

OF FIRE AND DUST: AN ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE
NEBRASKA SANDHILLS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1929-1941

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Dedication

In memory and honor of Neal Jay Dutton, a truer friend and Sandhillier I have never known.

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Abstract:

During the Great Depression life on the Great Plains of the central United States was harsh, difficult, fiscally challenging, and, at times, deadly. The economic challenges posed to the region's agricultural residents was due largely to difficult environmental conditions, such as drought, dust storms, severe thunderstorms, pestilential plagues, and fire, which resulted directly in farm foreclosures and forced migration when successive years of failed crops and dry, dusty fields led to even dustier pockets. Past historiography has primarily focused on the difficult experiences of agriculturalists in the central and southern plains states with the northern plains states, especially Nebraska, receiving little scholarly discussion. Individuals who lived in the unique sub-region of Nebraska known as the Sandhills during the Great Depression shared the aforementioned environmental calamities to varying degrees with their neighbors on the central and southern plains; however, not all of their experiences were identical. Due to the sub-region's sandy soils, topography, and abundant rangelands Sandhills' agriculturalists utilized more pastoral methods than many of their Great Plains contemporaries, thus, in turn, leading to different forms of agrarian success and failure. "Frontier" aspects persisted in Sandhills society during the Depression era as roads were rudimentary, ranches and farms lacked electricity, horses remained essential to agricultural production as tractors were few and ill-suited to the Sandhills' terrain, and felonious crimes reminiscent of the stereotypical "Wild West," such as bank robberies and shootouts, were commonplace. This study examines how the Great Depression era was simultaneously Sandhills' society's most "frontier" period, due to these aspects, and it's most progressive one due to significant infrastructure improvements brought to the hills by the New Deal in the form of new roads, schools, and reclamation projects and the subsequent social issues that arose when these two differing societal points collided.

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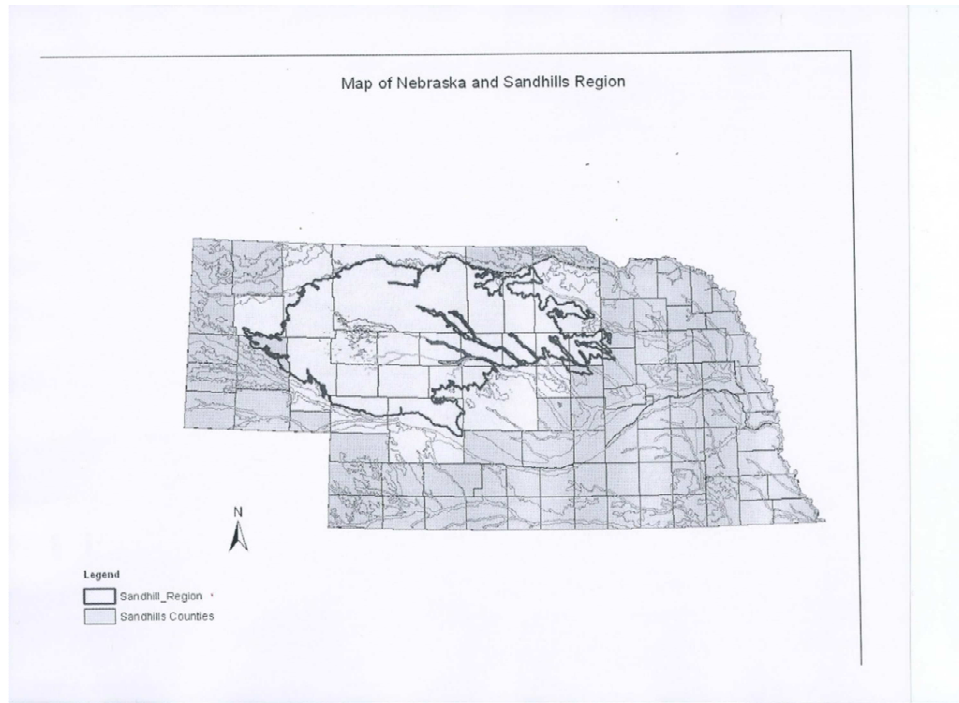
Introduction

The Great Depression on the Great Plains was a dry, dusty affair that left foreclosed farms, empty pockets, hungry stomachs, and broken dreams in its wake. Historiography has primarily focused on the dust bowl area of the southern plains in describing and analyzing the events of this era. Such examinations are more than justifiable as thousands of small farmers and their dreams of agricultural prosperity passed by the wayside due to severe drought conditions and the ensuing dust storms and animal plagues that accompanied it. But what of the experience on the northern plains? Was the environment just as hostile and unremitting? Were failed fields and foreclosures just as common? A limited number of historical works describe the experiences of agriculturalists in the Dakotas. *Dust Bowl Diary* chronicles the life of Ann Marie Low and her family's agricultural endeavors in southeastern North Dakota from 1927 to 1937 during some of the most economically and environmentally challenging years on the Great Plains. Low wrote of her family's eventual surrender to the inevitable: "...it was in 1938, the first time in many years there had been enough moisture to raise a crop, that the government finally paid Dad for his land. He and Mama bought an old house and seven lots of land on the south edge of Kensal for fifteen hundred dollars. They rewired, repainted, and repaired the house and landscaped the grounds. Dad always missed the ranch..."¹ Paula M. Nelson's 1996 study, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West*

¹ Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 181

River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust, described the equally harsh realities of life in western South Dakota from 1920 to 1940 for the state's agricultural populace. Nelson wrote of the environmental challenges that plagued western South Dakotans: "But any hopes for a return to normality were dashed by the dust storms of the fall. They arrived in November and blew what little feed was left 'to the four winds...'" Correspondents from all over Tripp County wrote of severe damage to buildings on farms and in towns. Windows were broken and roofs and walls blown down."² While these works and similar ones provide thorough treatment of the Dakotas during the Depression, the state of Nebraska does not garner such attention. Contrasting with its neighbors on the Great Plains, Nebraska receives little historical coverage during this period as it has been assumed by scholars that Nebraskans experiences would not be any different or unique in comparison to the rest of the Great Plains region. This is a fallacy as Nebraska, geographically and topographically, is far from wholly similar. Nebraska contains a unique sub-region of the Great Plains that is different from the stereotypical, flat farmland utopian image that is characteristically portrayed in literature, on television, and in tourism pamphlets. This sub-region is the Nebraska Sandhills and during the Great Depression this land was indeed a land of fire and dust.

² Paula M. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 122-123



(Map compiled by the author, April 2012)

The Nebraska Sandhills has stereotypically and wrongfully been viewed at various times in the last one-hundred fifty years by 19th century Euro-American settlers, modern-day passersby on I-80, and historical scholars alike as an intractable wasteland, an arid region devoid of people and agricultural or scholarly potential. Writer Ian Frazier succinctly summed up how unimpressed many writers and scholars have been with the Sandhills in his work, *Great Plains*, when he wrote of his own impressions of the region in the late-twentieth century:

“I slept in my van outside the town of McCook, Nebraska. The next morning I went on, over Interstate Highway 80, across the forks of the Platte River (the first river with any water I’d seen for days), and into the west-central part of the state. I was now in one of the blankest spots on the American map, a big section showing almost no rivers or roads or towns. This is the Nebraska sandhill country, the original model for the mapmakers’ Great American Desert- a land of grassy rises receding into the distance like a sea in a heavy chop. There was so little to look at that when a crow flew past in front of me and dropped something from its beak I turned around and went back to see what it was: a fetal

duckling, featherless, blue, with bulging sealed eyes and tiny webbed feet.”³

Whereas Frazier would call the region “blank,” others instead would call the region peaceful, at times almost eerily so, as much of its hilly landscape has remained unchanged and unmoved for hundreds of years. For those within its boundaries it can seem as if one is adrift in a never ending sea of sand as the wave-like hills continue on past the horizon. To Euro-American settlers migrating west in the early to mid-19th century such a geographical anomaly was viewed skeptically as a desired location for agrarians, especially in conjunction with its soil structure, as it seemed more than an antithesis to the fertile valleys of the Willamette Valley that lay ahead on their travels. Potential settlers also heard accounts of people such as themselves wandering into the hills and never being seen again. Due to these stories, which were similar to accounts of Spanish Conquistadors being lost on the seemingly unending prairies of southern Kansas in the 1500s, potential Euro-American settlers in turn lost interest. This attitude changed in the late-1870s and early-1880s as it was discovered that the land was perfect for cattle production as cows which had wandered into the hills from northern agriculture operations during the winter of 1879 were found to have survived the season by cow hands in the spring due to the hills’ quality grasslands. Thus, the hills became viewed as an area for potential profit in the cattle industry. This potential was soon realized as the Sandhills of Nebraska became one of the nation’s preeminent ranch and cattle producing areas.

