obtaining gossip, which could then be shared among family, friends, and neighbors. Low recalls that, with telephone calls, “it did not matter who was called; all the neighbors listened in. This was called ‘rubbernecking’ and was the main amusement and diversion of the rural housewife.”

Low’s mother found much enjoyment in this diversion. “Mama kept [Low] entertained with the stories of what had been going on at camp last winter. Her winter’s amusement had been listening in on the phone conversations of the CCC camp.”

The gossip that resulted from listening to these conversations may have strengthened or unified regional opposition to CCC projects in the area. Those who lived in Stony Brook knew, for example, that CCC men could have rescued most of the “hundreds of little ducks, hatched on the prairie, [that] perished before they could reach water” when Arrowwood Lake dried up.

Listening to calls from the CCC camps helped solidify views that CCC officials did their jobs half-heartedly and with ambivalence towards the area they supposedly worked to improve. Spacks contends that gossip can also have a “disturbing power” as rooted in “female minds as well as female tongues, and which potentially threatens the order of society by investigating what should remain veiled.”

Listening to CCC calls brought to light the “dirty tricks… bureaucrats have pulled and the lies they have told,” and Low found in this gossip additional reasons as to why her community disliked the CCC presence in the area.

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237 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 5.
238 Ibid., 140.
239 Ibid., 155.
240 Spacks, *Gossip*, 151.
241 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 154.
Gossip’s way of telling can project a different understanding of reality from that of society at large, even though gossip may claim to articulate the voice of the community.”

Sociologists C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby suggest that gossip is, however, most often found in tight communities and overall helps strengthen the bonds between community members.

Gossip also served as an important mode of “female” communication and knowledge sharing operating outside the formal power structures that tended to exclude women. Because of its position on the threshold between the private and public, gossip challenged the separation of the two spheres by confusing the distinctions between personal and publicly known pieces of information. Gossip gave women power within their communities, for it offered them a means of influencing others’ views and knowledge while also distracting them and other women from the harsh realities of their lives.

Those who lived in the Dust Bowl often found themselves close to their neighbors despite the fact that those neighbors likely lived miles away, for Dust Bowl residents often relied on each other for support and assistance. A sense of community is very apparent in one of Low’s diary entries regarding a 1935 blizzard during which her father and brother were at the house of family friends, the Nevas. “Nine other people were also marooned there, and [the] Nevas have no telephone. Most of the people had groceries they had bought in Jamestown and took in to help Mrs. Neva feed the crowd.”

Events such as these likely encouraged the free transmission of gossip and strengthened

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244 Spacks, *Gossip*, 262.
245 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 132.
community bonds. The support neighbors offered one another helped families survive the Dust Bowl, for neighbors often helped feed and care for one another while also sharing farm tools and supplies.

Some Dust Bowl women described a rich sense of community that helped them and their families cope with their struggles. Scholar Patricia A. Willis argues that, “Living so near the edge of poverty, [Dust Bowl families] gave when they had plenty and accepted when they were in need.”

Jenny, a young woman who lived in an Iowa town but whose mother and step-father resided on their family farm in the Dust Bowl, recalled that “if [a] woman could not go [to town] but needed grocery items, [Jenny’s parents] would buy them and bring them back to her.” Libby, a young woman who also grew up on an Iowan farm, remembered a time when her family helped a neighbor’s daughter receive the medical attention she required when a flood blocked the roads. When flood waters threatened the ill girl’s home, Libby’s family took in and fed the girl’s large family. Another woman expanded her baking when a neighbor’s wife died to as to supply her own family and her neighbor’s family with bread. Women made such acts of generosity without expectation of repayment. The sense of security obtained from this informal community support system helped women maintain strength during the Dust Bowl. Offering assistance to neighbors provided women with a sense of fulfillment as well, for women were quick to help their neighbors in need.

