

AGRICULTURAL CONDITIONS IN THE SOUTHERN
PLAINS: MEDFORD, OKLAHOMA, 1919-1940

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PREFACE

The history of a small farming community such as Medford, Oklahoma, is significant to western history for a number of reasons. Medford developed as a typical southern plains town, experiencing boom and bust cycles, and growth and decline. Market, weather, and population patterns affected the prosperity of the town, and as such are good examples of how these phenomena affected a rural, agricultural community in the Southern Plains.

Land hungry pioneers established Medford during the Cherokee Strip land rush of 1893. This land rush opened additional Indian lands to white settlement. Overnight the prairie became towns and farms as thousands of eager and optimistic souls sought their future on free lands. Most of these people either had a farming background or aimed to acquire one. The land was only marginally suitable for agriculture during some years, and in fact the United States government had sent explorers into the region early in the nineteenth century, and these men had labeled the region the Great American Desert. Medford residents would learn just what this label meant as they plowed

up the ground and sought to feed their families and build homes.

An agricultural boom occurred in the United States during World War I, as the demand for food to support the war effort, and the mechanization of agriculture, prompted what some have called the great plow-up. After the war, and throughout the 1920s, while much of the nation prospered, agricultural interests suffered as they were geared to production levels that created oversupply of products that led to a severe decline in prices. Thus, by the end of the 1920s, communities such as Medford had experienced a decade of a declining prosperity.

This is a study of Medford, Oklahoma, from the post World War I period until 1940. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that the Medford area, dependent for its economic livelihood upon agriculture, from time to time suffered economic depression related primarily to national and international agricultural overproduction before 1930 and not the effects of the Dust Bowl or Great Depression. Essentially, I wish to argue that for a number of reasons, the Medford region during the 1930s experienced no worse economic downturn than it had prior to either of these phenomena. Implicit in this description of economic hardship during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression is also the question of whether the area is suitable at all for

farming. Beginning in 1929, with the stock market crash, the United States economy entered a downward spiral that lasted until the late 1930s. During this period, Medford, subject to depression and Dust Bowl conditions, suffered as did the rest of the nation, but as declining agricultural prices had occurred in the previous decade, the town and its area were affected less severely as other regions, especially urban areas.

Many historians have suggested the causes of the Dust Bowl, and have taken positions on whether the region should be farmed. R. Douglas Hurt in The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History argued that soil composition, climactic conditions, and white settlement caused the ecologically devastating Dust Bowl.¹ But his conclusions indicated that farmers learned from their Dust Bowl experiences and even gained two things from the blowing dust: the Soil Conservation Service and the increased use and knowledge of irrigation. Hurt was careful not to lay the entire blame of the Dust Bowl on the farmers' individualism. Another work whose premise is similar is James C. Malin's The Grasslands of North America: Prolegomena to Its History. Malin argued that the Dust Bowl was not unique when placed in its historical context.² In fact, dust storms of the severity of the 1930s occurred throughout the Southern Plains for hundreds of years. Man, with increased technology,

plowed up more sod and produced higher yields, but this did not affect the blowing dust storms of the 1930s. Disagreeing with Malin, Donald Worster in Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s argued that man and his capitalistic ideals in the United States created the Dust Bowl.³ Individual human greed motivated the increase in acreage and the exploitation of the soil to its limits. He concluded that droughts would occur in the 1970s and the 1990s because of the flaws inherent in the American economic system that related to the farmer's activities.

Though one may wonder whether these arguments have a limited significance to this thesis, it is essential to understand that these diverse interpretations of the causes and conclusions had relevancy for Medford. Medford remains as the economic hub of Grant County because of the cooperative grain elevators access to national markets. Worster argued that much of the Southern Plains should not be farmed owing to the extreme individualism and capitalism inherent in the United States' economic system. Worster's perception would cause Oklahoma's largest wheat producing county to be depopulated, and Medford would have become a virtual ghost town. All businesses in the town depend heavily on the enterprise of wheat farming. Worster was not alone in his attitude toward farming in the Southern Plains. Nineteenth-century explorers in the

region also argued that the aridity made large-scale farming impossible, or at best risky. Zebulon M. Pike, Major Stephen H. Long, Captain Randolph B. Marcy, and Horace Greely agreed that the region should be pastured out or not inhabited at all.

The conclusions of this thesis support the ideas that R. Douglas Hurt suggested about whether or not the land should be farmed. Hurt believed that the Southern Plains was suitable for agriculture, if proper techniques were used and the farmers respected nature's cycles. Land use has as much to do with cultural and aesthetic judgments - not just economics as Worster presumes. Thus people farm because of this desire for the lifestyle.

I would like to express my appreciation to my husband for his patience and love and my parents for their support. Furthermore, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Prof. Joseph A. Stout, Jr., and Prof. Michael F. Logan, and Prof. Elizabeth A. Williams for their support and help with this thesis. I also want to thank Prof. Dennis Williams of Southern Nazarene University for his inspiration during my undergraduate and graduate years. Mr. John Phillips, Head of the Documents Collection at Oklahoma State University, helped tremendously with his knowledge of government documents and their proper methods of citation and his wife's generosity in lending me their microfilm reader.

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NOTES

¹R. Douglas Hurt, The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981).

²James C. Malin, The Grasslands of North America: Prolegomena to Its History (Lawrence, KS: James C. Malin, 1947).

³Donald Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: A HISTORY OF MEDFORD, OKLAHOMA, FROM ITS BEGINNING TO THE END OF WORLD WAR I

Medford is located in Grant County, Oklahoma, in the Southern Plains region on the northernmost border of Oklahoma and Kansas. The terrain slopes gently toward the east and is comprised of rolling prairies, numerous streams, and creeks. The largest streams include the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River and the Chikaskia. The eastern half of the county receives more rain, making agricultural enterprise an encouraging investment. Enough rain falls in the western half to grow crops, but the soil is better suited for ranching.¹ The average amount of rainfall for the county is 29.40 inches, sufficient for the cultivation of hard red winter wheat, which is the main crop found in the county. Grant County led the state in production of bushels of wheat harvested, totaling 8,715,989 in 1992.² Other crops grown in the county include sorghum, soybeans, and alfalfa.

The United States government acquired the Oklahoma region with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, and soon

thereafter sent explorers to report on the characteristics of the region. Present-day Oklahoma garnered more national attention in 1817 when Cherokee Indians of Georgia ceded their lands to the federal government. The Cherokees were relocated to seven million acres directly west of the Arkansas River. Congress established Indian Territory on May 28, 1830, and within the next few years all of the Five Civilized Tribes were removed to the region. The Cherokee Indians also received access to an additional six million acres to the west and north of their land that gave them access to the Salt Plains. This area was known as the Cherokee Outlet. Medford and Grant County are located within this area.³

With the growing industry of ranching in the mid-nineteenth century, cattlemen began using the Outlet's lush grassland for free grazing for their herds during the cattle drives from southern Texas to the railheads in Kansas. Organized cattle drives going through present-day Grant County, and Medford in particular, followed a path Jesse Chisholm established in 1867 that went from San Antonio to Fort Worth, Texas, then to Chickasha, El Reno, Enid, and present-day Medford, Oklahoma, with the destination of Abilene, Kansas. The Cherokees realized there was a profit for them in the cattle industry, and began charging ranchers and cattle drovers for grazing and passage through their lands.

They established the Cherokee Council and from drovers collected \$8,000 in 1880, \$21,500 in 1881, and \$41,250 in 1882. By 1883, the Cherokee began leasing their lands to cattlemen in five-year terms at \$100,000 per year.⁴ Simultaneously, cattlemen formed a counter organization called the Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association to protect the interests of large-scale ranching.⁵ Disputes arose concerning whether or not the Cherokees could legally lease lands that they did not own but merely had access to. The federal government decided that the Cherokees did not have the authority to rent land for grazing purposes. By 1884 the invention of barbed wire, declining prices for Longhorns, and the construction of railroads into Texas caused the abandonment of cattle trails through Grant County.⁶

Questions about the Cherokee leasing of the lands foreshadowed changes for the Cherokee Strip. In 1887 the Dawes Severalty Act set in motion a plan whereby Indian lands would be divided into 160 acre plots. Each head of an Indian family could receive the acreage for agricultural purposes, and in specific instances, an additional 320 acres for grazing. As a result, thousands of acres of Indian land remained after each Indian family had received its allotment. The government planned to sell or cede what was left to any potential buyer.⁷ The Homestead Act of 1862, which

offered white settlers land, provided the background for eventual land runs in Oklahoma. The Dawes Act merely hastened this process by making more land available.⁸

By July 15, 1888, the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska railway, that would later become the Rock Island railway, completed its line through the future sites of Grant County and Medford.⁹ The expanding miles of railroad track along the Cherokee Strip-Kansas border, with the Oklahoma land run of 1889 and border towns around the Outlet, encouraged the federal government to open remaining lands in the Cherokee Outlet.

Responding to a clamor for more Indian lands to be opened to white settlement, on August 18, 1893, President Grover Cleveland signed a proclamation opening the Cherokee Outlet. The government paid the Cherokees approximately \$1.40 per acre for their lands. This amounted to a payment of \$8,595,736.¹⁰ As the shots rang out signaling the opening of the Cherokee Strip, people raced to a previously determined claim near water and timber. As the fortunate pioneers drove their stakes into the ground closest to the border, others went on in search of land that would be theirs. Many acquired their land, as the official government document opening the land to settlement stated, "for the purpose of actual settlement and cultivation."¹¹

In Caldwell, Kansas, seventeen miles north of Medford, 15,000 people awaited their chance at free land.¹² Those fortunate enough to get land, once they staked their claim, had to go to land offices to fill out the necessary paper work ensuring the title to the land. Grant County residents went to the land office in Enid, 35 miles south of Medford. The curious emergence of boom towns, such as Medford, in these newly settled territories literally occurred overnight.

On the day of the opening of the Cherokee Outlet, Medford had its first newspaper. On that day the new editor proclaimed the excitement when he wrote of what would be Grant County:

At five minutes before noon on the day appointed 100 000 [sic] men, women and children were gathered upon the north and south boundaries of the Cherokee Strip awaiting breathlessly the signal which should announce the arrival of the hour when the land should pass from the ownership of the United States government into the possession of individual citizens. All were ready for the race which should bring fortune and happiness to some - disappointment and suffering to others. Some were mounted on thoroughbred racers, some were on the fleet, but surer-footed cow ponies, and some on bicycles. Others made the race in buggies and wagons. An air of strained expectancy pervaded the throngs, and each was eager for the signal.¹³

The editor further wrote that,

Immediately when a lot is claimed stakes are driven. In some cases the tents are erected, and in a few instances town meetings are held, officers elected, and before the whole thing seems possible a municipality has sprung into existence.¹⁴

The town of Medford did spring into existence overnight. In less than two months, an entire business district emerged, including over a dozen buildings erected. There were three groceries, a lumber yard, a saloon, numerous office buildings, two hotels, a feed store, a livery stable, and two hardware stores.¹⁵ Merchants were not the only busy people. Residents in the surrounding countryside worked hard to prepare for wintering on their claims. The Medford editor wrote again discussing the process, "Small houses are being built on almost every claim, and in nine cases out of ten someone, at least, will be left to take care of things."¹⁶ By the beginning of November 1893, eager souls had constructed 35 houses, as well as a new \$40,000 high school building. People also quickly built the Methodist Church, paved one mile of asphalt on town streets, and created electric lighting facilities.¹⁷

The farming community grew physically and united politically through its common interest of wheat production. Rising and falling prices dominated local discussion. The local newspapers also supported the National Populist movement that focused upon improving wheat prices for the farmer. On October 27, 1893, white males of voting age conducted the first city election for the positions of mayor, councilmen,

treasurer, clerk, and town marshal, establishing local government.¹⁸

The city government of Medford established plans for growth and made sure that the town expanded physically as rapidly and as efficiently as possible. To construct schools, city streets, sidewalks, street crossings, and generally make Medford attractive to outsiders, revenue was needed. Consequently, on May 13, 1899, officials encouraged, "a tax levy of 5 mills [that] was made for general purposes."¹⁹ The town ultimately used these taxes for the purposes described above. By August of 1899, city council minutes recorded that, "on either side of all the streets and alleys of the town of Medford, O. T.," telephone services were established by the Oklahoma and Kansas Telephone Company.²⁰