Despite ranching’s agricultural preeminence ranchers were forced to compete for land in the hills with farmers as the nineteenth century came to a close. In the early-1890s through the Great Depression, Euro-American farmers pursued the long-held dream of the

³ Ian Frazier, *Great Plains* (New York: Picador, 1989), 157

Jeffersonian yeoman farmer in the Sandhills and many local businessmen and Federal government officials perpetrated this image. Ranching had survived, why not farming? The 1904 Kinkaid Act granted 640-acre homesteads to settlers as a means to encourage further farming and to aid in farmers' survival. Many Sandhills farmers were forced to leave the region or sell out during the drought of the 1890s as they could not survive on 160-acre homesteads. Ranchers also took advantage of the Kinkaid Act's increased acreages to add onto their own holdings. Beyond being conducted in a region of sandy soils, farming was not practical as the sandy, and generally steep, hills were difficult to plow with horse-drawn implements. Tractors were not numerous nor used in the hills by farmers through the first thirty years of the 20th century. Nonetheless, the idea of farming the Sandhills was repeatedly pushed on the hills' residents by businessmen and regional newspapermen in advertisements for land and sales on farm equipment until finally the dusty, dry, and pest-filled days of the Great Depression ended the dream. Ranching survived this period even though the environmental challenges were no less difficult for pastoralists. In this regard, the Great Depression shaped the modern-day Sandhills and reiterated to agriculturalists the primary benefits of its use as a ranchland in comparison to empty, dry sand-blown fields.

In contrast to Sandhills agriculturalists, historical scholars of the American West and the Great Plains, like so many motorists cruising through Nebraska on I-80 along the wide Platte River Valley, have been generally unconcerned with the Sandhills and if they do take note of the hills' existence are rather apathetic to their exploration. For historians, this has been especially true of the region's twentieth century history. As previously stated, scholars also have generally not examined the Euro-American historical narrative in the Sandhills as a unique one in comparison to the rest of the state and the Great Plains as a whole. This has

been a scholarly miscalculation. Many studies have been done on the region focusing primarily on its Euro-American settlement from the 1880s-1920, and even then such works at times are incomplete. Some of this is due to incomplete sources but also the reliance on the assumption that if environmental/settlement conditions in Kansas, eastern Wyoming or Colorado, and eastern Nebraska are similar they must be in Nebraska's west-central hill country and thus do not require further discussion. While there are similar experiences amongst plains people, the geography, ecology, and soil structure of the Sandhills warrant their own in-depth historical examination, especially during the difficult drought-ridden days of the Great Depression, in order to more clearly define these differences and similarities with other parts and states of the Great Plains. The purpose of this study is to do just that as it provides insight into the unique and common experiences of Nebraska Sandhills residents during this pivotal time in American history.

In examining the historiography of the Great Plains it is important to understand the arguments of previous works, their area of impetus, and where and if they have mentioned the Sandhills in any regard. Compared to Great Depression era studies related to Nebraska and its Sandhills region in particular, secondary sources analyzing conditions faced by agriculturalists on the southern plains during this period are abundant. One such study, considered by many to be the most preeminent in this research field, is Donald Worster's 1979 study, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Worster examined the causes and effects of the dust bowl within western Kansas and Oklahoma focusing specifically on Haskell County, Kansas, and Cimarron County, Oklahoma. He argued that farmers in these areas were to blame for this environmental disaster as they over-plowed the land in an

attempt to profit from its capitalistic exploitation.⁴ Worster does not discuss the Sandhills; however, this is obviously understandable as it is not within his area of study or impetus.

Carey McWilliams's historic heralded 1942 work, *Ill Fares The Land*, noted the experiences of migrants from the plains who made their way to California looking for a better life during the Great Depression. McWilliams's impetus was to give face and voice to a largely ignored and forgotten element of American society. He wrote of their seeming invisibility: "Many communities throughout the country, at the height of the season, are often wholly unaware of the presence in their midst of several thousand migrants. It is also difficult to see these shadowy figures at work in a field. It is hard to distinguish them, sometimes, from the land. They never work twice in the same place; no matter how many times you may return to the same field, they are not likely to be there."⁵ McWilliams noted with concern that since the beginning of the Depression, the United States' class of migrant farm laborer had kept exponentially growing so much so that he feared they would never achieve a permanent physical home of their own or a legitimized place in society. McWilliams mentions Nebraska but only in combining its exodus statistics with surrounding states. Thus, while hugely significant, his study did not provide a thorough examination of what migrant labor was like from the northern plains in comparison to other parts of the country or specific incidents in the Sandhills when there were available examples.

A similar argument to Worster's study is put forth by Kansas farmer Lawrence Svobida in his 1940 work (reprinted 1986), *Farming The Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account*

⁴ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains In the 1930s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 4

⁵ Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares The Land* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), 7

from Kansas. Svobida's argument differs from Worster's in that he contends farmers were unsure what the long-term consequences of mechanized farming would be when they first began utilizing equipment such as tractors to farm and plow the land on the southern plains. He instead blames western promoters and various chambers of commerce for keeping the Great Plains' "desert" traits and its agriculturalists' plight during the 1930s secretive, at least for a time, due to a fear of negative perception by the general American public.⁶ Thus, both works emphasize how profit and image were intricately connected in unleashing the forces of the Dust Bowl on the southern plains.

Geoff Cunfer's 2005 study, *On The Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment*, studies human impact on the Great Plains in a different context as compared to Worster or Svobida as he incorporates humans into the environment and does not characterize them as separate agents. According to Cunfer: "People are a part of nature, not separate from it in any measurable way. Just like other species, we are embedded in natural systems, we work to manipulate those systems to our advantage, and we encounter natural restraints that we cannot transgress...The ways that people manipulate natural systems are complex, temporary adjustments and readjustments to constantly changing natural and human circumstances."⁷ Cunfer utilized different sources such as agricultural census records to note larger historical trends than Worster or Svobida considered. He examined this data through the use of Geographic Information Systems and from this sought to place the dust bowl phenomenon in a more natural perspective than one motivated by economics. However, Cunfer's work is

⁶ Lawrence Svobida, *Farming The Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 33

⁷ Geoff Cunfer, *On The Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 10

misleading in as far as providing a comprehensive study of the Great Plains as he follows Worster's scholarly path in primarily discussing agricultural examples in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. The Sandhills of Nebraska are only mentioned in one sentence on page thirty-four. Thus, yet again, such limited mention is unsatisfactory in providing full coverage of the region's history. Walter Prescott Webb's 1931 classic, *The Great Plains*, is equally limited in its coverage of the Sandhills, as well as Nebraska, for a work that is supposed to mention the region in a greater context as Webb only mentions the hills briefly and in a negative context. Webb wrote of the Kinkaid Act: "The next important modification of the Homestead Act was the Kinkaid Act, passed in 1904 and applicable only in the state of Nebraska. It was passed in order to dispose of the lands of western Nebraska, hitherto rejected by preemptors and homesteaders, and it permitted the acquisition of 640 acres of land."⁸ "Dispose" insinuates that the region was considered untenable; however, this was not the case in 1904 as homesteaders, farmers, and ranchers had been already living and working in the area for twenty-five years. While it is not surprising that Webb did not write about the events of the Depression as they had not entirely unfolded yet when his work was published, his work does not provide enough insight into this unique sub-region of the Great Plains. Like Cunfer's work which followed seventy years later, too much emphasis was placed on Texas and the southern plains and not their northern contemporaries.