247 Ibid.
248 Ibid., 102.
249 Ibid.
250 Ibid.
The Dust Bowl’s general emotional toll on women could not be completely tolerated with the support offered by friends and family and the hope that the future would be better. Dust Bowl women often felt extremely lonely, as already low population density further declined when people decided to migrate. Visiting neighbors also presented dangers: one did not know if she would be caught in a sudden dust storm temporarily blinding her and her horse or if a sudden increase in static electricity in the air would prevent her car engine from running.251 Henderson described her isolation during

… another long day of wild wind and blistering heat. Tonight I am quite alone—a mile and a half from anybody. The wind has gone down and the quietness makes me think of [my husband’s] memories of his old cowboy days, of silences out on the open plains so intense that one’s ears would ache while listening.252

The silence offered her a bit of comfort in that it indicated a reprieve from wind and dust, but it also reminded her of her loneliness.

Knackstedt Dyck frequently wrote in her diary of a similar desire for companionship, explaining that “Its very lonesome when we cant have much Radio.”253 She found reassurance while listening to radio shows, for they offered her refuge from the dust, drought, and housework she constantly faced. Fred Allen, Judie and Jane, Bob and Betty, and Andy Gump helped her escape from her world, if only temporarily.254

Knackstedt Dyck also expressed intense frustration when a bad battery or static from dust storms prevented her from keeping up with her shows.255 Both complete silence and the

251 Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s, 19-20,.
252 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 95.
253 Henderson, Letters from the Dust Bowl, 115.
254 Knackstedt Dyck, Waiting on the Bounty, 45.
255 Ibid. 35, 40, 45.
roar of wind reminded Knackstedt Dyck of her isolation, and the radio shows she enjoyed listening to distracted her from the fact that very few people resided near her.

Low seemed less isolated than Henderson and Knackstedt Dyck, for she lived near CCC camps and had opportunities to travel to towns for both recreational and educational purposes. She had mixed feelings regarding the heterosocial culture she experienced in town, for she felt dating and spending time with young men limited her independence. Heterosocial activities did, however, provide distractions from the dust storms and the large amounts of work for which women held responsibility. One summer Low “occasionally went roller-skating or dancing with a boy named Vern who lived a few miles away. By the end of the summer [she] stopped seeing him because he was getting marriage ideas.” Low often cut off relations with men once marriage became a consistent suggestion. She did not want to sacrifice her independence and knew it would be much more difficult to find a decent job outside the home as a married woman than as a single one. This did not prevent her from participating in a heterosocial culture, though. “Jamestown College students were not allowed to dance, but of course some of us did when away from Jamestown” because dancing, as well as Technicolor films, offered students an escape from the harsh realities of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl.

Low’s academic pursuits also helped her cope with agricultural, environmental, and economic hardships. She enjoyed her school work and the sense of accomplishment it brought her, for it helped her distance herself from the struggles found on her family farm. For example, Low’s professor “Dr. Sinclair asked [her] to join Sigma Tau Delta,

256 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 41.
257 Ibid., 95-96.
258 Ibid., 69.
the honorary English society. That made [her] happy. [She] enjoyed the students in that society. [They] can have a lot of fun and learn a lot."259 Low’s interest in English and academia, as well as the delight she found in her related pursuits, suggests that writing in her diary also strengthened her, which in turn helped her cope with the Dust Bowl.

Ann Marie Low’s sense of hope contained a sense of agency, for Low felt she could help bring about the positive conditions she longingly anticipated. Prior to the actual Dust Bowl, during the agricultural depression of the 1920s, Low expressed hope that “maybe next year we won’t have to work so hard. There may be plenty of rain and hay.”260 Low carried this hope throughout the Dust Bowl years as well:

The last six years have been tough, what with the Big Depression, my inability to get a good paying job, illness, a thousand petty discouragements, crop failures, drouth, dust storms, poor cattle market, and now this [federal project of a] game refuge thing costing us our home and Dad’s work of a lifetime. Somehow we’ve made it so far. Surely in 1936 things will break for the better.261

Low’s hope seemed to stem, in part, from an idea that life could not possibly get any worse. At the same time, though, Low was optimistic about the future because her family already survived great hardship and would continue to do so. Low helped ensure her family’s survival through the sense of agency exhibited in her hopefulness and optimism. When she wrote of wanting to become a journalist, for example, she confronted reality but still devised a plan that would bring her closer to becoming a journalist or pursuing a different career. “That field [of journalism] is too crowded, but I can prepare for it with an English major and take enough side courses to teach school if nothing else.”262 At one point, while contemplating the upcoming year, Low thought that perhaps she could “get

259 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 75.
260 Ibid., 33.
261 Ibid., 134.
262 Ibid., 37.
by cheaply enough not to have to work,” or maybe rain would allow for a decent crop, or she could “raise more turkeys” or “get a part-time job downtown” to bring in more money if her family did not have increased income from agricultural sources.\textsuperscript{263} Low knew she could not simply hope for the best when she could also take action to help bring about the conditions she desired for herself and her family. Other women likely felt the same way, for they saw the effects of their strength and perseverance on their family farms when their efforts helped keep the farm together.