Another experience that encouraged Medford's sense of community occurred on November 16, 1907, when Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory united and the state of Oklahoma was admitted to the Union. Medford area residents soon thereafter sought removal of the county seat of Grant County from Pond Creek to Medford. When the General Land Office had carved out quarter sections to give to the Cherokees and prepared to sell the remainder, surveyors had established townships and county seats in the Cherokee Outlet to maintain a sense of order when the runs occurred. They originally had

placed the county seat of Grant County in Pond Creek, located 11 miles southwest of Medford, because it was an old stagecoach station. From the beginning of settlement, the location became a source of great contention between Pond Creek and Medford, because Medford citizens believed that surely the middle of the county, the location of their town, would be best suited for the county seat. The Medford city council hired two attorneys, as the city council stated, "to attend to litigation in securing the location of the county seat at Medford, O. T."²¹ Citizens contacted Washington with their disagreement and petitioned Congress until government officials authorized the county to vote on the location of its county seat. The election took place May 27, 1908, and the county seat moved to Medford.²²

Meanwhile, the city of Medford was growing quickly. City council members extended the city limits in June of 1900, annexing open land, and encouraged another phone company to begin operation in Medford.²³ The council also planned for a water system that would extend through the city limits, costing approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000.²⁴ By 1903, the city council discussed building fire hydrants and placing gravel on alleyways. As had been done before, the council expanded the Medford city limits.²⁵ Expansion also took place culturally, with the city issuing a license

for opera shows.²⁶ As early as 1906 the city government had petitioned for an additional tract of land for the expanding municipality and for the construction of a jail and a city dump. The city council continued to provide funds to build more sidewalks to keep pedestrians out of the mud after heavy rains. During 1907, the city council made street improvements, including culvert building and railroad crossings, to meet the needs of the ever-expanding population.²⁷

After statehood, population growth causing the physical expansion of Medford occurred both in the town and throughout the county. In 1900, 551 people lived in Medford and were included in the 17,273 that lived in the county.²⁸ The Medford population was approximately 3 percent of the Grant County population. This soon changed. As of 1910, Medford, located at the crossing of two major railroads, and by then the county seat, contained 1110 people. The county population had also expanded and Grant County had 18,760 residents. Medford residents comprised almost 17 percent of the county population.²⁹ The editor of the local newspaper discussed the increase since 1900: "Lots of people are coming to Medford to investigate the prospects of the town [and] also to invest in property."³⁰ One might best describe Medford as a bustling trade center located in the middle of an agriculturally rich county.

Between 1909 and 1914, prosperity in Medford encouraged the banking industry. Statistics for the major banks during this period reflect great optimism. On November 16, 1909, the last quarterly report on the financial condition of the First National Bank of Medford showed loans to be \$19,158.30, and assets totaled \$180,344.57. The same categories show a dramatic increase by June 14, 1912, with \$91,792.27 in loans and \$210,211.67 in total assets. Bankers in that period believed that in good times farmers borrowed more to buy equipment and more land. In poorer times they took no chances with large loans. A similar report of the Grant County Bank in Medford, for the quarter ending on January 31, 1910, showed loans were \$69,563.29 and assets were \$97,414.98.³¹ The quarter ending June 16, 1914, included \$94,781.25 in loans and \$136,620.10 in total assets. These figures demonstrated similar increases that took place in both banks.³²

Advertisements in the local newspaper also showed the increased wealth of Medford and Grant County residents. Local businesses encouraged readers of the newspaper through advertisements to spend money on new Ford automobiles, wallpaper, La Creole Hair Restorer, and the Pickerell Music House. The Rock Island Lines railroad company offered trips to the sunny state of California for "reasonable rates." Likewise, the Santa

Fe Railroad Company invited readers to Colorado.³³

Edward G. Meyering attempted to obtain business for his painting and wallpaper services and the Graves Studio encouraged readers to have their photographs taken at this establishment.³⁴ By 1914, advertisements in the newspaper lured readers into buying toys like a Harley Davidson Two-Speed Twin motorcycle for only \$285.00.³⁵

The number of physicians and attorneys in Medford also indicated wealth in Grant County. Those physicians advertising their services in the July 1912 newspaper included optometrist George Six, dentist J. M. Blood and physicians C. H. Lockwood and I. V. Hardy. Attorneys in the newspaper were Mackey and Stephenson, Sam P. Ridings, J. G. McKelvy, J. B. Drennan, and A. C. Glenn.³⁶ The number of these professionals was significant because of their high ratio to town population. Over eight decades later Medford's population of 1,172 only supports one physician, Ray E. Stowers, and three attorneys including Denny Falkenberg, Bramlet & Bush, and J. C. Drennan.³⁷ There is no optometrist or full-time dentist employed in the town.

Another indicator of wealth during the first two decades of the twentieth century was the fluctuation of personal tax delinquencies of Medford residents. In 1909, 26 people, owing \$131.52, were delinquent in their taxes. Four years later, this figure was

substantially lower, with 8 people owing \$47.37.³⁸ Exactly why there was such a dramatic decrease is unclear, but this probably was a partial indicator of increased affluence within Medford. Tax delinquencies probably decreased as a consequence of the discovery of oil in Grant County in early 1913. The newspaper editor reported, "Oil fever has broken out in Grant County and men are now in the field securing leases preparatory to inducing development companies to sink test wells [sic]."³⁹

Along with the fairly predictable population surge and increase of wealth in Medford and Grant County after the land run of 1893 came the rising number of farms throughout the area, and increasing crop production. Grant County farmers, after breaking out the sod on their claims, experienced their first significant harvest by 1896.⁴⁰ Despite the short amount of time and limited resources these families had, Grant County farmers had planted 135,924 acres in wheat by 1899. This crop produced 1,805,240 bushels with a yield of approximately 13 bushels per acre. Grant county farmers also planted 89,572 acres of corn that produced 2,523,590 bushels yielding approximately 28 bushels per acre.⁴¹

The growing population and wealth of Medford increased with the beginning of the war in Europe in 1914.⁴² The fighting that began in Europe in June 1914

affected United States citizens, including those in Grant County. Medford residents felt both direct and indirect effects. The local effect of the war was wholesale price increases that forced Medford businesses to charge inflated amounts for goods and services. The local newspaper demonstrated how merchants, fearing increased costs, tried to lure readers in to buy their products immediately to avoid higher prices, as the editor declared, "when the real fighting across the big lake [begins]."⁴³ Grant County also contributed monetarily to the war effort by sending the Belgians \$79.00 in early December 1914.⁴⁴ But Grant county citizens felt the effects of war directly through the favorable increase in wheat prices. The newspaper editor exclaimed, "on account of strong export demand wheat is going skyward at a rapid pace."⁴⁵ September 1914 saw the price of \$.95 per bushel and five months later, the price increased to \$1.50 per bushel.⁴⁶ According to this editor, this drastic change in price, along with favorable weather conditions including rainfall in early 1915, "has created unusual interest in gasoline power for the farms as is evidenced by the unusual number going from Medford to Wichita to the Threshermen's convention." The editor also gave a list of over 40 farming families that attended the Kansas convention.⁴⁷

President Woodrow Wilson adhered to a policy of neutrality and moralism and urged United States citizens to do likewise in thought and action. Editorials in the local newspaper revealed that Grant County residents agreed with President Wilson's proclamation of neutrality. In fact, the editor printed a poem by C. N. Ernest entitled "To Christian Europe":

Why pray to the God of Heaven?
who said 'Thou shalt not kill?'
Go raze to the ground His temple
Erected on the hill,
Turn back the hands of progress
A thousand years or so
And see ourselves as savages
With tomahawk and bow.
What means the roar of the cannon?
What means the shriek of the shell?
It means that men turn demons
And ply all the arts of Hell;
It means that hate takes reason
And drives her from her throne
And kills all the good within us
So she may rule alone.

Behold your ruined cities;
Behold your wasted fields;
Behold your starving millions
And what starvation yields;
And when you have beheld them
Then see if you can say
That you should not be smitten
When you attempt to pray.

Go search the blood stained meadows
And see where your brothers fell;
Go look into the hovels
Where their helpless children dwell;
Gaze, too, upon their windows
Then hang your heads in shame
For your boasted civilization

Is nothing but a name.

Why carry your faith to the heathen,
If it will not abide,
And ask of them acceptance
For what you cast aside?
When you have shown by example
You follow the Prince of Peace
Then ask of the heathen nations
That their idol worship cease.

Go, dwell as God intended
And heal up the wounds you made
Forsake the sword and bayonet
For the ax, the pick, and the spade,
Bring forth the wealth of the forest
The mine, and, also the sod
And prove yourselves to be worthy
To be called the children of God.⁴⁸

Wilson's neutrality did not last, and on April 2, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and its allies. The editor of a newspaper in Medford stated that now Medford would be more affected by German action, for even the price of wheat per bushel dropped 12 cents.⁴⁹

Fighting in a war across a large ocean seemingly would not affect a small, rural community in the middle of the United States. But World War I was crucial in shaping what happened to Medford for two decades thereafter. As the editor of a local newspaper reported, not only did Grant County organize its own "Company of Infantry...[with] the enlistment of a platoon at...Medford", but also began other preparations.⁵⁰ Immediately, the war caused an increase in wheat production in places like Medford. On April

15, 1917, President Wilson called upon the nation and its farmers to increase the Allied food supply. He argued, "Without abundant food the whole great enterprise upon which we have embarked will break down and fall." He also stated, "Upon the farmers of this country, therefore, in large measure, rests the fate of the war and the fate of the nation."⁵¹ This was most significant to Grant County in particular because that same month the Oklahoma State Board of Agriculture had declared, "the growing condition of wheat in Grant County is better than that in any other of the seventy-six counties in Oklahoma."⁵²

The government made clear that farmers could serve their country by growing more crops, but the process of cultivation took some time. By the time the United States declared war, all that farmers could do was wait for wheat to ripen in the fields, then cut and thresh the grain. By early fall, they were able to increase acreage they would plant. Grant County farmers increased the total tilled land by 1,432 acres by 1920. That was significant because already by 1910, the county was farming 97 percent of its total acreage.⁵³ The farmers of Grant County took Wilson's proclamation seriously, and did what they could to aid the war effort to enrich themselves and out of patriotism.

This ability to increase in acreage and production greatly shaped the future of Grant County. At the end

of the war the gains farmers had made in acreage increase and mechanization would be to their detriment. Upscaling agriculture on marginal lands was fine until nature refused to cooperate. Increasing farming debt was also reasonable, until overproduction lowered the price of wheat and sent the Southern Plains into an agricultural depression.

This history of Medford has established the framework for the economic and agricultural conditions of the region prior to the agricultural depression of the 1920s and the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s. It demonstrates that Medford heavily depended upon agriculture for its existence, thus setting the stage for the hardship that would ensue in the 1920s with the low prices of wheat caused by overproduction that carried over from World War I.

This history of Medford also shows that people came to the semiarid Southern Plains, an area only marginally suited for farming, and that the families made their living off of the land. Whether or not this region should be farmed, as nineteenth-century explorers had maintained, had little effect on Medford and Grant County residents. They farmed it and did so successfully enough to make a living and feed their families.

NOTES

¹The Medford (Okla.) Monitor, 3 October 1893, p. 1.

²U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, Climatological Data, Oklahoma Section, Annual Summary, 1901-1940 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 58, 101; U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1992 Census of Agriculture, Oklahoma State and County Data (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1994), 162-172.

³See Joe B. Milam, "The Opening of the Cherokee Outlet" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1931); William G. Snodgrass, "A History of the Cherokee Outlet" (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 1972); Dwight Bennet, Cherokee Outlet (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1961); George Rainey, The Cherokee Strip (Guthrie, OK: Co-operative Publishing Co., 1933); and Stan Hoig, The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1984) for further study of the Cherokee Outlet.