Differing from Cunfer's work is Craig Miner's 2006 study, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940*. Miner's work focused on more personal accounts than did Cunfer's which utilized agricultural census data in more depth. Miner's study counters Svobida's to a degree as it notes the pride many western Kansans felt in their

⁸ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1931), 422

hometown and the insults they felt from the eastern national media who believed that such a region was untenable for human life due to the environmental factors of the 1930s.⁹ This work is significant to Great Plains studies as it examines the personal attitudes and situations of various individuals, thus providing historians a more well-rounded view of agriculturalists on the Kansas prairie. Not all failed, not all were pessimistic in their future. Many persevered through this difficult period. Thus, one must be wary to make broad assessments of the region's environment or its people without a closer examination from their perspective. Paul Bonnefield also applied this method in his 1979 study of Oklahoma during the Great Depression, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression*. Such a practical concept can also be applied to Nebraska Sandhills agriculturalists.

A final work that discussed the Great Depression era experiences of Nebraska's neighbors is Daniel Tyler's 2011 biography of eastern Colorado rancher, W. D. Farr. While the work chronicles Farr's impact on the ranching industry in Colorado for nearly a century, it is also significant for noting how individual agriculturalists personally profited in the 1930s if they were willing to diversify and change some of their operations. Tyler noted this in regard to Farr's profits off of lamb sales during the period as well as his diversification into other crops such as pinto beans, sweet clover, and peas which some neighboring farmers did not grow.¹⁰ In comparison, by further examining the motivations and agricultural practices of large scale agriculturalists in the Sandhills during the period, it can be discerned if the diversification tactics of Farr were unique to Coloradans due to a combination of personal situations, topography, and soil structure or if Sandhills agriculturalists also participated in

⁹ Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 28

¹⁰ Daniel Tyler, *WD Farr: Cowboy in the Boardroom* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 61

such practices.

As previously mentioned, scholarly studies of the Sandhills during the Great Depression are significantly lacking even amongst those that specifically focus on the state of Nebraska. Accounts of the Depression come mainly from county histories which tend to downplay the difficulties of the era or do not cover it in great detail. Such works instead assert the accomplishments of the particular county's pioneers and prominent families over what could be perceived as less than celebratory accounts of personal agricultural failure brought on by improper farming methods and/or environmental challenges during that era. One such work is *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska*, edited by Cherry County historian Marianne Beel. As with other Sandhills county histories published in the late-twentieth century, *A Sandhill Century* is a celebratory account written in commemoration of the centennial of the establishment of Cherry County, the largest county in the state of Nebraska. This work details events important to the county's primarily Euro-American settlers throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century as well as family histories of past Cherry county residents. Despite lacking analysis and cultural empathy (i.e. regarding the fate of the Sioux in nearby neighboring South Dakota), *A Sandhill Century* is useful for providing the historian with a listing of significant events that occurred within the county during a given decade. Such is the case for the 1930s.

Beel's edited work describes a myriad of events that took place in Cherry County during this decade ranging from bank failures to Works Progress Administration projects that improved the city of Valentine's streets to violent criminal acts such as murder for money.

According to *A Sandhill Century*:

The Bank of Crookston failed...Main Street was paved as part of the National Emergency Relief Administration with Roberts Construction as general contractor working two six-hour shifts of 160 men...It was opened to the public in July 1934...Migrating grasshoppers blocked out the sun during the summer of 1936...An

old murder was solved in 1939. Willie Gowen confessed that in 1936 he and Bernard Oots had murdered George Harris after obtaining checks for \$40 and \$80 from the elderly Kennedy community man.¹¹

Such information is important for highlighting the comings and goings of Cherry County during the 1930s; however, the reader is not able to ascertain how important many of these events are in relation to other Sandhills counties, the Great Plains, or the United States in general during this period. Beel does not explain why the Bank of Crookston closed or if it was in conjunction with other bank failures of the period; when grasshoppers plagued the Cherry County in 1936, how often these plague events occurred, and what residents' reactions were to them; and what the motive was for the murder of George Harris. Simply listing these factual events does nothing to explain why they happened or how they are interrelated to the Sandhills region as a whole.

The county histories of other Sandhills counties are similarly limited in determining why certain trends within a specific county occurred during the 1930s. One such work is *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction*, edited by Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder. While the title immediately makes one somewhat suspicious of the work's credibility, like its Cherry County contemporary it does yield historical information pertaining to McPherson County's rural residents during the 1930s. According to *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction*: "The thirties were tough for those who were seeking employment in this county. For that reason, beginning in 1934, some of the county's young men went to Civilian Conservation Corps camps. There they could work and receive a small wage...183 people left the county in the years 1939-1940."¹² The work is important for providing insight

¹¹ Marianne Brinda Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Henderson, Nebraska: Service Press, 1986), 258

¹² Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder, *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction* (Callaway, Nebraska: Loup Valley Queen, 1986), 37-38

into the difficulties facing the residents of McPherson County during the Great Depression, but yet again such information leads to more questions instead of providing definitive answers regarding such topics as unemployment rates, and migration destinations.

A third county history that does not provide much detail into the particular hardships of the 1930s in the Nebraska Sandhills was *Hooker County, Nebraska: The First 115 Years, 1889-2004*. This work does not mention how farmers and ranchers benefited from federal aid as does the study of McPherson County; however, it does briefly mention that poor farming practices had created untenable environmental issues. “From 1932 to 1938, Hooker County along with the rest of the Central plains was hit by a severe drought. The sandy soil of this county, that had the sod torn up by farming, eroded badly from the dry winds. Most of the dry land farming had to be discontinued by the mid 1940’s and the land allowed to return to native grasses.”¹³ Nonetheless, one is unable to ascertain from this assertion alone just how severe the drought was in Hooker County, if farming was solely responsible for this lack of soil conservation, and if overgrazing by ranchers played a significant role in the development of this problem. While this work is not meant to provide the reader a detailed focus on the Great Depression’s hardships in Hooker County, a more thorough account of how these environmental conditions impacted the county agriculturally, financially, and socially is necessary in order to put the county’s difficulties in a more regional context and, in turn, contribute to a broader developing historiography on the Dust Bowl’s scope in the 1930s.

Beyond local county histories, the impact of the Great Depression and drought of the 1930s on the Nebraska Sandhills is briefly articulated in larger monograph studies, which

¹³ Cathy Nichols and Nina Clark, Eds., *Hooker County, Nebraska: The First 115 Years, 1889-2004*, 2004

emphasize a broader focus on state history, as well as biographical works. One such monograph is Everett Dick's 1975 study, *Conquering the Great American Desert: Nebraska*. Dick's work provides an overall history of Nebraska from its earliest territorial days through statehood as he chronicles the Euro-American development of Nebraska in agriculture and industry through the 1970s. Due to the breadth and scope of the work, Dick was unable to go into explicit detail on how Sandhillers suffered financially and environmentally or if they even did in the 1930s. Dick did note the occurrence of dust storms in the state: "Now in the thirties a long period of extremely dry weather, accompanied by winds sweeping across the plains, brought dust storms. Great quantities of dust were blown into Nebraska from the southwest, and in turn, tons of fine soil from Nebraska were carried to the northeast. As a result of these dust-storm experiences of the thirties, the national government...established the Soil Conservation Service with its several beneficial features..."¹⁴ Dick does not write how often these storms occur nor how Nebraskans, specifically Sandhillers were affected, nor how drought conditions exacerbated such storms when the scorching winds of the 1930s blew across the prairie.