Low believed that, since her family had already survived much hardship, it could continue to do so, and this offered her strength that helped her cope with the Dust Bowl. Reading through the previous year’s diary entries likewise lifted Knackstedt Dyck’s spirits. “After Mo reading, the last year Diery [of 1936], it sorta, put a Sunny side on life for her.”\textsuperscript{264} She and her husband survived the struggles of 1936 and could surely overcome the hardships presented throughout 1937. Such hope was evident during one dust storm when Knackstedt Dyck hoped to “see the Ray of Sunshine.”\textsuperscript{265} The sun breaking through the clouds of dust would signify a reprieve from the dust: less housework, more possibility for successful crops, and fewer headaches as caused by the dust and wind. Knowing the sun would eventually break through helped Knackstedt Dyck and other Dust Bowl women face the unending housework, the financial difficulties, and the medical conditions that plagued those in the Dust Bowl.

Henderson also maintained a positive perspective while in the Dust Bowl despite the fact that she claimed to have lost her self-respect as a result of her hardships and she constantly worried about her family’s financial troubles. She found hope in the smallest

\textsuperscript{263} Low, \textit{Dust Bowl Diary}, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{264} Knackstedt Dyck, \textit{Waiting on the Bounty}, 67.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., 57.
of things, including that “There are always the children to help us to look forward.”

Even while labeling 1936 as “another year of failure,” a year in which her husband experienced a debilitating ankle injury, Henderson noted that “the injured ankle slowly regained its shape and strength and the recovery is one thing to be grateful for as we look back over a difficult year.”

Henderson, like Ann Marie Low and Mary Knackstedt Dyck, held confidence in the improvement of Dust Bowl conditions and managed to hold on to that optimism to help her cope during the most trying of times.

At moments Henderson did, however, feel close to despair. As early as December of 1932 she felt “The road ahead seems blocked. All sense of security for our old age has vanished,” but she believed conditions would eventually improve. Henderson struggled with housework, her family’s health, and her farm’s poor conditions, but she never entirely gave up on the land, feeling confident that she would eventually benefit from her hard work and dedication.

Low slowly lost hope in the potential for success in Stony Brook, but this decline in hope served as another type of coping strategy, this time making her imminent separation from Stony Brook less painful. In 1934 she wrote, “I love [Stony Brook], but am not going to. Everything I loved will be gone,” predicting the destruction of the beauty she found in the region. She later viewed the area she once so dearly loved as a symbol of oppression. Upon having obtained a job in 1937 teaching in the Badlands, an area she enjoyed particularly for its buttes and job opportunities, Low mentioned writing a diary entry while “on a bus taking [her] back to Stony Brook, where [she] had hoped

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267 Ibid.
268 Ibid., 118, 147.
269 Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 106.
never to go again, and [she felt] very blue about it. Just as it seemed [she] was set up in a
good job for a nice summer, a letter from Mama… told [her] to come home as [Mama]
and Dad need[ed her].”

The Stony Brook she had loved no longer existed, and she felt
“trapped in the same round all over again.”

Low only had enough money for her bus
fare home “to just an everlasting round of work in the Stony Brook country that has been
ruined.”

She yearned for an escape from the labor and from Stony Brook itself,
frustrated by working for years and having little to show for it, exclaiming, “Somehow,
I’ve got to get out!”

While she spent many years resisting marriage because of the
limitations she felt it would impose on her, she turned to marriage while experiencing a
sense of despair, later explaining that “When I married, it seemed the only future after I
had thrown away my job in the Badlands to go home and help the folks.”