⁴Milam, 16.

⁵William Savage, Cherokee Livestock Association: Federal Regulation and the Cattleman's Last Frontier (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1973).

⁶For more insight concerning cattle drives through Grant County see Wayne Gard, The Chisholm Trail (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954); T. U. Taylor, The Chisholm Trail and Other Routes (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1936); Stan Hoig, Jesse Chisholm: Ambassador of the Plains (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991); and Don Worcester, The Chisholm Trail: High Road of the Cattle Kingdom (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

⁷For more detail on the Dawes Severalty Act see Wilcomb E. Washburn, The Assault on Indian Tribalism: The

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⁸Homestead Act, Chap. 75, 12 Stat. 392; To gain a better understanding of the history of the Dawes Severalty Act see Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss, eds., The Oxford History of the American West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹Guy P. Webb, History of Grant County, Oklahoma, 1811 to 1970 (Medford: Grant County Historical Society, 1971), 10; for information regarding those Boomers who attempted to cross the state line before Indian lands opened up, see Carl Coke Rister, Land Hunger: David L. Payne and the Oklahoma Boomers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942); and Stan Hoig, David L. Payne: The Oklahoma Boomer (Oklahoma City: Western Heritage Books, 1980).

¹⁰U. S. Congress, Senate, Message from the President of the United States, Submitting in Agreement with the Cherokee Indians for the Cession of Certain Lands, S. Ex. Doc., 52 Cong., 1 sess., Vol. V, No. 56, 4-5.

¹¹Homestead Act, Chap. 75, 12 Stat. 392.

¹²Ibid.

¹³The Medford (Okla.) Monitor 3 October 1893, p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 13 October 1893, p. 1.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 3 November 1893, p. 1.

¹⁸Ibid., 27 October 1893, p. 1.

¹⁹Village Minute Book from 10 May 1899 to 9 September 1902, Vol. I, 3.

²⁰Ibid., 29.

- ²¹Ibid., 71.
- ²²Webb, 12.
- ²³Village Minute Book, 124, 146.
- ²⁴Ibid., 187.
- ²⁵Minutes of the Board of Trustees vol. II, 26 August 1902 - 10 May 1906, 13, 20, 25.
- ²⁶Village Minutes vol. I, 158.
- ²⁷Minute Book No. 3 - Town of Medford June 1906 - August 1911, 5, 6.
- ²⁸U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States, taken in the year 1900: Population, Part 1 (Washington: United States Census Office, 1901), 322.
- ²⁹U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910 - Population 1910 vol. III (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 471.
- ³⁰The Medford (Okla.) Patriot 27 January 1910, p. 1.
- ³¹Ibid., 13 January 1910, p. 1; Ibid. 10 February 1910, p. 1.
- ³²Ibid., 2 July 1914, p. 3.
- ³³Ibid., 3 February 1910, pp. 1,2,7; Ibid., 27 January 1910, p. 3, 4; Ibid., 4 July 1912, p. 2.
- ³⁴Ibid., 4 July 1912, p. 7.
- ³⁵Ibid., 31 July 1914, p. 5.
- ³⁶Ibid., 4 July 1912, p. 2.
- ³⁷Oklahoma Department of Transportation, 1996 Official State Map.
- ³⁸The Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 28 April 1910, p. 8; Ibid. 6 August 1914, p. 3.

³⁹The Medford (Okla.) Patriot 30 January 1913, p. 1.

⁴⁰Webb, Guy, 113

⁴¹U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States - 1900 Agriculture, Part II, (Washington, D. C.: United States Census Office, 1902), 179.

⁴²For more detail regarding events leading up to World War I and the war itself see Robert O. Paxton, Europe in the 20th Century (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1991) and for information on United States involvement in the war see Sean Dennis Cashman, America in the Age of the Titans: The Progressive Era and World War I (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Neil A. Wynn, From Progressivism to Prosperity: World War I and American Society (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986); Robert H. Ferrel, Woodrow Wilson and World War I, 1917-1921 (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); and John Milton Cooper, Causes and Consequences of World War I (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972).

⁴³Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 20 August 1914, p. 7; many businesses used the situation in Europe for special sales gimmicks, see *Ibid.*, 10 September 1914, p. 7.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 3 December 1914, p. 1.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 24 December 1914, p. 1.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 10 September 1914, p. 1; *Ibid.*, 4 February 1915, p. 1.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 25 February 1915, p. 1.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 18 January 1917, p. 7.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 1 February 1917, p. 1.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 17 April 1917, p. 1.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 17 April 1917, p. 9.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 3 April 1917, p. 1.

⁵³U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census,

Thirteenth Census of the United States - Agriculture
(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913),
367; U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census,
Fourteenth Census of the United States - Agriculture
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1286.

CHAPTER TWO

POST WAR AND AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION, 1920-1925

Although the war in Europe ended late in 1918, industrial and agricultural production remained at wartime highs, and prices continued inflationary until 1920. That year overproduction caused falling prices, and the end of the wartime boom began. Recession occurred in all economic areas, but the downward spiral in prices affected the farmers more than other economic sectors. Increased production needed during the war years became overproduction after the war. Declining prices left the farmer, who had taken advantage of the high prices to buy expensive machinery on time payments, with the problem of servicing this debt at the same time he was trying to pay other overhead costs. Soon farmers had little or no buying power.¹ In 1920, wheat prices fell to approximately 75 cents per bushel. All farmers directly felt the brunt of the blow by the spring of 1921.²

Farmers reacted against falling wheat prices by forming co-operative organizations to store their products until prices improved. On June 21, 1921,

Grant County farmers created the Clyde Cooperative Association to eliminate the independent grain elevator operators, who formed a price step between the farmer and the grain market.³ Grant County farmers also joined other organizations such as the Wheat Growers Co-operative Association, a national group, that held a national convention in May 1920 in Hutchinson, Kansas, where the members calculated that it cost farmers approximately \$2.75 per bushel to grow wheat. These producers believed that a fair market price for the crop should be \$3.13 per bushel. Since the war, production had declined but this association declared, "our whole plan and propaganda is to encourage an increase in production."⁴ Farmers wholeheartedly believed that national hunger would occur, if farming production did not increase. They further voiced their concern about the decreasing rural population caused by the economic depression.

What concerned the Wheat Growers Co-operators Association was evident, at least in Grant County. Wheat production in the county was down, as farmers planted only 233,118 acres of the crop in 1924, which was 54,652 fewer acres than they had planted in 1919.⁵ The value of farmland, buildings, and equipment was also lower in the first half of the 1920s than it was during the wartime boom. In Grant County, the total value of land and buildings in 1920 was \$41,715,548

while the value in 1925 was \$30,899,705.⁶ The actual number of farms also markedly decreased, by 140 farms in Grant County between 1920 and 1925.⁷ Most dramatic, however, was the population decrease that occurred. In 1920, the total population had been 16,072, but by 1930, the county population had declined to 14,150 residents.⁸ Times were difficult during the agricultural depression and some people who had lived in the county sought refuge elsewhere.

Another indicator of the agricultural depression affecting Grant County, long before the stock market crash, the Depression, and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, was local bank activity. Though one must remember that loans from a healthy bank will increase with the years, the agricultural depression did affect loans and total resources. In May 1916, Grant County Bank issued \$113,109.39 in loans and had \$180,657.82 in total assets for the quarter. After the great growth of banks during the wartime boom, loan figures for February 1921 were \$169,393.23.⁹ Although the figure increased slightly, this was still an adequate indicator of economic depression for a community that relied on agriculture for its well-being.

Increased personal tax delinquency also demonstrated a decline in Grant County's wealth due to the deflationary period following the first World War. The already mentioned figures for personal tax

delinquency for 1913 indicated that only \$47.37 from eight residents of Medford were delinquent.¹⁰ This figure rose substantially by 1920 to \$398.00. Not only do these figures indicate an increased inability of people to pay their personal taxes, but also they are indicative of a more limited buying power than during the war. They further demonstrated that the people who did not pay their taxes in 1920 owed a much larger amount than before. For example, during that year one man individually owed \$192.23 in taxes.¹¹

The editor of the local newspaper offered insight into what was happening in Medford during the early 1920s in his editorial column. He predicted, "There won't be many automobiles sold in 1921 in the rural sections of the country is an expression commonly heard for the past two or three months."¹² Further demonstrating that Medford suffered through difficult circumstances, the editor said of the coal situation in town, "Many persons in Medford and the surrounding country were out of coal this week and others were nearly out."¹³

Businessmen also hurt by agricultural depression tried to get farmers and others to buy more goods. Advertisements in newspapers encouraged farmers to break out more sod, plant more wheat, and harvest more grain. Merchants offering the most technologically advanced machinery that would cut down on manpower and

increase production filled page after page of the newspapers. One implement dealership, attempting to sell its Simplex spreader, informed the reader, "The world's food reserves are low." It further beckoned, "In this time of great need it [is] a national crime to burn straw."¹⁴

Market conditions of lower prices encouraged the already poor farmer to expand his operation to raise more money, only then to sell his large number of bushels for only pennies. The farm machinery dealerships also exhibited the latest machinery at local popular farms, and then served a free lunch to all who came in order to encourage machinery buying. Naturally, it was in the dealer's best interest to sell merchandise, but perhaps it was not in the farmer's best interest to be further enticed to produce more crops for a glutted market. Even the Association of Railway Executives lured farmers into increasing production by advertising, "The successful farmer raises bigger crops!"¹⁵

The agricultural depression that engulfed American farmers following the first World War did considerable economic damage to farmers near Medford. Bank activity during the first half of the decade shows the trend of decreased wealth and the decline continued throughout the 1920s. The First National Bank's figures on April 29, 1921, for loans were \$203,155.91, while in the same

first quarter only two years later the figure dropped to \$187,038.77.¹⁶ Although it might seem that a decrease in loan activity would mean greater wealth for individual; in reality, people with greater wealth tend to borrow more money.¹⁷ So this decrease in loan activity by \$16,117.14 is indicative of decreased personal wealth of Medford citizens and farmers outside of town who banked with First National. One can see this trend in the last quarter of bank activity as well. On December 29, 1922, the total amount in loans of the same bank included \$185,694.64 while the December 31, 1923, loan figures were \$168,933.60.¹⁸ And as the decade progressed, loan activity declined. The figures for the last quarter of 1924 were \$167,501.11, and for 1928 fell to \$156,432.20.¹⁹

Activity at Grant County Bank mirrored the decline that the First National Bank experienced during the early 1920s. Loans on April 3, 1923, were \$159,709, and in only nine months, they declined to \$131,883.72.²⁰ An even more substantial decrease occurred in December 1924 in the amount of \$117,289.53, in loans.²¹ The deposit figures of the bank also declined. In April 1923 the bank had \$276,133.63, in deposits, and by December 1923, the figure decreased to \$259,400.75.²² The assets of Grant County Bank also declined from December 1923 to December 1924. Assets amounting to \$365,633.83 in the last quarter of 1923

fell to \$323,406.98 by the same time in 1924. These banking figures show how Medford and the surrounding community suffered as a consequence of economic decline.

There were other indicators also that demonstrated that Medford was experiencing decreased wealth during the "prosperous" 1920s. On April 12, 1923, the power and light plant in Medford faced a possible shut down due to a lack of coal or credit to pay for fuel.²³ Though town residents eventually raised enough funds to cover expenses, the mention of a shut down due to insufficient fuel was indicative of troublesome cash flow that in turn was funded by individual citizens of Medford, who apparently were not paying their bills promptly. Perhaps the city officials caused this problem because of poor planning or a lack of demand for services, but more likely the problems stemmed from delinquent bill and tax payments which helped to fund the water and power plants of Medford. If the 1924 personal tax delinquencies list was indicative of people not paying their taxes in 1923, then the reason for insufficient funds to run the plants was obvious.²⁴ Again, people who have enough money will pay their taxes because it is unavoidable. Not paying indicated Medford's first-hand experience of depression.