Another general history of Nebraska that raises more questions than it answers regarding the experiences of Sandhillers and their interaction with their environment in the 1930s is James C. Olson's and Ronald C. Naugle's 1997 work, *History of Nebraska*. In this study, Olson and Naugle dedicated a specific chapter to the Great Depression era; however, they focused more on the drought's impact in eastern Nebraska than in the western Sandhills counties. The authors do mention the construction of Kingsley Dam and Lake McConaughy in Keith County in the late-1930s and the political maneuverings that made this enterprise

¹⁴ Everett Dick, *Conquering the Great American Desert: Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1975), 379

possible, but do not address how such a project impacted employment for local Sandhills residents nor the environment regarding dust storms and soil erosion. Olson and Naugle wrote of the project: “Its principal feature is Kingsley Dam, near Ogallala, an earthen dam that forms Lake C. W. McConaughy. Built at a cost of \$38 million, it irrigates land in four counties and can provide 233 million kilowatt-hours of power annually.”¹⁵ Beyond this discussion of the successful completion of this irrigation project there was no mention of how the Sandhills were impacted by the larger Depression era issues of drought, unemployment, and crime.

A somewhat biographical study that examines the experiences of Sandhills residents throughout much of the twentieth century is the Monahan family’s 1987 study of their ranching history and development entitled *Sandhill Horizons: A Story of the Monahan Ranch and Other History of the Area*. The work does note how Ear Monahan expanded the family’s ranch holdings in Grant, Hooker, and Cherry counties in the 1930s through various land purchases, many of which were from absentee land owners. However, the Monahan study does not definitively state how many of the Monahans’ land purchases were from failing farmers, how common absentee ownership was and why these owners were absentee, and what condition the land was in when they purchased it. Certainly such factors influenced these purchases.

A final secondary source that considered issues relevant to Nebraska Sandhills residents in greater detail than past sources was Gene E. Hamaker’s 1964 work, *Irrigation Pioneers: A History of the Tri-County Project To 1935*. In comparison to Olson’s and

¹⁵ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 346

Naugle's brief remarks on the development of Kingsley Dam and Lake McConaughy, Hamaker delves into the intricate details of the political issues over the project's proposed construction, resistance to it by communities further downriver in Nebraska who feared its impact on their water rights, and the various meetings of groups and committees that were responsible for the project's implementation. Hamaker wrote of the objections of groups from Grand Island and Sutherland in 1935 that: "The Associated Chambers objected to diversion, asked that the question of overlapping power markets be considered, and recommended the construction of the on-river dam. The next complaint by the valley interests was rendered in Washington, but not by a delegation of citizens."¹⁶ This study is significant for demonstrating state-wide concerns over the project's viability as well as the complex interactions between important state and national political figures such as Franklin Roosevelt and George Norris that eventually made the project's approval possible. However, just as with Olson's and Naugle's study Hamaker did not explain how the average individual in the western Sandhills felt about such a project or if the project's construction improved local unemployment conditions.

This study is significant and differs from the previous works mentioned which focus on Nebraska and/or Great Plains history in that it examines the environmental issues that Nebraska Sandhillers faced during the Depression-era and how these challenges impacted Sandhills' society as a whole during the period, whereas others only examine eastern Nebraska or not at all. Environmental challenges associated with drought impacted agricultural patterns and land purchases, migration, financial matters, crime, racial cooperation, and domestic/gender issues between men and women. In many ways there was

¹⁶ Gene E. Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers: A History of the Tri-County Project To 1935* (Minden, Nebraska:Warp Publishing Company, 1964), 206

no such thing as “Sandhills exceptionalism” in comparison to Kansans, Oklahomans, or Coloradoans regarding hardships such as crime, financial hardship, and agricultural foreclosure. These traits were very similar and also occurred in other parts of the United States. However, the experiences of Sandhillers were different in that the region’s landscape, geography, and soil structure itself dictated how agriculturalists should best use the land. On the prairies of Kansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, or eastern Colorado either farming or ranching could be conducted depending on the agriculturalists’ preference. Farming was practiced in the Sandhills but was not successful on a large scale prior to and especially during the Depression. In the 1930s, ranchers and land speculators practiced a type of pragmatic capitalism that inadvertently served to conserve the Sandhills grasslands. Farmers were bought out or foreclosed on and ranchers and speculators took over their lands. In so doing, the region’s grasslands were protected from over plowing or other large scale conservation mistakes. This is not to say that some ranchers did not overgraze their lands during this period because they did; however, the environmental damage from cattle was still minimal compared to the harm of over plowing in the Sandhills arid, sandy soils. While Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, eastern Colorado, and eastern New Mexico became the Dust Bowl, the Sandhills could have become a “sandbox” if farmers had been the predominant agricultural group during this period and utilized anti-conservationist practices in their farming methods. There was no dust bowl in the Sandhills as the region’s grassed rangelands prevented it as long as they were not plowed under. Ranchers made certain that much of these grasslands remained untouched during the 1930s. While ranchers and speculators were motivated out of profit and not conservation, the result was still the same. Sandhills agricultural capitalists inadvertently protected their environment to make what money they

could during this period. This differs significantly from Worster's contention that agrarian capitalists in Kansas and Oklahoma destroyed their environment in the capitalistic drive for greed and greater profits. What good were Sandhills profits if the land was wrought bare? Thus, in this manner the Sandhills environment itself influenced man's use of it as much as man influenced and shaped environment.

The Nebraska Sandhills is a land of contradictions. It is the western hemisphere's largest grassed arid sand dune area but beneath its soil lies the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the United States last great water reserves. Its people can be reclusive to near isolation, but yet friendly to strangers. It was a region that was founded by Civil War veterans of both sides, contains counties named for Union generals or United States presidents, but at its core remains somewhat apathetic regarding race issues. The Great Depression era was no different as this period was contradictorily the region's time of greatest progress, in terms of infrastructure, road building, and population growth while at the same time retaining "frontier" traits endemic to the late-nineteenth century. Frederick Jackson Turner argued in his work, *The Frontier in American History*: "In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: 'Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.' This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement."¹⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner was wrong. In the Nebraska Sandhills the frontier elements that he espoused remained in effect in the Sandhills through the use of horses for

¹⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), 1

transportation and agriculture, a lack of mechanized farming, a limited number of automobiles, bad roads, no rural electricity, and high incidents of violent crime such as bank robberies and murder made worse by the drought and economic decline. However, this seemingly extended if not permanent, 19th century Sandhills society came to an end in the 1930s with the election of Franklin Roosevelt as president and the implementation of his New Deal. Through the New Deal, Sandhillers realized new schools, courthouses, roads, irrigation projects, wild game refuges, and cultural interchanges with people outside of the Sandhills. Also during the 1920s and the 1930s the region contained its greatest population of human inhabitants. Thus, the region contradictorily experienced episodes of progressive modernity in the form of technological and engineering achievements alongside criminal incidents and practiced agricultural methodology reminiscent of the late-19th century American West. It was a land in transition suffering bi-polar episodes made more acute by the nation's economic collapse and environmental challenges brought on by dust storms, drought, grasshoppers, fire, and severe storms which also challenged local agriculture. If not for the New Deal, Sandhillers would not have had the immediate funding for new transportation, irrigation systems, and other infrastructure improvements. Road projects had begun during the Hoover administration in the hills; however, not on the scale that was later implemented during the New Deal era. Ironically many Sandhillers tired of New Deal programs, in particular the Agriculture Adjustment Act and its low agricultural prices, and returned to their Republican voting habits in the late-1930s. Nonetheless, they did not refuse Federal aid offered for these modern amenities. While certain parts of the New Deal were routinely criticized by Sandhillers, its successful implementation aided in ushering in modern Sandhills society. In other parts of the Great Plains, Kansans and Oklahomans were able to

engage in mechanized farming and had adequate roads, but when the Depression and Dust Bowl came their agrarian societies suffered greatly. Thus, environment shaped these society's destinies as much, if not more, than they did for themselves.