While a general sense of optimism tended to help women cope with Dust Bowl
conditions, Dust Bowl women did experience times of despair. Henderson “suffer[ed]
from a painful sense of helplessness and utter frustration” when dust storms obscured the
landscape in which she found comfort.

Like Low, she grew frustrated by hard work
with little or no benefit or profit, though that hard work often kept the family farm
functioning. “It certainly seemed that ‘something attempted, something done’ ought to
have earned at least ‘a night’s repose.’”

“Bewilderment, distraction, despair, would come nearer to suggesting that common state of mind as people are forced into selling
their most important means of livelihood for less than the cost of production.”

People seemed to only lose more when they increased the resources put into their farms. The economy and ecological environment did not allow for successful family farms in the southern Great Plains, and women’s mindsets reflected the conditions of their failing farms.

Dust Bowl women mentally struggled with elements of the Dust Bowl and agricultural economy. Henderson “confess[ed] that at times the endless round of our daily duties seems quite… meaningless and unprofitable.” A loss of self-respect accompanied her feeling of working hard but in vain (in part due to low farm prices):

… of all our losses in recent years the most distressing is the loss of our self-respect. How can we feel that our work here has any dignity or importance when the world places so low a value on the products of our toil? We are humiliated every time we have to dole out another load of wheat at a price below production costs, but we must do it to meet our current expenses.

Despite her despair from a lack of self-respect and no profit from her labor, Henderson thought she could “never go willingly or without pain that as yet seems unendurable,” for she did not want to simply give up. “Thus far [Henderson] and most of [her] friends seem[ed] held—for better or for worse—by memory and hope.” Knowing they had already survived helped women cope with past struggles and brace themselves for what the future might bring. While some women found Dust Bowl conditions unendurable, many others tried to retain a sense of optimism to help them survive the struggles presented by the Dust Bowl. They did their best to believe agricultural and environmental conditions, and thus their own living conditions, would improve.

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278 Ibid., 107.
279 Ibid., 110.
280 Ibid., 150.
281 Ibid., 146.
Conclusion

Fifty years after the Dust Bowl Ann Marie Low commented in the epilogue of her Dust Bowl diary that “the term ‘Dust Bowl days’ means little now to young people, and even many people who lived through those days seem to have forgotten. After all, they may believe, it is a period of history that can never recur and is best forgotten.”

An era with such a large impact on those who lived and struggled through it, though, cannot be simply forgotten. Henderson wrote to Evelyn Harris of the horrendous conditions caused by the Great Depression throughout the United States, explaining:

The situation throughout the country is much more serious, I believe, than many people suppose. Think of the loss of homes, the decrease in land values, the idle shops and idle men, the closed banks, delinquent taxes, rents hopelessly overdue, children deprived of school privileges, thousands of young men and women roaming over the country freed from the normal restraints of orderly social conditions.

While the 1929 stock market crash had a relatively minimal impact on agriculture, an industry experiencing a depression throughout the 1920s, the drought and dust storms that comprised the Dust Bowl greatly complicated the lives of those living in the Southern Great Plains in the 1930s. Women witnessed dust, drought, and poor economic conditions destroy the lives they loved and hamper their prospects for the future. Each night represented a triumph over the dust and wind, as well as the illness and increased volumes of housework that accompanied dust storms, for the Dust Bowl transformed women’s daily lives into struggles for their own survival and that of their families. Heightened societal standards of cleanliness presented additional pressures for

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282 Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary* (U of Nebraska Press, 1984), 188.
women to rid their homes of dust, a seemingly impossible task, because a lack of cleanliness became associated with an increase in illness. With the health of their families supposedly under their control, women felt responsible for keeping their homes as clean as possible so as to keep their family members healthy and present a positive image to their neighbors. New dietary standards also complicated women’s lives in the Dust Bowl. Food preparation itself required much more effort than prior to the Dust Bowl due to the omnipresent presence of dust, and many could not afford to adequately feed their families.