Medford appeared to be in a depression socially as well as economically. Medford residents were more

interested in spending what little money they had on necessities than entertainment. For example, a city council meeting in May of 1924 declared, "That Medford would not attempt a Fourth of July celebration this year was the consensus of opinion of members of the Chamber of Commerce." At the same meeting, the manager of the Alvo Theatre told the local businessmen that unless they helped him solicit interest in picture shows then he would not be able to "continue the high standard of pictures."²⁵

The general agricultural picture for Grant County in the middle of the 1920s also seemed bleak. Weather conditions, among other culprits, were responsible for this view. Even though the average rainfall of the 1920s was a normal 29 inches per year, other adverse weather conditions affected the crops. The rate of evaporation, timing and amount of rainfall, and of course the wind velocity at the wrong times throughout the year affected farmers.²⁶ Due to conditions that prevailed during 1924, the wheat crop was not bountiful. For example, the editor of the local newspaper argued that, "Reports on wheat prospects in this section are greatly overdrawn." He continued that,

There is at least 25 percent less acreage this year than last, and the past week has seen several thousand acres over the county plowed under, with

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others that would be plowed under if the farmer were in shape to put in another crop.²⁷

One year later the situation was even worse. The severe winter of 1924-1925 prompted the agent of the state board of agriculture to report, "a condition of 61 [percent] on May 1 is indicative of a yield per acre of approximately 9.15 bushels, assuming average variations to prevail thereafter." He continued, "the average yield per acre for the last ten year period was 12.5 bushels."²⁸

These poor yields, however, raised wheat prices for the farmers. Because farmers were at the mercy of the markets that, in turn, were at the mercy of the economic law of supply and demand, their inability to raise a large quantity of good wheat due to weather, insects, or other nuisances, raised the price of wheat, although the price hikes were usually never high enough to suit the farmer. This occurred as a result of foul weather conditions of the mid-1920s. Due to high winds and hot temperatures in late spring-early summer, the editor of a local newspaper stated that, "the price of new wheat being around \$1.25 locally is cause of great pleasure to the farmers, as a dollar per bushel has been the general price talked until recently."²⁹

By 1925 farmers briefly began experiencing somewhat better times, when the worst period of deflationary prices ended. Prices finally stabilized

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from the wartime boom and ensuing recession, although they were far below the boom period prices. While farm prices stabilized at a lower level, other sectors of the economy were poised to enjoy the boom of the late 1920s.

World War I demand created an overproduction of wheat for the Southern Plains, Grant County included. This surplus lowered the price of wheat dramatically causing an agricultural depression to occur throughout the decade. This depression ended when the price of wheat rose in the early 1930s because of the lack of surplus grain. This was a consequence of the limited amount of wheat due to the poor growing conditions in the Dust Bowl area. Only then did the price of wheat rise enough to allow Grant County farmers to operate successfully. However, one must remember that Grant County was already in decline economically in the 1920s as a consequence of overproduction. Dust Bowl and Great Depression conditions did not affect Grant County as much as one might imagine because it was already in decline. Rather than questioning whether or not the Southern Plains should be farmed at all, many, including farmers, wondered whether it was worth the effort because of the hardships endured. Nevertheless, Grant County was farmed throughout the difficult decade, thus indicating that people farm for reasons other than economic success and affluence, on which

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Worster's thesis depends. The major flaw in any Marxist's argument is its dependence on economic determinism. People do things for all sorts of reasons: economic self-interest, moral imperatives, personal passion, and religious teaching among other reasons. Specifically, sometimes people farm for aesthetic as well as economic reasons.

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NOTES

¹For more detail regarding the agricultural depression following the First World War, see Thomas R. Wessel, ed., Agriculture in the Great Plains, 1876-1936 (Washington: The Agricultural History Society, 1977); Norman Scott Brien Gras, A History of Agriculture in Europe and America (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., Publishers, 1946); A. B. Genung, The Agricultural Depression Following World War I and Its Political Consequences (Ithaca: Northeast Farm Foundation, 1954); and David Grigg, The Transformation of Agriculture in the American West (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

²Genung, 6-7.

³Webb, 116.

⁴Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 20 May 1920, p. 1.

⁵U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, Agriculture Oklahoma (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 1318.

⁶*Ibid.*, 1304-1305.

⁷*Ibid.*, 1286.

⁸U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 Population (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 819; U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930 Population (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 886.

⁹Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 3 March 1921, p. 5.

¹⁰Ibid., 6 August 1914, p. 3.

¹¹Ibid., 25 March 1920, p. 2.

¹²Ibid., 6 January 1921, p. 3.

¹³Ibid., 15 January 1920, p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid., 8 January 1920, p. 5.

¹⁵Ibid., 3.

¹⁶Ibid., 12 May 1921, p. 13; Ibid., 19 April 1923, p. 12.

¹⁷For more information concerning farmers and debt, see Murray Benedict, Can We Solve the Farm Problem? (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1955); Benedict and Oscar C. Stine, The Agricultural Commodity Programs (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1956); Edward Higbee, Farms and Farmers in An Urban Age (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1963); Wayne C. Rohrer and Louis H. Douglas, The Agrarian Transition in America (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); Luther Tweeten, Foundation of Farm Policy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970); and Walter W. Wilcox, Economics of American Agriculture (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1951).

¹⁸Ibid., 11 January 1923, p. 3; Ibid., 10 January 1924, p. 5.

¹⁹Ibid., 8 January 1925, p. 6; Ibid., 10 January 1929, p. 7.

²⁰Ibid., 19 April 1923, p. 12.; Ibid. 10 January 1924, 5.

²¹Ibid., 1 January 1925, p. 5.

²²Ibid., 19 April 1923, p. 12; Ibid., 10 January 1924, p. 5.

²³Ibid., 12 April 1923, p. 1.

²⁴Ibid., 29 May 1924, p. 8.

²⁵Ibid., 22 May 1924, p. 1.

²⁶U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, Climatological Data, Oklahoma Section, Annual Summary, 1901-1940 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940).

²⁷Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 15 May 1924, p. 1.

²⁸Ibid., 14 May 1925, p. 12.

²⁹Ibid., 10 June 1926, p. 1.

CHAPTER THREE

AGRICULTURE, MEDFORD, AND THE BOOM OF THE LATE 1920S

The brevity of the economic recession following World War I for the business world encouraged the economy to grow dramatically after 1925. Using new inventions of the Industrial Revolution, for example the automobile, corporations grew larger and more financially sound as they improved methods of production and management. Undermining this progress was the "speculative wave" of stock buying that interested not only the wealthy, who previously were the only social class that invested in the stock market, but also the middle class. This market boom began in 1925, and soon turned into a mania. Many people lost sight of the potentially harsh reality of the market.¹

Politics during the 1920s mirrored the expansion of big business, and to some extent affected Medford and the Southern Plains. Republicans remained in power throughout the decade and produced three presidents with a corporate vision. Warren G. Harding was

president until his death in 1923. His administration's reputation became scandalous. Perhaps due to the pro-business and corporate vision, Republicans did little to aid depressed farmers in the Southern Plains. Vice-president Calvin Coolidge came into the presidency and continued the trend of doing little to help the plight of the farmer. Coolidge even vetoed the McNary-Haugen farm bill that would benefit domestic agriculture by lowering tariffs, among other actions. But Coolidge encouraged making laws that would benefit businessmen the way the McNary-Haugen would have aided farmers if passed.² Herbert Hoover, elected in 1928, further encouraged Republican ideals of corporate expansion. Of all three presidents during the decade, Hoover was most active in passing farmer-interest legislation. In order to help alleviate economic distress to the farmer, Hoover established the Federal Farm Board. But generally speaking, people in Washington did little to ease the suffering of depressed farmers in the Southern Plains.³

Republican politics did little to affect Medford in the 1920s compared to what they did in larger, industrial areas, but the social changes of the era did influence the town as they did the rest of the United States. Although the Medford area experienced little economic change during the later 1920s, social changes did occur. Socially, the 1920s were a time of

prohibited yet exploited alcohol consumption and daring women's fashions that referred to an inherent delinquent thread in traditionally conservative social values.⁴

Grant County citizens did not experience prosperity as did some residents of larger industrial areas. For example, management in the industrial United States generally and in Medford specifically received a disproportionate amount of profit and the lower, working class and farmers gathered what remained.⁵ Farmers experienced a leveling out of farm prices, but not what they should have experienced after World War I. A smaller percentage of the American population had the majority of the buying power.⁶ This small percentage did not include farmers. Farmers experienced little if any prosperity during the decade. This was crucial to the changes in American values during the decade. As historian Robert MacElvaine has argued, "Farmers and small-town residents, long accustomed to being hailed as the backbone of the nation, now found themselves ridiculed as hayseeds and hicks." Furthermore, "An urban-industrial society that they neither liked nor understood was engulfing them."⁷

Medford banks in the latter half of the 1920s reflected the leveling out of economic conditions, but the increase in activity between 1925 and 1930 was small in comparison to the wartime boom activity of

1920. Loans for Grant County Bank increased marginally in 1925. The last quarter of loans and discounts only totaled \$117,289.53 in 1924, but these figures rose to \$157,243.27 making an increase of \$39,953.74.⁸ This slow upward trend continued through the decade. The loan total at the end of the last quarter in 1929 equaled \$186,690.09.⁹ But these amounts were small in comparison to those in February that were \$225,628.72.¹⁰

There were other indicators of decreased wealth in Medford during the last five years of the 1920s. People were not doing as much business as before in the town. For example, in 1925, the Medford Chamber of Commerce ran an advertisement in the local newspaper that covered an entire page in the middle section:

It would be [a] narrow vision indeed to rejoice in the movement of freight as great trains go back and forth across the country carrying grain, livestock, poultry and farm products to seaboard markets--and in return bringing manufactured goods to inland customers--Such activity means prosperity to the nation; more business; better markets; peace and plenty, unless this community takes all necessary steps to be part of that activity, however, the day cannot be evaded when Medford will be nothing more than a whistling post.¹¹

Other businesses seemed to change advertising tactics during the decade making products appear as favorably as possible to the consumer. Advertisements that took only a two or three inch square in the back of the

newspaper grew with such magnitude that they began covering one-half of an entire page.¹²

Although public auctions and sales occurred in Medford from about the beginning of settlement, prior to 1925, approximately only one sale per week was in the newspaper. But after 1925, this number quickly rose, indicating that a larger number of residents of Grant County were selling all of their farming equipment and heads of livestock, and engaging in occupations other than farming. One May edition of the Medford Patriot Star advertised four different sales in one week. The next week offered three sales in the Medford area.¹³ Such an increase in the number of public sales per week was not simply coincidental, instead it indicated that times were difficult for the farmer in Grant County and that, rather than staying, farmers were choosing to leave before they fell deeper into debt.

The leveling off from the wartime boom, and ensuing recession, clearly affected agriculture in Grant County. Still, the number of farms in the county actually increased after 1925. In 1920 the number of farms was 2,713 and by 1925 this figure had dropped to 2,573. But by 1930, the number had risen to 2,757.¹⁴ This fluctuation indicated that the worst of times occurred during the first half of the decade when smaller farmers sold out to those farming on a larger

scale. Those who left their farms assumed occupations in town, or moved somewhere else altogether. Closer to the end of the 1920s, economic conditions became more normal after the high of the wartime boom, and the low of the recession, and some farmers returned to farming.