In compiling this work extensive primary research was done utilizing newspapers, land deeds, District Court cases and appearance dockets, county court cases, chattel mortgage indexes, agricultural census data, unemployment records, correspondence, oral history interviews, church records, and historical collections. Newspapers for all of the twenty-two Sandhills counties (Arthur, Blaine, Brown, Box Butte, Cherry, Custer, Garden, Garfield, Grant, Greeley, Holt, Hooker, Keith, Lincoln, Logan, Loup, Morrill, McPherson, Sheridan, Thomas, and Wheeler) were examined from late-1929 to early-1942 to gain insight into the weekly lives of Sandhillers during this period. The newspapers also provided vital information on the implementation of New Deal projects in the hills and the money allotted for them, unemployment numbers, social gatherings, criminal incidents, political elections, and weather/environmental events. Thus, newspapers were a valuable source as they provided a thorough accounting of the region's society during the Depression era. Land deeds provided insight into the agricultural transactions and patterns of the era as did agricultural census data which provided pastoral and crop acreages, livestock numbers, and total number of farms during specific years in the Depression. District Court appearance dockets provided the total number of civil suits for the period in each county including foreclosures brought by creditors such as the Federal Land Bank of Omaha, felonious crimes including murder, robbery, and rape, and divorce cases that provided information on abusive and abandoning husbands due to the effects of the economic downturn. Oral interviews with living survivors of the Great Depression in the Sandhills also provided first-hand accounts of

what west-central Nebraska was like during those difficult years by individuals who lived it. From these sources it is apparent that the Great Depression was a transitional period in Sandhills society as environmental challenges shaped its struggle between frontier and modernity and that the stresses surrounding this inner struggle led to a frenetic climate of uncertainty that was not that dissimilar from what other Americans experienced. For much of the Sandhills, the Great Depression was the high point of Sandhills society as in the twenty-first century the region's population continues to decline, ghost towns are growing, and there are limited large scale structural improvements being implemented as they were in the days of the New Deal. Such characteristics are emblematic of a burgeoning declension for Sandhills society in the twenty-first century that may already be unstoppable.

The work consists of five chapters which detail the environmental and economic challenges faced by Nebraska Sandhillers and how these difficulties shaped their society. An emphasis will be placed on the progressive and frontier elements that were simultaneously present in the hills in relation to the chapter's discussion. Similarities or discrepancies between Nebraska Sandhills residents' experiences and those of their Great Plains and Midwestern neighbors during this period are also noted in order to place Sandhillers' experiences in a broader historical context within the region and the nation as a whole. Chapter One examines the onset of the Depression-era drought in the Sandhills, that was simultaneously experienced by other Great Plains residents, and the ensuing dust storms, pestilential plagues, fires, and severe storms that forced many Sandhills' agriculturalists to flee the region. The impact of the environmental conditions on the region's wildlife is also examined in order to gain a better understanding of how extensive the environmental problems were. Drought and dust were not just human problems but affected all living

things. Chapter Two focuses on the environmental conditions impact on Sandhills agricultural occupations and those that profited from their dealings with them. The decline of small Sandhills farming is examined, the ensuing migrations to the west and other parts of the country by failed Sandhills' agriculturalists and townspeople, the impact on ranching, profits gained by land speculators, and the success of agricultural diversification during this time. This chapter focuses specifically on how Sandhills pragmatic capitalism utilized by ranchers and land speculators inadvertently conserved the Sandhills and prevented the region from becoming similar to the conditions experienced by their Kansas and Oklahoma brethren.

Chapter three studies Sandhills' society in the early-years of the Depression as it explores what life was like in the region during the Hoover administration. Sandhillers early reactions to the Great Crash of October 1929 are examined as well as early banking failures, relief efforts, and the rise of Democratic support in the Sandhills to counter the malaise and ineffectiveness of the Hoover administration. Chapter four examines the significant impact of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal on Sandhills society during the Depression. Road and building projects are examined under the Civil Works Administration as well as similar projects and ones dealing with irrigation, including the significant Tri-County Project, under the Public Works Administration. The impact of the Civilian Conservation Corps on the region's young men and the communities that dealt with them is discussed as well as Works Progress Administration projects. The chapter also examines the Agricultural Adjustment Act's inability to effectively take hold and be accepted by the area's ranchers thus leading to a return to Republican political support in the hills.

The work concludes in chapter five with an examination of the divisive social

problems that troubled the hills during the Depression such as crime, racial apathy/relationships, and gender and domestic problems. Crimes such as bank robbery, burglary, livestock and grain theft, and murder occurred in the hills as economic problems strained nerves and led to the utilization of crime as the only way to find funds. Racial relations between white agriculturalists and African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans were strained by the perpetuation of stereotypes by local newspapers and the competition for jobs and land. Relationships between men and women failed as the economic and environmental collapse led many men to feel emasculated. They took their frustrations out on women in the form of abuse or abandonment to deal with the problem, which in turn led to numerous divorces. Women regained control of their lives by either finding limited work in towns or leaving themselves to start over. The chapter also examines how religion and social gatherings aided in unifying Sandhills society during this uncertain time by bringing people together. Even though crime and domestic violence were not cured by these functions they were still alleviated and thus Sandhills society was strengthened and reaffirmed.

The study of the Nebraska Sandhills during the Great Depression is significant and adds to the historical scholarship of the Great Plains as it sheds light into the daily lives of a unique sub-region of Great Plains people and the events that shaped them during this difficult era that as of yet has not been fully uncovered. While many of their experiences were no different from their Great Plains neighbors, the Sandhills unique environment and ecology led to a unique transitional period as the region's society struggled with its frontier past and modern progressivism and the infrastructural improvements that brought. Improvements in transportation and the implementation of Federal programs brought new and different people

to the Sandhills. Due to this the Sandhills of the Depression years of 1929 to 1941 was a much more diverse place than it is today. It was as much a time defined by Sandhiller's interactions with other people interacting with the Sandhills environment as it was just a struggle with environmental conditions. The Sandhills was ripe with farmers, ranchers, bootleggers, bank robbers, oil wildcatters, land speculators, New Dealers, road contractors, missionaries, and "gypsies." This is their story.

Chapter One

A Land of Pests and Flame: The Challenges of the Sandhills Environmental Tempest, 1929-1941

During the Great Depression the Great Plains suffered severe environmental hardships which impacted agriculturalists from North Dakota to Texas. Farmers and ranchers struggled almost daily from difficulties brought from drought, dust storms, severe weather, animal plagues, and fires. The plight of farmers in the dust bowl region of the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, western Kansas, and eastern Colorado has been thoroughly examined by scholars. Most have placed responsibility for the region's environmental decimation during the 1930s on over farming fields and agricultural practices that placed little emphasis on conservation. In Nebraska the struggles of the 1930s were similar for the state's agriculturalists as they were elsewhere on the plains except that the hills' grassed rangelands prevented another dust bowl as long as they were not plowed under. Nonetheless, the Sandhills' environmental challenges were no less difficult despite the region's emphasis on ranching instead of plowing the soil. Sandhillers still had to deal with drought that brought agricultural loss, heat, fire, and pests. This chapter will examine the natural environment of the Nebraska Sandhills and its impact on agricultural options, the intensifying drought in the region during the 1930s, the various environmental hardships faced by the region's populace that were associated with the drought, the stewardship efforts of Nebraska conservationists during the period

regarding the region's wildlife, and how these issues in the Nebraska Sandhills were similar or dissimilar to other areas in the Great Plains.

The Landscape, Environment, and Agricultural Challenges of the Nebraska Sandhills

Travelers journeying through Nebraska, whether along the Oregon and Mormon trails in the nineteenth century or on I-80 in the twenty-first, have stereotypically viewed the state as flat and empty, a land of unending corn stalks and few trees. Such assessments are not entirely accurate when describing Nebraska's geography and natural environment. In the heart of the state lie the Sandhills, a region that in the nineteenth century frightened emigrants as an embodiment of the Great American Desert. This area greatly contrasts the stereotypical image of Nebraska as a corn farmer's paradise due to its surface aridity, soil structure, and hilly topography. Covering nearly one quarter of the state of Nebraska, the Sandhills is a geographical anomaly in North America and on the American Great Plains.

Describing the region's grandiose scope, Ann Bleed and Charles Flowerday wrote:

The Sand Hills region, approximately 19,300 square miles of sand dunes stretching 265 miles across Nebraska and into South Dakota, is the largest sand-dune area in the Western Hemisphere and is one of the largest grass-stabilized dune regions in the world...topography, among other things, distinguishes the region from the surrounding prairies. Dunes are as high as 400 feet, as long as 20 miles, and have slopes as steep as 25 percent. Another distinguishing feature is that the large sand masses now held in place by grasses were formed by blowing sand during a surprisingly recent time, mostly during the last 8,000 years or less.¹⁸

The region's topography and pastureland are not its only distinguishing characteristics.