Women did go to great lengths, though, to provide for their families as best as they could. Tending to gardens, raising poultry, and canning fruits and vegetables allowed women to bring in additional profit to help their families. This income often covered, at least in part, families’ living expenses. Some farm women turned to a barter economy in an attempt to avoid the capitalist system they found harmful to their way of life.284 Others, especially daughters, sought employment in local towns and found themselves sending most of their paychecks home to support their families.285

Farm women found little benefit from federal relief efforts. Many Dust Bowl residents rejected the AAA and CCC on the basis that those implementing the efforts failed to consider the actual needs and conditions of the individuals living in the region. Many Dust Bowl residents, women in particular, found CCC programs contributed to a decline in the beauty of, and subsequently the appreciation for, the land. AAA programs aimed at increasing farm prices through the reduction of cultivated acreage seemed

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285 Low, Dust Bowl Diary 65.
counterproductive to Dust Bowl farmers whose entire livelihoods depended on agricultural production, and tenant farmers frequently found themselves entirely displaced when the owners of the land on which they worked decided to reduce cultivated acreage by evicting tenants.

Those whose families owned their land often found themselves in a better position than did tenant farmers, though the inability to pay one’s mortgage drove some Dust Bowl families from their farms, and foreclosures accompanied the decline in land values throughout the Southern Great Plains. The inability to live off the land led some to leave their farms while others lost their land when it became part of public domain or conservation programs. Some sold their land and voluntarily resettled, though they often characterized such resettlement as a sign of personal failure. Those who did migrate often relocated to towns or counties neighboring those in which they already resided and searched for work as migrant or day laborers. With every family member required to work outside the home so as to obtain the funds necessary for living, women who relocated to industrial areas often found themselves working in canning or packing houses, learning new skills and replacing previous male, often Mexican American, employees due to women’s willingness to work for lower wages. Other migrant women found themselves relying on seasonal field work to obtain the funds necessary for their family’s survival.

Emotional drain accompanied the hard work and harsh conditions of Dust Bowl women’s lives. These women relied on inner strength and a general sense of optimism regarding the future to help them continue with their lives during times of great need.

\[286\] Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 149-150.
The comfort they found in bits of beauty offered by nature, letters written to and from friends, and days without dust and wind helped Dust Bowl women maintain a sense of hope; they might soon be rewarded for their hard work, or environmental and economic conditions might soon improve, and they could perhaps return to the dust-free lives they previously enjoyed. These women distracted themselves by listening to radio shows, entertained themselves with gossip, and educated themselves with academic pursuits, all of which contributed to their belief that conditions would, in fact, improve. Heterosocial culture and gossip offered women strength as well, for they granted women a realm in which to participate and exert influence while also strengthening community bonds.

Community bonds and the assistance willingly offered by neighbors helped women cope with the challenges presented by the Dust Bowl. While multiple crop failures, changes in the landscape, and little actual profit for hours of labor proved disheartening to Dust Bowl women and caused a sense of despair, knowing their families had thus far survived the Dust Bowl, and in part due to the women’s own efforts, helped women maintain a positive outlook regarding the future.

The history of the Dust Bowl clearly is not complete without a discussion of Southern Plains women and their conditions and experiences during the 1930s. The changes they experienced in their lives, from a large increase in housework and greater responsibility for the health of their family members to a disillusionment with farm life and an increased distrust of federal intervention and assistance, help fully portray the Dust Bowl and life within it. Dust Bowl women, so often ignored or mentioned only in footnotes, found their lives drastically changed as environmental and economic conditions pushed them to fulfill new responsibilities both in and out of the home. This
work, too often ignored by Dust Bowl historians, proved vital to the survival of families and their farms during the dust and drought of the 1930s Southern Plains. As their lives changed, Dust Bowl women found that “somehow we managed.”288 At a time when “the drouth and dust storms are something fierce. As far as one can see are brown pastures and fields which, in the wind, just rise up and fill the air with dirt. It tortures animals and humans” and “there is one dust storm after another,” women worked to provide and care for their families and retain an optimism that helped them cope with the difficult conditions they constantly faced.289 Existing studies of the Dust Bowl are incomplete because scholars have not acknowledged the significance of women in the history of this region and this time. A complete historical narrative of the Dust Bowl must include women’s lives and experiences—their dedication and strength, their struggles within households and on farms— for women’s efforts were critical to the survival of families and their farms during this time of severe economic and ecological disaster.

288 Low, Dust Bowl Diary, 124.
289 Ibid., 101, 156.
Bibliography