Other indicators that demonstrated Grant County's period of leveling off was in the average size of farms. These figures, which increased in the latter half of the decade, indicate that Grant County was emerging from the slump. In 1920 there were 618,972 acres being farmed in Grant County but in 1925 that number dropped to 579,067 acres. Yet by 1930 the number of acres was at an all-time high of 668,108. The big increase in acreage was due to part of the town of Jefferson, located 7 miles south of Medford, being turned into farmland rather than city limits.¹⁵ One can also see this in the average size of farms. In 1920 the average was 228.2 acres. In 1925 it lowered 3.1 acres to a total of 225.1 but it had increased by 1930 to 242.3 acres. This is indicative of more money in the county in the latter half of the 1920s than in the first part of the decade.¹⁶

The total value of farms in the county also followed a similar pattern of increase after 1925. However, the comparison of farm value clearly showed that Grant County farms were not worth as much in 1925

and 1930 as they had been in 1920. The total value of land and buildings on Grant County farms increased in 1925 from \$30,899,705, to \$38,854,359, in 1930.¹⁷ But total farm value in the county in 1920 amounted to \$49,254,656.¹⁸ The average values per farm also increased by 1930. The figure for 1925 totaled \$12,009, while it was \$14,093, by 1930.¹⁹ But these figures did not exceed the wealth of 1920, when the values of farms had averaged \$18,155.²⁰ Not only did the value of land increase, but also did the value of implements and machinery. Grant County figures in 1925 were \$2,056,201 while they rose by 1930 to \$3,651,958.²¹ These figures demonstrate that although Grant County experienced a slight increase in farm value after 1925, it was not even near the value of farms in 1920. The area still suffered from an agricultural depression that would last until the middle of the 1930s.

Probably the most significant reason that Grant County experienced any slight trend of increased wealth in the latter half of the 1920s was the increase in the price of wheat in the Oklahoma market. During the wartime boom, the average price of wheat per bushel in the state rose as high as \$2.10 per bushel in both 1917 and 1919. But this high price began its descent in 1920 and decreased to 88 cents per bushel in 1923. But after the shock of the initial recession after the

wartime high prices, the price rose to \$1.07 in 1923. The highest it reached in the 1920s was \$1.46 in 1925. Unfortunately for the farmer, prices leveled off and then began a rapid rate of decline in the early 1930s.²²

Oklahoma as well as the rest of the Southern Plains experienced an agricultural depression occurring in the 1920s. Wheat production for the state was down by 14,577,715 bushels from 1920 to 1930. Corn production also decreased from 53,851,093 bushels in 1920 to 44,830,439 bushels in 1930. The production of oats in Oklahoma experienced decline as well, with 45,470,191 bushels produced in 1920 and only 16,196,880 bushels by 1930. Hay crops declined in production too. The bushels produced in 1920 numbered 2,946,614, and these decreased to 1,139,961, in 1930. These general statistics for the state of Oklahoma are important in understanding how the agricultural depression affected the Southern Plains. Farmers did not have the capital to produce higher yields and larger amounts of crops. Unfortunately, farmers did not experience the prosperity during the 1920s that would help them weather the continued economic chaos that would come in the next decade.

The stability of commodity prices gave a false sense of security concerning the economy, and by 1928 every aspect of the economy depended heavily on the

stock market.²³ During the summer of 1929 there occurred incredible stock market gains, and profits soared, especially for big businesses. Richard Pells, speaking of speculative mania argues, "yet ironically the market and the boom it continued to fuel were both generating inflationary pressures beyond actual demand, and thus helping to dig prosperity's grave."²⁴ The speculative buying that was seemingly profitable was coming to an end.

On October 24, 1929, the stock market crash sent market values downward violently; it would affect millions of Americans throughout the next decade. It seemed to take approximately one year for the American public to respond to the crash, but the government took over three years to awake from the shock. It was not until almost one month after the crash that the editor of one of Medford's newspapers even mentioned the stock market crash. And then, it was only a small four paragraphs in the back section of the newspaper. The editor reported, "Prices of securities on the stock exchange are now from 30 to 50 percent lower than they were a month ago." He further foreshadowed the effects of the crash, "Those events are the beginning of a priod [sic] of economic readjustment in America." The editor chastised, "Twenty-two million persons, Wall Street estimates, were infected with the delusion that money can be got honestly without working for it" He

concluded, "It is hard to sympathize with the amateur stock-market gambler even if he has lost his life savings in speculating on the margin."²⁵

The editor had little sympathy for those on Wall Street, probably because Grant County residents had been working arduously and receiving little if anything from the general prosperity of the 1920s. Southern Plains farmers during the 1920s had already experienced economic depression. The Great Depression and blowing dust of the 1930s did little to change the financial status of the economically depressed farmers of the Medford area. These conditions also did nothing to convince these farmers that the land should not be farmed.

NOTES

¹William E. Leuchtenburg, The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

²For detail regarding the McNary Haugen bill, see James Ernest Boyle, Farm Relief (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1928) and Luther Weeks Courtney, The McNary Haugen Bill and Recent Farm Relief Legislation (Waco, TX: Debators Research Agency, Baylor University, 1927).

³For more information about President Herbert Hoover, see Liebovich, Louis, Bylines in Despair: Herbert Hoover, the Great Depression, and the United States News Media (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); Herbert Hoover and the Historians (West Branch, IA: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, 1989); William J. Barber, From New Era to New Deal: Herbert Hoover, the Economists, and American Economic Policy, 1921-1933 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Martin L. Fausold, The Presidency of Herbert L. Hoover (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985).

⁴See Edmund Wilson The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Twenties and Thirties (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958) for in depth insight into American culture, specifically the arts during both decades.

⁵Robert McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941 (New York: Times Books, 1984), 22.

⁶Leuchtenburg, 245.

⁷McElvaine, 19.

⁸Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 1 January 1925, p. 5; Ibid., 7 January 1926, p. 7.

- ⁹Ibid., 10 January 1929, p. 7.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 4 March 1920, p. 8.
- ¹¹Ibid., 23 April 1925, p. 9.
- ¹²This is especially true for the Medford Ice Company throughout the 1920s with their attack on mechanical refrigeration; for details see Ibid., 29 April 1926, p. 5.
- ¹³Ibid., 21 May 1925, pp. 3, 4, 10, and 12.
- ¹⁴U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, Agriculture (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 1286.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 1304-1305.
- ¹⁸U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States 1920, State Compendium, Oklahoma (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 73.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Ibid.
- ²²Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, Oklahoma Agricultural Statistics, 1894-1947 (Oklahoma City, 1949), 15.
- ²³Leuchtenburg, 242.
- ²⁴Richard Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973), 20.
- ²⁵Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 14 November 1929, 7.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEDFORD IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Many books and vivid images tell the sad story of America during the Great Depression: Poor, dirty people standing in bread lines and soup kitchens, living in cardboard box shantytowns called "Hoovervilles" named after President Herbert Hoover, men migrating out of cities riding railroad tracks frantically searching for work and food for their families, men attacking men with sticks and other weapons in clashes between factory strikers, and once wealthy businessmen plunging to premature deaths from building tops because of the great financial burden. Dorothea Lange, and other professional photographers working during the 1930s, captured these images on film. Lange's most memorable photo depicts a mother staring blankly in the distance, cradling her infant in what appear to be filthy rags, while her two older children hide their faces in her shoulders.¹

Republican presidents W. G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover (1921-1933) took no action to control speculation that contributed to the stock

market crash, and once depression arrived, Hoover did not believe government had any responsibility for managing the economy. In fact, during the 1920s, even when many other sectors of the economy appeared to be strong, but agriculture was in depression, these presidents either did not support government help to farmers or actually vetoed farm legislation passed by Congress.

In 1932 voters rejected the traditional Republican view of laissez-faire economic policies, and elected Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency. On March 4, 1932, FDR assumed his position and faced the difficulties of an economy that had reached its nadir in 1932, when huge numbers of people were unemployed.

FDR promised America a New Deal with the aim of improving living conditions for all people. Often in American history, the nation's poor and lower classes supported social reform such as that proposed and ultimately passed by Congress.² But the seriousness of the Great Depression prompted the middle class to urge the government to become more active on behalf of the people. The elected governmental officials closely reflected the political and social mood of their constituents.³

Some historians would contend that the Great Depression, although ultimately caused by inherent inconsistencies in the economic system, resulted mostly

from an agricultural depression in the 1920s.⁴ This would seem to be a valid assessment as one-quarter of Americans were farmers in the year of the stock market crash, and hence the national economy depended heavily on agriculture. At the same time, agriculture relied on the export market because one-quarter of the farmer's income in 1929 came from exports. With a drastic drop in the number of exports at the end of World War I, and rising United States tariffs, individual farmers were significantly affected.⁵ Some people even argue that farmers played a crucial role in agricultural price decline as they bought more land on credit and immediately plowed it.⁶ Overproduction that contributed to the agricultural depression of the 1920s also worsened the Depression of the 1930s. The link between the Depression and agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s is crucial in understanding what really happened during those tumultuous decades.⁷

Though the Great Depression affected Medford, it did not make as significant a change in the region as it did in urban and industrialized areas because Medford and the Southern Plains were already experiencing economic depression that had begun in the post-World War I era. Difficult times were nothing new to the Grant County citizens who heavily depended for their livelihood heavily upon agriculture. While local newspapers reported on the worsening depression across

the country, the economy of Medford in the 1930s remained relatively unchanged from the previous decade. New Deal programs that filtered down from Washington to reach the rural community probably assisted the local people to maintain about the same level of life as before the Great Depression.

Herbert Hoover's Republican administration either did not understand the seriousness of the depression, or was bound by Republican economic and market beliefs not to do anything to help the country. Medford residents also were slow in realizing the magnitude of the crash. But by January 1931, the local newspaper editor was fully aware of the terrible economic condition of the country. A New Year's greeting from Hills Furniture Co.--actually also an advertisement--in the newspaper addressed directly the national depression and demonstrated the importance of Medford's sense of community:

When the stock market reaches new lows...when unemployment stalks behind every worker...when depression and fear are foremost in the minds of men and women...friendship takes on a new meaning...there is something more than chasing dollars...⁸

The 1930s began in Medford with expansion of numerous building projects throughout the town as a consequence of a fire that had destroyed a block of businesses in the downtown district in 1930.

Contractors erected new buildings and remodeled old

ones during 1930, spending approximately \$75,000. The editor of the local newspaper stated that this was done, "to give the city one of its most progressive building years in its history."⁹ That same year the city also gained new businesses in town with a new filling station, warehouse, and a Texaco supply house. Other indicators of expansion in Medford can be found in the early years of the 1930s. In March 1932, two new businesses came to town selling their goods. A ladies' and children's clothing store opened, as did a new implement dealership, offering Allis-Chalmer tractors to consumers.¹⁰

Perhaps the largest building project in the early 1930s was the 50,000-bushel capacity grain elevator erected by the Clyde Co-Operative association. As the local newspaper editor reported, the association spent funds on such a structure, "in keeping with the federal farm board plan in which a farmer to secure a loan from this department must be a member of a co-operative association."¹¹ He referred to the only legislation passed in the 1920s by Congress and signed by President Hoover to benefit farmers.

Though progress occurred in Medford, the national depression caused a decline in the personal wealth of farmers, who were already poor from the agricultural depression of the 1920s. A notice in the local newspaper on February 12, 1931, offered free seed to

needy families in the county, and by the next week 50 people had already applied.¹² Other relief measures of the state of Oklahoma were administered to the county under the pretense of drought relief. Although the annual precipitation amount for 1931 was 29.3 inches, with the county average being 30.45 inches prior to 1931, the county received very little rain in the first months of the year.¹³ Nevertheless, the state of Oklahoma gave Grant County \$1,000 of the \$400,000 of a drought relief fund.¹⁴

On January 31, 1931, a representative of the Federal Farm Board spoke about the international overproduction of wheat. He encouraged farmers to diversify their crops, thus reducing wheat acreage. These proved to be wasted words.¹⁵ By 1932, however, nature took care of the wheat surplus in the Southern Plains. The editor of the local newspaper reported the conditions of May wheat, "March freezes, dry weather and high winds were unfavorable factors which lowered the condition of wheat and increased the acreage to be abandoned." This was especially true in Texas and Cimarron counties in the western Oklahoma panhandle in which one-third of the farms were abandoned. He reported in respect to Grant County, "in the north-central counties wheat has made better growth than in the Panhandle counties."¹⁶

Agricultural decline near Medford during the early 1930s demonstrated that the region, long in agricultural depression, continued economic activity at about the normal pre-depression level. Bank activity during the first years of the 1930s demonstrated that the county was in decline. Loan amounts at the First National Bank showed decline. In December 1929, loans totaled \$159,562.09. One year later, loans were only \$124,893.44, and in December 1931, they were \$100,848.09. The downward trend continued in 1932 with \$96,450.51 in loans and discounts. By 1933, the figures amounted to \$73,915.76, and in 1935 were \$67,267.80.¹⁷ A similar pattern of decline occurred in the loan activity of the Grant County Bank. In December 1930, loans were \$154,513.58, and the next year fell to \$142,475.32. The downward trend continued in 1932 with \$122,832.05, \$100,974.58 in 1933, and in 1934 plunged to its lowest at \$75,095.71.¹⁸ Bankers then and today believed a decline in loan activity was indicative of decreased personal wealth. If times were profitable, farmers were more likely to invest more money in land and equipment. But when times were bad, farmers tended not to gamble with high interest loans.