Ironically it is this region's water sources that make it unique. Hydro-geologists C. F. Keech and Ray Bentall wrote of the hills: "...the Sand Hills region of Nebraska is more than 10 times larger than the State of Delaware and almost 3 times the size of Massachusetts.

However, unlike other great sand-dune areas of the world, the Nebraska Sand Hills region is

¹⁸ Ann Bleed and Charles Flowerday, Eds., *An Atlas of the Sand Hills* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Conservation and Survey Division, 1989), 1

not a desert. Not only is its surface stabilized by a grass cover, but beneath it is a thick sequence of permeable rocks filled to overflowing with water. Hundreds of shallow lakes are present in swales and low-flying flats, and many streams having remarkably steady rates of flow rise within the region.”¹⁹ While the Sandhills contains the North Loup, Middle Loup, and Dismal rivers and is bordered by the Niobrara on the north and the Platte on the south and has numerous small ponds and lakes, its greatest aquatic source is the Ogallala aquifer. James H. Williams and Doug Murfield wrote of the aquifer’s importance to the region and state: “The entire central and west-central part of the state is underlain by an enormous reservoir of groundwater centering in the Sandhills, where porous sands inhibit surface runoff and allow great quantities of water to percolate down to the aquifers of sand, sandstone, and gravel. Large or moderate quantities of groundwater are available for wells over more than 80 percent of Nebraska.”²⁰ Thus, these water sources when coupled with adequate rainfall make the land sustainable for agriculturalists.

Despite available underground water sources, the region’s topography and soil structure make it less suited agriculturally for farming than other places on the Great Plains, such as Kansas and Oklahoma, and it is more wholly a rancher’s utopia. Keech and Bentall wrote of the region’s sandy consistency: “Quartz sand, deposited by either wind or running water, is the parent source of virtually all the soils in the Sand Hills region. One, the Valentine soil, is included in the Entisol order which comprises all soils lacking distinct layers...the areal extent of the Valentine, an upland soil developed on wind-deposited sand, is greater than the combined areas of all the other soils. Surface soil of the Valentine is thin

¹⁹ C. F. Keech and Ray Bentall, *Dunes On The Plains: The Sand Hills Region of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Conservation and Survey Division, 4th Edition, 1988), 1

²⁰ James H. Williams and Doug Murfield, *Agricultural Atlas of Nebraska* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 7

and has either a sand or loamy sand texture and a neutral to slightly acid reaction. As does the sand subsoil, it absorbs and transmits water readily. Because the water-holding capacity of the Valentine is low, grass roots extend to depths greater than 40 inches...Other soils developed on wind-deposited sand are the Anselmo, Dunday, Elsmere, Ovina, and Gannett.”²¹ Thus, the sandy surface soils provide difficult conditions for farming success. However, the region’s deep rooted grasses make it more than adequate for ranching. Bleed and Flowerday wrote of the vast number of grasses found in the hills: “...there are about 720 species of vascular plants growing without cultivation in the Sand Hills. About 670 of them are native species, and about 50 are introduced from elsewhere, especially from Europe and Asia.”²² Despite this large variety some species are more apparent in the hills than others. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Professor of Biology Paul Johnsgard wrote of the region’s common species: “Yuccas are often present...especially on steeper slopes. Between these and a few other shrubs, taller grasses such as prairie sandreed, sand bluestem, and needle-and-thread are typical, as is blue grama in an underlayer. Many of the forbs are those of Sandhills dune prairies, such as sand milkweed, prickly poppy, bush morning-glory, ten-petal stickleaf, wild begonia, and blazing star.”²³ These plants reinforce the beauty of the prairie but they also are important in that they are resistant to erosion.

During the dry years of the 1930s, protecting such grasses was essential to the environmental health of the Sandhills region and by extension agricultural profitability for ranchers. The most prominent ecologist of the era, Frederic E. Clements, described the importance of grass to the Sandhills’ environment: “Sandhills shift about constantly when

²¹ Keech and Bentall, *Dunes On The Plains*, 7

²² Bleed and Flowerday, Eds., *An Atlas of the Sand Hills*, 127

²³ Paul A. Johnsgard, *The Nature of Nebraska: Ecology and Biodiversity* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 82

they are exposed; the others drift less and less as their sand content decreases. It is an interesting correlation that sand, which blows most readily, is covered by the tallest grasses, the intermediate soils chiefly by mid-grasses and the fine, compact silts by buffalo grass. However, the protective values of these three types are much more alike than their stature seems to indicate. Under natural conditions any one of them affords an almost perfect control against the strongest winds... When vegetation catches and holds soil particles, it keeps the wind from picking them up to form soil-drift or dust-storms.”²⁴ In the nearby Great Plains states of South Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, and eastern Colorado, protecting grasslands and maintaining soil cohesion was considered less important to agricultural success as farmers plowed thousands of square miles in these states in the late-1920s and early-1930s. Clements wrote in 1938 of the negative and negligent impact such a practice had overall on the Great Plains environment and its agriculture: “Of all the forces that act upon plant cover to destroy its protective power, those released by man are by far the most potent. The only natural one of great significance and wide extent is drought, though floods and animals may exert much local effect. Even drought is chiefly contributory and the train of events which lead to soil drift and dust storms is regularly set in motion by disturbances due to man. All these- cultivation, fire, grazing, road-building, etc. –lay the land surface bare and provide opportunity for erosion.”²⁵ Clements was significant for calling for environmental conservation at a time and place when there was little. Donald Worster, preeminent environmental historian of the Great Plains, wrote of the underlying

²⁴ Frederic E. Clements, “Climatic Cycles and Human Populations in the Great Plains,” *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. XLCII, No. 3, (September 1938), 193-210, 201, Box 63, Folder 15, Coll. 1678, Edith S. and Frederic E. Clements Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

²⁵ Frederic E. Clements, “Climatic Cycles and Human Populations in the Great Plains,” *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. XLCII, No. 3, (September 1938), 193-210, 202, Box 63, Folder 15, Coll. 1678, Edith S. and Frederic E. Clements Paper, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

importance of Clements's message in the 1930s: "Frederic Clements was one of the first to make the case for what he called 'ecological synthesis' in land management. Farmers, ranchers, foresters, engineers, subdividers (sic) - none of them fully understood that their actions in one place could ripple out over the entire surface of the nature of the world...With the Dust Bowl's advent...there was more need than ever for scientific leadership on the plains."²⁶ As we will see, in the Sandhills ranchers tended to promote such "synthesis" better than farmers as they attempted to preserve the range unless they had no other option but to overgraze their cattle out of necessity.

The practice of over-cultivation that Clements was concerned with also damaged the soil in parts of the Great Plains. At the outset of the Depression, over plowing was common in much of western Kansas and eastern Colorado. Great Plains historian R. Douglas Hurt wrote of the soil effects of over plowing in this section of the plains: "...after a farmer plowed under his grassland, the productivity of the soil steadily decreased because of continual loss of organic matter, and that decrease made the soil more susceptible to wind erosion because it could not absorb as much moisture that would hold the soil against the wind."²⁷ Oklahoma farmers were similarly hard on their soil. Historians W. David Baird and Danney Goble wrote of their methods: "In place of grasses, they had sown wheat according to the prevailing doctrines of dryland farming. Taught that their chief imperative was the preservation of the soil's moisture, they had systematically destroyed anything and everything that might compete with wheat for precious water...The result was broad, open fields that stretched further than the eye could see, cleared of the tangled roots that always

²⁶ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 200

²⁷ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011), 85

had held soil in place...”²⁸ Thus, if Sandhills grasses had been similarly excessively removed by farmer over plowing, the environmental challenges of the Depression era would have been far worse. Nonetheless, erosion concerns were an issue during the period as some Sandhillers attempted to farm in the hills and follow the Jeffersonian dream of the yeoman farmer. These individuals, in turn, failed in the conservation practices Clements advocated.