This decline in personal wealth reflected low wheat prices, prompted in turn by a glut in the farm market. International demand for wheat was lower during the early 1930s because of the combined

production levels of the Southern Plains, Canada, and Russia. In 1929, total winter wheat harvested in Grant County was 2,809,731 bushels to 332,522 acres.¹⁹ Wheat produced 4,343,174 bushels to 267,431 acres in 1934.²⁰ More countries that had originally needed the United States agricultural surplus either became self-sufficient, or purchased wheat and other products from other big producers such as Canada or Russia. Because of the number of producers internationally the demand was low while the overall supply was high. Wheat and other agricultural prices dropped. They also dropped as a consequence of the national depression that occurred in all commodity prices. Oklahoma wheat value began its descent in 1928, when the price was \$1.04 per bushel. It fell to \$.96 in 1929, and by 1930 to \$.68. The price deteriorated even further in 1931 to only \$.33 and fell one cent lower the next year.²¹ When the price of wheat is that low, bank activity in a community that directly depends on agriculture for its existence is going to decline significantly.

The economic decline of Grant County, already in motion in 1920 as a consequence of the agricultural depression, as stated before in this paper, is also clearly evident in farm statistics concerning the number of farms, acreage, and land area. The number of farms decreased in Grant County as a result of the low price of wheat. On April 1, 1930, there were 2,757

farms in Grant County. By January 1, 1935, the number decreased to 2,609 farms.²² This was a substantial loss of 148 farms in only 5 years. The average size of farms also declined as the result of the limited capital of farmers. In 1930, 242.3 acres constituted the average size of a farm in Grant County. This size decreased to 237.5 acres in 1935. Though the decline was slight, it was evidence of poorer economic times for farmers in the county. The land used for farms also grew smaller in acreage from 1930 to 1935. Farmers used 450,249 acres for crops in 1930, but only 371,966 acres in 1935. If farmers had the capital to prepare the soil, to plant seed, and then drill, they would have done so. Not as much acreage could have been used for crops, if there simply was not enough money to put the seed into the ground.²³

The actual value of farms including the land, buildings, and equipment also decreased in the first half of the 1930s. The value of land and buildings on Grant County farms in 1930 amounted to \$38,854,359, but decreased by \$13,072,619 only five years later to \$25,781,740. This significant reduction was also apparent in the average value of Grant County farms. In 1930, the average totaled \$14,093, and by 1935, the amount was only \$9,882. This approximately 30 percent reduction distinctly demonstrated a further depressed economy for Grant County.²⁴ This depressed

agricultural economy was reflected also in the declining buying power of farmers.

Some farmers had difficulty feeding and clothing their families and did not have enough money to put seed into the ground to farm. Local charity in Medford provided these needy families with necessities until New Deal programs took over the responsibilities. For example, in early 1933, the Medford chapter of the Red Cross accumulated carloads of flour and distributed them among those families who needed it most. This humanitarian effort took place in the rest of the county as well.²⁵

Local and federal aid helped Grant County and the rest of the Southern Plains through the depression. But hardship was nothing new to the residents of the area. The agricultural depression of the 1920s affected Grant County drastically; farmers were already familiar with low wheat prices, and the depression did not signify more traumatic trials. Instead, it was an extension of the previous decade.

The farmers in the Grant County area were better equipped to deal with a depression of national magnitude. They had direct access to foodstuffs by living off the land than did those who lived in urban and industrialized areas. As previously mentioned earlier in the chapter, many men migrated out of the city to the country in search of money and food.

Whether or not the Southern Plains should be farmed according to ecological conditions did not matter in the context of the depression. People were simply content to survive the decade and Grant County residents had access to a direct food supply.

NOTES

¹Michael E. Parrish, Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1992), 406-7.

²McElvaine, 6.

³For more in-depth information about the national depression, see Michael A. Bernstein, The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America, 1929-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Barry Eichengreen, Golden Fetters: The Gold Standard and the Great Depression, 1919-1939 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Edward Robb Ellis, A Nation in Torment: The Great American Depression, 1929-1939 (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1970); John A. Garraty, The Great Depression: An Inquiry into the Causes, Course, and Consequences of the Worldwide Depression of the Nineteen-Thirties, as Seen by Contemporaries and in Light of History (New York: Doubleday, 1987); Garet Garrett and Murray N. Rothbard, The Great Depression and New Deal Monetary Policy (San Francisco: CATO Institute, 1980); Robert Goldston, The Great Depression: The United States in the Thirties (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1968); Robert F. Himmelberg, The Great Depression and American Capitalism (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1968); Isabel Leighton, ed., The Aspirin Age, 1919-1941 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949); David P. Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Bernard Sternsher, ed., Hitting Home: The Great Depression in Town and Country (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Studs Terkel, Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); T. H. Watkins, The Great Depression: America in the 1930s (Boston: Little

Brown, 1993); Dixon Wecter, The Age of Great Depression, 1919-1941 (New York: Macmillan, 1948); and Ira Wolfert, An Epidemic of Genius (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

⁴Robert McElvaine and William Leuchtenburg contend that the agricultural depression actually caused the national depression.

⁵See Leuchtenburg and McElvaine for more explanation on the matter at hand.

⁶T.H. Watkins, The Great Depression: America in the 1930s (Boston: Little Brown, 1993), 44.

⁷Historians recognize the significance of this link, especially Paul Bonnifield in Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); Donald Worster in Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Leuchtenburg in Perils of Prosperity; Robert McElvaine in Great Depression; and Paul Sears in Deserts on the March (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935).

⁸Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 1 January 1931, p. 7.

⁹Ibid., 1 January 1931, p. 1.

¹⁰Ibid., 24 March 1932, p. 1; Ibid., 31 March 1932, p. 1.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 12 February 1931, p. 1; Ibid., 19 February 1931, p. 1.

¹³U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, Climatological Data, Oklahoma Section, Annual Summary, 1931 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 51.

¹⁴Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star, 4 February 1932, p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., 22 January 1931, 1.

¹⁶Ibid., 12 May 1932, p. 1.

¹⁷Ibid., 9 January 1930, p. 7; Ibid., 8 January 1931,

p. 6; Ibid., 7 January 1932, p. 1; Ibid., 12 January 1933, p. 3; Ibid., 11 January 1934, p. 1; Ibid., 16 January 1936, 7.

¹⁸Ibid., 8 January 1931, p. 6; Ibid., 7 January 1932, p. 1; Ibid., 12 January 1933, p. 3; Ibid., 11 January 1934, 2; Ibid., 17 January 1935, p. 1.

¹⁹U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1930 Agriculture (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 1318.

²⁰U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States - 1940 Agriculture - Oklahoma (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 12.

²¹Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station Oklahoma Agricultural Statistics, 1894-1947 (Oklahoma City, 1949), 15.

²²U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940 Agriculture - Oklahoma (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 12.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 30 January 1933, p. 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

DROUGHT AND NEW DEAL LEGISLATION IN MEDFORD DURING THE "DIRTY THIRTIES"

Since the nineteenth century, government explorers, environmentalists, and many of those knowledgeable about agriculture have referred to the Southern Plains as the Great American Desert. In his expedition of 1806, Zebulon M. Pike believed that the Great Plains could support only ranching. Approximately twenty years later, Major Stephen H. Long, who crossed the Southern Plains, agreed with Pike's observation that this part of the United States could not support traditional agriculture because of the shortage of timber and water. United States Army Captain Randolph B. Marcy in a Red River exploration of 1820 considered the Plains to be barren and desolate. Horace Greely, who traversed the area during the middle of the nineteenth century, agreed with earlier explorers.¹

White settlers, however, ignored the warnings of these men and by the 1900s and 1910s had turned the area into an agricultural region. This was possible as

a consequence of the mechanization of farming tools and implements. The combined harvester-thresher, the one-way plow, the tractor, and the truck were the means by which farmers plowed up sufficient land to make a profit.² The machines not only made harvesting the crop, tilling the soil, and drilling the seed quicker, but they also drastically decreased manpower.³

As most farmers had acquired the machines and the payments that went with them by the 1920s, the only way for these people to make an adequate living was to plow up even more ground to compensate for the low prices. In good rainfall years all went well, however, a couple of dry years would bring loss of crops and economic hardship. The clay composition of the Southern Plains soil, without the benefit of native short grasses, has little resilience and responds poorly to such dramatic ecological conditions as limited rainfall and moisture evaporation due to wind and high temperatures. Natural vegetation for the Southern Plains includes mesquite, galleta, gramma, and buffalo grasses.⁴ The natural growing processes of the plains created a balance for the natural vegetation. Once man planted wheat, the natural balance and processes that enriched the soil disappeared. Soil quality deteriorated. This also related to the soil's ability to hold and process water. As more wheat was grown, the planting and harvesting cycle caused damage to soil nutrients.⁵ The

Plains region did successfully produce wheat, however, and became America's breadbasket. Nevertheless, when the nutrients were used up and not replaced naturally, yields lowered. Soil nutrients naturally declined and needed replacement. Today fertilizer serves that purpose as a consequence of increased knowledge and technology.

Donald Worster in his Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s eloquently expressed the situation: "the grass was destined to disappear too - to be turned under by the plow... but across millions and millions of acres." He goes on, "When the plowing was done, the land would fall apart, and the outcome would be the most desolate event that humans had ever experienced on the plains."⁶ A drought set in on the Southern Plains that further complicated the problem of depleted soil; severe droughts have been recorded in this area every 20 years beginning in the 1890s, then returning in the 1910s, 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s.⁷ But the drought of the 1930s lasted for several years and its severity had never been previously recorded. The winds usually blowing in the late winter and spring months on the Plains in conjunction with the exposed, dry soil created what would be known as the Dust Bowl.⁸

Historians have long contemplated the causes of this ecological disaster and though some suggest minute variations, most agree the Dust Bowl was a combination

of human factors and poor weather conditions. The destruction of sod in what many warned as marginal land; the simultaneous planting of more wheat by means of the Industrial Revolution's technological contribution to farm machinery; the vast expansion of methods of production without being checked with methods of conservation; increased evaporation in conjunction with an unusually low amount of rainfall at the most crucial moments; and the relentless wind known intimately to the Southern Plains caused the violent dust storms of the "dirty thirties".

Wheat farming in the Dust Bowl during the 1930s proved to be a more difficult and inefficient task than ever before. In the hardest hit areas, drought and exposed subsoil resulting from wind lifting and carrying away precious topsoil made the already arduous task of farming grueling. In the fall farmers would wait for rain before they planted wheat seed. Often it never rained at the right time so they planted in dry soil. Without moisture, the wheat did not grow sufficiently to provide ground cover for the prevailing winds that began in the late winter months. If farmers were fortunate, there would be something left to harvest in June. Even if visibly there was something in the fields, the kernels in the heads had a good chance of being shriveled, small, or light because of the lack of rain. But often, wind blew out wheat by

its roots. This wind did not just destroy the crops but also devastated the actual soil. To stop their topsoil from blowing into their neighbors' fields or to the next state during high winds, farmers had to work the ground with special plows that created clumps of soil too large to blow. Usually they used an implement called the lister to turn over bigger dirt clods to hold the pulverized soil in place.⁹

Though Medford experienced drought, it was not as severe in this region as in the heart of the Dust Bowl area, located approximately in Cimarron County, to the west. Daily dust storms did not affect Medford as much as other areas because Medford is located approximately 250 miles east of the geographical center of the Dust Bowl.