Ranching was more successful in the Sandhills due to the abundance of grass on the region’s dunes but also it was a more environmentally sound agricultural practice rather morally or functionally as it did not rip up the sod for financial exploitation. These hardy and plentiful grasses served as sufficient feed for cattle wherein the region’s soil structure was less sufficient for farming. Ranchers could overgraze grasslands during periods when moisture was light; however, ranchers, in general, tended to practice more environmentally sound agricultural methods thus displaying a modicum of moral responsibility in caring for the Sandhills’ environment in comparison to farmers. Bleed and Flowerday wrote of ranching’s agricultural application: “A rolling sea of grass that might seem desolate and isolated to some often evokes a serenity not experienced elsewhere for natives and those who have come to love the place...Regardless of hardships or inconveniences, ranching is the lifeblood of the region’s economy, the essence of its mystique, and probably the best use of its land. At least, most of its residents believe so.”²⁹ This was not always the case prior to and during the Great Depression. While ranching was always the region’s most preeminent and logical agricultural use of the land, small farming operations were conducted in the hills during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. By the dawn of the Depression,

²⁸ W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 221

²⁹ Bleed and Flowerday, Eds., *An Atlas of the Sand Hills*, 12

farming was still practiced but not on the scale that ranching was. The environmental hardships that farmers encountered during the Depression aided in the final downfall of the agricultural practice in the hills. Drought and unremitting heat baked the region and when coupled with its sandy soils led to times no less difficult for Sandhills agriculturalists during the Great Depression. The Sandhills environment long characterized as exemplifying the stereotype of the nineteenth century explorers' "Great American Desert" nearly became just that during the 1930s.

Farewell Rain, Hello Heat: The Arrival and Persistence of the Sandhills Drought

During the Great Depression, the Nebraska Sandhills region suffered consistently from a harsh drought which parched crops and dried up pastures. This experience was shared throughout the Great Plains. Worster argued in *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* that southeastern Colorado, much of western Kansas, the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, and northeastern New Mexico came to be infamously known in the mid-1930s as the "Dust Bowl" due in large part to the consequences of the over-use of mechanized farming.³⁰ Worster's arguments of capitalistic driven environmental disaster have inspired much debate. H. H. Bennett wrote of where to place blame for the Dust Bowl tragedy in the July 26th, 1936, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*: "It is useless to indict individuals for what has happened. If any indictment be made, it should be an indictment of the false philosophy pursued by a nation unconsciously bent on destroying its natural resources."³¹ No matter if one agrees or not with this thesis and the one posed by Donald Worster the environmental

³⁰ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 6-7

³¹ H. H. Bennett, "The Vague, Roaming 'Dust Bowl,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, Section 7, July 26, 1936, 2, Collection No. D949-b, Dust Bowl Subject File Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

hardships faced by residents of the plains caused by seemingly unremitting drought were quite real. Kansas historian Craig Miner wrote of the experiences of Kansas farmer Ray Garvey in 1936: “Garvey reported in August 1936 that there had been .28 inches of rain in relatively moist Wichita since June 1, and August 23 was the seventeenth successive day there where temperatures exceeded 100 degrees.”³² Sandhillers were not immune to such difficulties as precipitation became scarce in the 1930s.

In late-1932 and early-1933, the United States was politically transitioning from the economic malaise and social apathy characteristic of President Herbert Hoover’s administration to the vibrant, hopeful optimism represented in President-Elect Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal platform which held the potential for economic and social revitalization yearned for by many Americans. Unfortunately, for residents of the Great Plains during the 1930s, this change in American politics did not equal an immediate change in environmental and climatic conditions for the region. The drought was intensifying, not declining. It had not even yet reached its apex as Roosevelt was inaugurated in March 1933. This was more than apparent for Nebraska Sandhills residents in Cherry County. The county’s total precipitation in 1932 was 16.02 inches when the normal average was 17.49 inches.³³ At the conclusion of 1936, Cherry County totaled 12.50 inches of moisture, while the year before had accumulated 16.79 inches.³⁴ By the end of the decade, the county still suffered from dry spells. In its April 7, 1939, issue, *The Valentine Republican* noted under a column heading “March Was Pretty Dry” that: “The total precipitation during the month was

³² Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854- 2000* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2002), 277-278

³³ *The Valentine Republican*, December 23, 1930, 1

³⁴ *The Valentine Republican*, January 1, 1937, 1

.47 inch, less than one half of the normal of 1.02”³⁵ Other Sandhills counties suffered from similar conditions.

In Garfield County, the spring and summer months of the 1930s proved exacerbating to the county’s rural residents as moisture was lacking and records for heat were broken. *The Burwell Tribune* reported in early-September 1931: “All hot weather records for the month of September have been broken this week. A temperature each day of near the one hundred mark has been maintained for the past week. A promise of rain Tuesday morning but it failed to materialize. The weather man is promising us cooler weather for to-day, Thursday, but at this writing it has failed to put in an appearance.”³⁶ Nearly a year later, conditions remained poor in the county. *The Tribune* took note of the county’s declining agricultural prospects in July 1932:

A week of high temperature and short moisture has been the prevailing weather conditions in this vicinity up to Wednesday afternoon. At times the temperature has risen to the one hundred-mark and seldom dropped below ninety. Lot of complaint is heard as regards the lack of moisture and many report that already considerable loss has been sustained to the corn crop. Alfalfa fields while yielding a first good crop show little prospect of another crop. An inch or so of moisture could be used to good advantage in this vicinity at this time.³⁷

A week later it was further reported that the county’s corn crop was significantly damaged by the unremitting drought.³⁸

The climate was no better two years later. Garfield County suffered environmental hardships during 1934 that were common in other parts of the state as well. University of Nebraska-Omaha Associate Professor of English Lisa Knopp wrote of the conditions to the east: “For thirty-nine days that year, the air temperature in eastern Nebraska was above one

³⁵ *The Valentine Republican*, April 7, 1939, 1

³⁶ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 10, 1931, 4

³⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, July 21, 1932, 1

³⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, July 28, 1932, 4

hundred degrees.”³⁹ *The Burwell Tribune* commented on the dry spring of 1934 in the eastern hills: “...records for drouth for the month of April were broken this year not only in Garfield county but throughout the entire state of Nebraska. Less than a quarter of an inch fell in Garfield county during the month of April is the report that has been handed to us. Ordinarily April brings us many showers but not this season.”⁴⁰ By mid-summer of 1934, moisture in Garfield County was still varied and intermittent. *The Tribune* further reported: “Not a trace of moisture has been recorded for the week. Showers during the middle of the month brightened the prospects of pasture and cornfields for a few days but the outlook is again assuming alarming conditions.”⁴¹ The conditions were no better anywhere else in the Sandhills region. The hills were scorched and crops and pastures were decimated by unrelenting heat.