The agricultural depression of the 1920s, and low wheat prices resulting from the national depression that followed the 1929 stock market crash, definitely impacted Medford's agriculture. More important to the Medford area were the programs of Roosevelt's New Deal that aided Grant County farmers. These farmers, who had been in economic decline since the early 1920s, eagerly accepted New Deal help. This changed the future of farmer-federal government relations and probably kept the farmers of the area from bankruptcy.

Henry Wallace, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, established methods of immediate aid for

Dust Bowl farmers. These programs included the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the Farm Credit Administration (FCA), the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the Resettlement Administration (RA), listing payments, and cattle purchase programs. New Dealers realized the seriousness of the Southern Plains blowing away, and acted to stop it. When addressing Congress during the worst years of the Dust Bowl, the editor of a local newspaper reported that Roosevelt had said, "this emergency situation concerns the 'dust bowl' area...where continued severe droughts and the exhaustion of vegetative matter in the soil are contributing to serious wind erosion." He further pressured Congress by demanding that, "there is extreme need for emergency action in that area on land where wheat is blowing out or where wheat or other crops have failed."¹⁰

Though traditionally a proud and self-sufficient group, farmers believed government intervention was their only means of survival.¹¹ Fortunately, government responded quickly. FERA, which began as the Civil Works Administration (CWA) in January of 1934, began including work relief projects for farmers as well as other impoverished Americans by March 31, 1934. The administration was not attempting to establish a permanent welfare state, and therefore required people

to do public work in exchange for food. For example, by 1933 in Grant County 1,000 residents of the total county population of 14,150 were employed primarily building terraces, among other county improvements and for their labor received basic food supplies.¹² AAA, established in 1933, paid farmers not to plant more wheat, which helped sustain the farmers financially through tough times. This agency, later declared unconstitutional in 1935, was replaced with the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act which paid farmers to plant grasses conducive to drier conditions for ground cover instead of crops. E. E. Jacobs was the Grant County A.A.A. agent. He issued and distributed funds to those farmers who applied and qualified with the regulations of the program.¹³ The emergency listing program in 1935 paid Plains farmers to work their blowing land. The FCA, established in June of 1933, acted as the federal bank for farmers with emphasis on mortgages and loans. In April of 1935 the RA, headed by Rexford Tugwell, attempted to bring all agencies aiding the farmer under an umbrella agency; the FSA eventually replaced the RA.¹⁴

Not only were farmers given government aid for their crops, but also for their livestock, which suffered gravely from blowing dirt and drought conditions. During the actual dust storms, the nasal cavities and lungs of cattle filled with dirt. Many

animals died as a result, but the ones who lived faced the possibility of starvation. Grant County cattle suffered most from the heat which caused a lack of food and water. The editor of a local newspaper reported, "Grant County pastures have been completely burned under the continuous heat wave...livestock is suffering from the heat."¹⁵ And in June of 1933, the editor of the newspaper reported that local businesses pooled their resources to help farmers water their livestock, "until water may be obtained from other sources."¹⁶ The yearly amount of rainfall in 1933 was approximately ten inches less than normal at 19.79 inches.¹⁷ Poor harvests and low wheat prices severely limited the farmer's buying power. He was unable to buy feed for the animals. The winter wheat stand that farmers traditionally grazed out simply did not exist because it had been blown out. So farmers holding cattle faced grim circumstances before the government stepped in to help the situation. The Drought Relief Service bought the farmers' herds and killed and buried the sickly animals, and butchered the best ones to give the meat to the needy in the cities.¹⁸ This also took place in Grant County in August of 1934 as the editor of a local newspaper reported, "Cattle will be sold in county to aid farmers."¹⁹

The conditions of the Dust Bowl proved to be too much for some Southern Plains residents to endure.

Despite government aid, some Dust Bowl families left their farms. Lawrence Svobida, a Meade County, Kansas farmer remained through much of the 1930s, but the dust eventually undermined his morale: "When I knew that my crop was irrevocably gone I experienced a deathly feeling which, I hope, can affect a man only once in a lifetime."²⁰ Svobida did not go to California, nor was there a mass exodus to that state as John Steinbeck's novel Grapes of Wrath suggests.²¹ In fact, historians have argued that out migration from Oklahoma towns was mostly urban, not rural.²² And those who did leave went to the next town or county in the Plains, not to California. Though Steinbeck's work was vastly popular throughout the 1930s, it was a novel. In 1930, the Medford population totaled 1,084 while the 1940 population grew to 1,121.²³ Historical fact shows that not everyone migrated out of rural America.²⁴

Through this ecologically dramatic decade, the conservationist ideas of Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt collided with those of scientists and historians who were concerned with preserving ecology. Aldo Leopold, James Malin, Frederic Clements, and Paul Sears expressed the basic conservationist attitudes that influenced governmental policy.²⁵ The concept of conservation as a moral issue, the ever-present problems of the budget in the federal government, and simple practicality of implementation collided and

formed the conservation efforts of the 1930s. These included water conservation, contouring, terracing, planting shelterbelts, and establishing areas of grasslands that the federal government owned. Water Conservation and Utilization projects used federal money to reimburse land owners who had spent money on labor and materials on farmers' projects to lessen the aridity of the Plains.²⁶ Department of Agriculture agents instructed farmers on contouring and terracing techniques to discourage rainfall run-off. Government agents encouraged terracing work. In Grant County FERA workers carried out this effort.²⁷ A shelterbelt project was President Roosevelt's personal plan. He believed that planting a huge tree barrier across the Plains from Texas to Canada would decrease the fierceness of the gales, wind erosion in general, and evaporation.²⁸ There were problems getting trees to grow in a semiarid climate, but some made it.

All of these ecological factors that caused the Dust Bowl affected economic activity in Medford, whose existence depends solely on agriculture. Local bank activity in the latter half of the 1930s showed an increase in the economic conditions of the county. Loan activity increased at the First National Bank beginning in 1936 as a result of better times. Increased wheat prices due to the shortage from the lack of production in the Dust Bowl area demonstrated

that the agricultural decline that began in 1920 was finally over by the mid-1930s. Loan amounts for the bank were \$67,267.80, at the end of 1935.²⁹ But by December of 1937, loans were \$89,750.50.³⁰ By 1939, loan totals for December were \$144,031.86.³¹ This increased loan activity demonstrated the economic upswing that had been long in coming to Grant County farmers. Deposit activity at First National mirrored the trend of increased loan activity. The trend began again in 1935 with deposits totaling \$344,686.29.³² In 1936, the figure rose to \$404,201.48.³³ By 1939, the total amount of deposits was \$432,770.97.³⁴ This almost \$100,000 increase in deposits in only four years indicated that Grant County residents were experiencing increased prosperity in the latter half of the 1930s.³⁵

Another indicator of economic upturn from 1931 to 1938, is the reduction of personal tax delinquencies for Medford. In 1931, there were a total of 42 people owing \$1,111.43, collectively on their delinquent taxes.³⁶ But by 1938, relatively the same number of people, 40, owed only \$485.57, on their delinquent personal taxes. This significant decrease in amount owed from 1931 to 1938, can be attributed to the increase in personal wealth of Medford citizens that resulted from higher wheat prices, among other economic conditions.

Prices for such commodities as foodstuffs respond quickly to an extremely sensitive market. When the stock market crashed, wheat prices fell dramatically, and if it had not been for the Dust Bowl and limited production in the 1930s, the market wheat prices in all likelihood would have remained at \$.32. Ecological conditions forced that price upward. A large section of the western Southern Plains did not produce its normal capacity of crops during the decade. Likewise, the national supply was lower and the price went up, though not as much as Grant County farmers would have liked. Wheat prices rose from the low of \$.32 in 1932 to \$.68 in 1933. This gradual upward trend continued and by 1934, the price was \$.81. Wheat came nearest the dollar mark in 1937 when it was \$.99. Much to the chagrin of the Grant County farmer, the price declined to \$.56 in 1938, because the drought and wind of the Dust Bowl had abated enough for most of the Southern Plains to experience some sort of increase in production.³⁷

Agricultural statistics for Grant County further show the increase in the farmer's prosperity in the latter half of the 1930s. This continued to demonstrate that Grant County did not suffer from the Dust Bowl conditions as areas further west did. Grant County's economic decline in the early 1930s resulted from the agricultural depression of the 1920s and the

low wheat prices the depression created. Cropland harvested and the size and value of farms substantially rose from 1935 to 1940. In 1935 the number of harvested cropland acres was 339,032 with 2,432 farms reporting. Similar figures for 1940 showed the marked increase. Only 2,120 farms reported harvesting 393,269 acres of cropland. If Grant County had experienced the Dust Bowl as some Southern Plains counties did, the results would not have been more acres harvested because of the adverse ecological conditions. Likewise, the average size of farm increased from 273.5 acres in 1935, to 274.0 acres in 1940. Farmers will buy more land and cultivate bigger farms when the economic conditions encourage it. Farm value also increased during this period further demonstrating economic expansion. In 1935, Grant County farms were worth \$25,781,740 and that amount rose to \$30,507,248 by 1940. The average value of a farm rose \$7.87, from 1935 to 1940 in the county as well, indicating the financial advancement of the Grant County farmer in the latter part of the 1930s. Production also increased during this time. In 1934, Grant County produced 4,343,174 bushels of wheat and by 1940 that already high number increased over 2 million bushels to 6,640,307. Though weather conditions are a determining factor in production, a farmer simply cannot adequately prepare the soil, put the seed wheat in the ground, and

harvest the grain if he has very little capital with which to work. The gains made for Grant County farmers from 1935 to 1940 clearly indicated the long-sought reward for their arduous effort since the boom days of World War I.

Neither shelterbelts nor farming techniques stopped the blowing dust; nature terminated it through life-giving rain. By the end of the 1930s the drought had ended on the Plains and wheat farmers experienced a bumper crop in 1939. With the beginning of World War II in 1941, wheat prices returned to wartime boom levels seen in the late teens. The Dust Bowl days were a phenomenon of the past, or were they? In the early 1950s, farmers were uprooting the shelterbelts planted in the 1930s because of their inconvenience and the limitation they imposed on acreage. When another drought began in the 1990s, Dust Bowl conditions reproduced themselves and left farmers a visible reminder that nature was in charge. Oklahoma has been experiencing drought conditions in the mid 1990s, though not to the degree of severity of the dirty thirties. The cycle of droughts, however, clearly indicate the delicate balance that exists between man and nature.

Though the Dust Bowl was quite traumatic and devastating to those living in the immediate area of the dust storms, these storms did not greatly affect

Grant County and Medford. The agricultural depression of the 1920s had had a much greater impact on the area than did the disasters of the 1930s, the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl. Economic conditions and farming statistics indicated the severity of the agricultural depression of the 1920s. The Dust Bowl and the depression affected counties more that were closer to the geographical center of the Dust Bowl.

Whether or not the Southern Plains should be farmed comes under great scrutiny during the 1930s. The ecological disaster in an area that is only marginally suitable for farming would provoke such strong arguments as Donald Worster's. As previously stated, he believed that the Southern Plains, specifically Oklahoma, should not be farmed at all and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s supported his theory. Man's greed, inherent in the United States' capitalist economic system, caused the exploitation of soil to further crop production and, in turn, revenue. Nevertheless, Grant County farmers continued to cultivate just as much acreage as they did prior to the Dust Bowl, and this was less for greed than for survival. Even in drought these farmers proved that the region could be farmed successfully.

NOTES

¹Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Dallas: Ginn and Company, 1931), 155-159.

²Bonnifield, 49.

³See United States Department of Agriculture Harvesting Wheat with a Combined Harvester-thresher in the Great Plains Region (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1927) for detail regarding mechanization.

⁴James Wesley Ware, "Black Blizzard: The Dust Bowl of the 1930's" (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 1977), 6.

⁵See Paul Sears Deserts on the March for more detail.

⁶Worster, 79.

⁷Worster, 233. Worster wrote this in 1979, and accurately predicted a drought that occurred in the mid 1990s.

⁸For general histories of the Dust Bowl written immediately after it occurred, see Stuart Chase Rich Land Poor Land (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936); and Vance Johnson, Heaven's Tableland: The Dust Bowl Story (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1947).

⁹See Lawrence Svobida's Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1968) for personal experience of a farmer during the 1930s. Other books on the subject of living through the Dust Bowl include: Ann Marie Low, Dust Bowl Diary (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Pamela Riney-Kehberg, Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); and

Robert Allen Rutland, A Boyhood in the Dust Bowl, 1926-1934 (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995).

¹⁰U. S. Congress, House, Proposed Provision Pertaining to an Existing Appropriation, Department of Agriculture H. Doc. 189, 75th Congress, 1st Session, 1937, p. 2.

¹¹Leuchtenburg, 102.

¹²Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 23 November 1933, p. 1; U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States - 1930 Population Vol. III, Part 2 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 593.

¹³Ibid., 1 February 1934, p. 1.

¹⁴For more information regarding the FSA see United States Department of Agriculture Farm Security Administration - Social Research Reports 1-10 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1939). To gain insight of other New Deal programs and the farmer, see Theodore Saloutos', The American Farmer and the New Deal (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982); William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963); Kenneth S. Davis, FDR: The New Deal Years, 1933-1937, A History (New York: Random House, 1979); James E. Sargent, Roosevelt and the Hundred Days: Struggle for the Early New Deal (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981); Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968); and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Coming of the New Deal: The Age of Roosevelt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958).

¹⁵Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 26 July 1934, p. 1.

¹⁶Ibid., 22 June 1933, p. 1.

¹⁷U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, Climatological Data, Oklahoma Section, Annual Summary, 1933 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 53.

¹⁸See United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Adjustment Administration The Beef-Cattle Problem (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing

Office, 1934), and C. Roger Lambert's, "The Drought Cattle Purchase, 1934-1935: Problems and Complaints" Agricultural History 45 (1971) for more insight into Drought Relief Cattle Purchase Program.

¹⁹Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 16 August 1934, p. 1.

²⁰Svobida, 116.

²¹Steinbeck's, Grapes of Wrath (New York: Bantam Books, 1963) makes it seem as though all Southern Plains residents moved to California escaping the Dust Bowl. Other works that encouraged this myth include: Walter Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1973); James N. Gregory, American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939).

²²Ware, 105.

²³U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 Population Vol. III, Part 2 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 593; Ibid., Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 Population Vol. II (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 888.

²⁴Worster, 48.

²⁵For an in-depth study of the beliefs of Leopold, see Aldo Leopold's Aldo Leopold's Southwest (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), Curt Meine's Aldo Leopold: his Life and Work (Madison: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), and Max Oelschlaeger's The Idea of Wilderness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). For Malin's ideas see James C. Malin, History of Ecology: Studies of the Grassland (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). For Clements see Frederic E. Clements, Bio-ecology (New York: Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1939). And for Sears see Paul B. Sears, This is Our World (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); Ibid., Lands Beyond the Forest (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969); and Ibid., The Living Landscape (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

²⁶U. S. Congress, House, Proposed Provision Pertaining to an Existing Appropriation, Department of Agriculture H. Doc. 146, 75th Congress, 1st Session, 1937, p. 1.

²⁷Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 18 October 1934, p. 1.

²⁸For further insight on Roosevelt's Shelterbelt Project, see Worster's chapter 14, Bonnifield's chapter 8, and Hurt's chapter 8.

²⁹Medford (Okla.) Patriot Star 16 January 1936, p. 7.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 13 January 1938, p. 1.

³¹*Ibid.*, 11 January 1940, p. 6.

³²*Ibid.*, 16 January 1936, p. 7.

³³*Ibid.*, 14 January 1937, p. 7.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 11 January 1940, p. 6.

³⁵Thus agricultural areas entered the Depression earlier and left it earlier. The standard line is that mobilization for World War II ended the Depression much later.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 8 October 1931, p. 8.

³⁷Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, Oklahoma Agricultural Statistics, 1894-1947 (Oklahoma City, 1949), 15.

CONCLUSION

MEDFORD IN THE LARGER CONTEXT OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

Agriculture in the Southern Plains has always been a precarious proposition. When the rains come in timely fashion, and when national and international markets are strong enough to support abundant production, farmers in this region enjoy a lifestyle and livelihood that are almost idyllic. Self-employment, access to land for recreational use and house building, limited hours spent working during the off seasons of the winter and spring, and living close to the land provide exceptional reasons for choosing farming as an occupation. Other favorable conditions in farming in the Southern Plains are living away from urban areas that are densely populated and noisy. There is geographical space in the region as well. City dwellers may hope for enough of a back yard to have a gas grill or a patio. Space is not lacking in the Southern Plains.¹

When drought and agricultural depression conspire to lower farm profits to subsistence levels, life on a

Southern Plains farm can be miserable. Immense machinery and land payments that come due in the economically tighter months of the spring are not exactly favorable. Problems also arise when families are unable to depend upon a salary or a weekly paycheck. Farming in general is an incredibly risky investment. Farmers depend upon things over which they have no control like weather conditions, green bugs, grasshoppers, bind weeds, and other unwanted nuisances. Though insects and weeds can be contained by pesticides and insecticides, it costs amounts of capital to have crop dusters spray the toxic chemicals. Often, the return on the farmer's investment is low. Hard work and an abundance of money cannot save crops experiencing damaging conditions. In the history of the region there have been more periods of agricultural depression than ones of prosperity. Medford, Oklahoma, is an example of an area caught in this unpredictable economic roller coaster.

The national economy crashed during the 1930s, bringing hardship to rural and urban dwellers throughout the United States. In Medford, an example of a Southern Plains farming community, people suffered just as many did in other regions far from the Plains. However, depression in such an agricultural area was not unique. People to some extent expected less from

their farming, hoped for more, but ultimately were happy just to stay in business and remain as farmers.

The depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, therefore, did not affect farmers of the Medford area psychologically or economically as much as one might expect. Owing to the fact that these people were not used to economic affluence, and lived closer to a subsistence level, they were able to tolerate the conditions. In reality, Medford and agriculture did not change drastically as a consequence of the arrival of the 1930s and the concomitant depression and Dust Bowl except in the new dependence on the federal government farming programs that remain vital to the 1990s farmer's financial status.

Many indicators clearly demonstrate that the area was not greatly affected by the depression and the Dust Bowl. Bank deposits, loans, and assets during the 1920s, except in occasional and brief periods differed little from those of the 1930s. Tax delinquencies, acreage plowed, overall size of farms, value of farm property and machinery, and general affluency did not change greatly. The number of people engaged in farming declined, but that was an indicator of the movement from family farms to larger corporate type organizations or as a consequence of a desire on the part of some individuals to leave farming permanently.

Historian Donald Worster in Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s argued that Oklahomans did not learn anything from the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl. In discussing the drought conditions during the mid 1970s, he contends that, "the average plainsman was no better prepared than before."² Worster called the drought in 1974 in the Oklahoma Panhandle, Dust Bowl III. He demonstrated how Southern Plains farmers continued to operate their businesses in a haphazard manner, specifically with irrigation from the Ogallala aquifer, the underground water reserves on which the Southern Plains rest. He also argued that the American surplus would end because of the growing world population; American wheat growers will not be able to keep up with the demand and in the process will ecologically destroy the American Breadbasket. Worster examined the severe drought conditions of 1968 in the Sahel, an African region located south of the Sahara Desert. He suggested that western capitalist ideas about farming and weather caused Dust Bowl conditions. Further warning readers, Worster argued that, "the world is facing a future of dust bowls."³

This bleak view of Southern Plains agriculture in demise contrasts with R. Douglas Hurt's The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History. Though Hurt provided readers vivid images of the Dust Bowl conditions of the 1950s and warned residents of what

might again happen in the future, he focused upon how farmers could help prevent and alleviate these drought conditions. Farmers reseeded pastures to give the soil native grass coverage and the government protected these range lands. And in direct contrast, Hurt viewed irrigation not as depleting a limited aquifer, but instead as a method effectively used "to stabilize agricultural lands and minimize the effects of drought in the 1950s Dust Bowl."⁴ Hurt also believed that the 1930s conservation practices helped to ward off the return of the Dust Bowl conditions of the 1950s. He even contended that there were positive attributes to the 1930s Dust Bowl, for example, the creation of the Soil Conservation Service. Contrary to Worster's beliefs, Hurt stated that, "Significantly, Dust Bowl farmers profited from their knowledge of the past."⁵

While both of these historians have valid arguments, neither is exactly correct. Worster's view that western ideas about agriculture were inherently wrong because they are diseased with capitalism was true to some degree. But what was his comparison? His overall conclusion of Southern Plains farmers learning nothing from their past mistakes has substance. He said Dust Bowl conditions prevailed during the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s, because of increased acreage being plowed up causing a lack of adequate ground cover for the high winds that blew. Historian James Malin

suggested another answer. In The Grasslands of North America he wrote that the Dust Bowl had little to do with humans plowing up more soil. Instead, he believed Dust Bowl conditions had occurred in the Southern Plains for centuries because of cyclical climatic conditions.⁶

Perhaps a synthesis of the ideas of all three historians provides a picture of the truth. One cannot believe that the Dust Bowl happened entirely on its own as Malin suggested. There had to have been some conditions present in the ecosystem that were conducive to creating a Dust Bowl. These conditions along with the farmer's self-interest, or as Worster would argue human greed, to better himself and his family, created the most violent environmental disaster of the twentieth century in the United States. Hurt's contention that human conservation efforts have greatly lessened the likelihood that another will visit the Southern Plains again was also misguided. Instead, farmers must do all they can to encourage the conservation efforts and make their operations as ecologically friendly as possible, yet simultaneously maintain their standards of living by increasing crop yields. This would place the farmer in as favorable a position as possible to weather difficult economic times should they recur as in the 1920s agricultural depression, and the 1930s depression. As Malin

suggested, conditions existed in nature that made drought and wind impossible to control fully. Farmers also cannot control trends in the national economy. The farmer and agriculturally based government agencies must cooperate and find the most efficient manner in farming to help ensure the stability of those who make their living cultivating America's Breadbasket, the Southern Plains. Whether or not the Southern Plains should remain in cultivation is a problem for which Worster suggested an answer. He argued that the region should not be farmed altogether. Though actions of this magnitude originate in intellectual ideas, the physical removal of farmers from the Southern Plains seemed impossible in the 1990s. Who would see to the removal? It is doubtful the federal government would enforce mandatory migration out of the region. Who else could? It is highly unlikely this would ever occur. Meanwhile, farmers, environmentalists, federal agencies under the umbrella of the Department of Agriculture, lobbyists, and law makers must use the Dust Bowl of the 1930s as a reminder of the delicate balance that exists between man and nature, and strive to maintain this fragile equilibrium between two very different phenomena. With this balance the Southern Plains can be farmed successfully as it has since the opening of the region to farming in the land run of 1893. The fact that the Dust Bowl and the Great

Depression of the 1930s had little effect upon the economics and crop growing in the Medford area is a powerful argument in favor of farming the region despite arguments such as those of Donald Worster.

NOTES

¹Interview with Grant County farmer, Steve Downing on March 15, 1997.

²Worster, 233.

³Ibid., 242.

⁴Hurt, 153.

⁵Ibid., 156.

⁶Malin, 137.

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TABLE I

AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS FOR GRANT COUNTY AND MEDFORD FROM
1910 TO 1940

Category	1910	1920	1930	1940
Population-Medford	1,110	1,050	1,084	1,121
Grant County	18,760	16,072	14,150	13,128
Number of farms				
Grant County	2,970	2,713	2,757	2,250
Land in farms-acres				
Grant County	617,540	618,972	668,108	616,499
Average size of farms-acres				
Grant County	207.9	228.2	242.3	274.0
Value of farm property in dollars				
Grant County	32,143,025	41,715,548	38,854,359	30,507,248
Value of implements and machinery in dollars				
Grant County	1,007,974	3,415,612	3,651,958	3,415,612

2
VITA

Debra Downing

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MEDFORD, OKLAHOMA, 1919-1940

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