In McPherson County, the lack of moisture was crippling to the county’s rye crop. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of the worsening condition in Arthur and McPherson Counties, as well as the state in general:

The drouth (sic) situation in central Nebraska is becoming more serious as day after day the hot sun beats down on already parched fields. A few scattered sections have received local showers, but general rain is needed to break the drouth (sic)...an inch of rain was reported at Arthur, however, the scope of country receiving the rain was small. Light showers were reported in eastern and north-eastern Nebraska. In the sand hill region the pasture is drying up though there is still enough grass to provide range for the stock. Rain is badly needed, however. Showers fell in the western part of the county early this week but the area was small. The rye crop here is already hurt and many have stopped listing due to the dryness of the soil.⁴²

The summer of 1934 was also harsh for Sandhills farmers in Loup County as many began cutting down their stunted corn crops for silage months before the fall harvest time. For

³⁹ Lisa Knopp, *What The River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2012), 181

⁴⁰ *The Burwell Tribune*, May 3, 1934, 1

⁴¹ *The Burwell Tribune*, June 28, 1934, 1

⁴² *The Tryon Graphic*, May 31, 1934, 1

many corn farmers, their crops were barely salvageable. Extreme temperatures were once again to blame for the situation. The *Taylor Clarion* noted the heat's role in the county's emerging corn shortage: "With temperatures ranging from 90 to 114 the past ten days have been pretty much a nightmare to farmers and stockmen. The few light showers brot (sic) but slight relief, and the end is not yet. A few farmers are mowing their corn, but it is too short to get much."⁴³ The southern hills were also scorched from the heat. *The Tryon Graphic* noted the record-breaking heat in North Platte in mid-July 1934: "Hot blasts of wind from the south were blamed by weather observers for the excessive heat, and the sun blazed forth relentlessly from a sky dotted with thin scattered clouds...The reading of 108 at North Platte was a new record for that weather station. The previous record of 107 had been reached at several previous times."⁴⁴

In the northeastern Sandhills the weather report was much the same. Rains did fall but only in minimal amounts. The *Rock County Leader* in Bassett noted the county's conditions in early-July 1934: "The rainfall in this immediate vicinity was very light and insufficient to do any real good for growing crops. The first rain fell Monday evening registering a bare fractional part of an inch. The second rain came Tuesday evening and was just a little more than a trace...The sky was cloudy most of the day the Fourth but no rain in this section. Pastures and hay meadows are showing desperate need of moisture."⁴⁵ In neighboring Brown County, heat records were broken in the month of July and the situation did not improve by flipping the calendar to August. The *Brown County Democrat* wrote of the county's smoldering furnace-like conditions:

⁴³ *Taylor Clarion*, July 19, 1934, 1

⁴⁴ *The Tryon Graphic*, July 19, 1934, 1

⁴⁵ *Rock County Leader*, July 5, 1934, 1

August is apparently attempting to match July in the matter of extreme heat. July left a record of twenty-two days, when the mercury registered 100 or better, with the peak at 112 for three days. From July 25 to July 29 there was a respite, the temperature ranging from 88 to 90. The last two days of the month, July 30, was an even 100 and the 31st, 102... Thus in July and the first seven days of August, there were 28 days when mercury registered 100 or better.⁴⁶

Thus, for Sandhillers in the early-1930s drought became a part of everyday life. In the summer months oppressive, hot temperatures, not just warm ones, became common place. Such conditions took their toll on Sandhills farmers and ranchers as many could not sustain their agricultural ventures without sufficient rainfall, leading to foreclosure and migration.

Despite these problems the Sandhills had periods of adequate moisture and the drought did periodically lessen in intensity in the Sandhills. *The Valentine Republican* noted in its August 25, 1933, issue under a heading “Wonderful Rains Soak the Ground, Renew Pastures” that: “On Monday and again on Wednesday the weather man showed that he could produce rain when he felt like it, and as a result the earth and its inhabitants in these parts are smiling again. The total for the period was about an inch and a half, and it came in easy showers so that the ground was well-soaked.”⁴⁷ Rains such as these were welcome but did not break the region’s overall drought. Nonetheless, the editors of various county newspapers made it seem like every rain shower foretold a return to abundant harvests and green pastures. In many ways, the optimism of these individuals paralleled the attitudes of their nineteenth century counterparts. Henry Nash Smith wrote of the visions nineteenth century Americans held of the agricultural paradise that existed in the West in his work, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. According to Smith: “With each surge of westward movement a new community came into being. These communities devoted themselves not to marching onward but to cultivating the earth. They plowed the

⁴⁶ *Brown County Democrat*, August 10, 1934, 1

⁴⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, August 25, 1933, 1

virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden; for the imagination, the Garden of the World.”⁴⁸ While Sandhills communities were also concerned with pastoral practices and not only farming, the goal of agricultural success was much the same.

During the Great Depression, the perils brought by drought were a significant threat to community stability and Sandhills agriculture as small farmers began to migrate from the region. Thus, for Sandhills newspapers each rain shower offered an opportunity to reassure subscribers and agriculturalists that the environmental challenges they were currently facing were not as bad as they feared. Many newspapers made each passing downpour seem like the final drought buster that would preserve the virility of Sandhills society and agriculture. This was the attitude of the *Sheridan County Star*. The *Star* reported on a passing shower in May 1934 under the large heading, “Half Inch Rain Boon To Crops: Will Greatly Benefit The Grass Land,” that:

The fellow who says the people of this territory do not live right is crazier than a hoot owl-what say? WiWth (sic) a half-inch or more of rainfall here Wednesday night, at a time when it was much needed, it would seem the Lord still has his arms around us and that everything will work out just as it should be. During the past week there has been a great deal of rain talk. Not that crops were particularly suffering, but the range country was getting dry and grass was beginning to show the effects...However, the moisture condition was reaching a point where a rain was needed, and, sure enough, we got it. It's a great country boys and girls. All we need to do is just stay in there and pitch.⁴⁹

Later, in the month The *Star* reported additional rain. In its May 31, 1934, issue the paper's large title read, “More Than Inch of Rain Falls Wed.: Some Damage Done By Wind And By Hail”: “More than an inch of rain fell here Wednesday evening. That in itself should be news sufficient and story a-plenty. However, there was some slight damage which should be

⁴⁸ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 123

⁴⁹ *Sheridan County Star*, May 3, 1934, 1

mentioned. This damage consists largely of broken trees and ruined gardens.”⁵⁰ As previously discussed, the summer of 1934 was particularly severe for Sandhills farmers and ranchers. Thus, it was understandable that rain storms deserved large headings; however, not all rain events significantly dampened the blistered Sandhills landscape. Nevertheless, Sandhills newspapers continued with optimistic accounts especially during less severe years. One such paper was *The Taylor Clarion*. In July 1935, *The Clarion* reported on Loup County’s improved agricultural conditions in comparison to the previous year:

Loup County at this time certainly presents an extreme contrast as to appearance, productiveness and living conditions of one year ago. Today the sandhills and the North Loup and Calamus Vallies (sic) are lush with grass, grains, and hay; billowing seas of ripening rye and other small grains, and large fields of emerald corn cover the bosom of Mother Earth, where last year and two years previous to that, but scant vegetation even attempted to raise its head. One year ago pigs were being given away or slaughtered and cattle were being bought by the government and slaughtered to feed the hungry unemployed or relief workers; now farmers are looking about for animals to eat the grass, hay and grain in such luxuriant promise. The morale of our citizenry is at a very high point. From the slough of despair (sic) of last year, it is now raised to one of courage and hopes realized or on the highway to fulfillment; from dejected dependence it is raised to joyful independence. Bountiful rains have worked the transformation. Could the people of Loup County but be assured of abundant moisture, natural rainfall or irrigation, their future would be rose colored, their hopes and ambitions boundless.⁵¹

Unfortunately, for most Sandhillers the rest of the 1930s and even the early-1940s proved to be less than rosy.

In 1936, the reemergence of drought in the northern Sandhills was of primary concern for Rock County Residents. As with the summers past, June and July were particularly stifling months. The *Rock County Leader* noted the inundating heat and its effect on the rural parts of the county, stating:

Crops have been severely damaged by the lack of moisture and blistering heat waves that have prevailed all over the state during the past two weeks. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday marked the hottest days of the year with hot winds taking a toll of growing crops that is hard to estimate. No rain of any consequence has fallen in the state during the past two weeks and temperature readings of from 100 to 107 degrees have been nothing unusual for a number of days. A very light shower fell here Sunday night but was so light that there was no visible trace by morning...Locally corn is standing the

⁵⁰ *Sheridan County Star*, May 31, 1934, 1

⁵¹ *The Taylor Clarion*, July 18, 1935, 1

dry spell very well as yet, small grain has been severely damaged and upland pastures are also burning. Lowland hay meadows are still green but the upland meadows are also browning up.⁵²

In August the heat remained unrelenting. The *Leader* observed that: “Although cloudy to partly cloudy weather has prevailed for several days in this section of the country during the past week the daily temperatures have ranged up around the hundred mark again.”⁵³ Times were as equally challenging in the southwestern Sandhills. The *Garden County News* reported in late-June: “Many fields of spring grain will not be worth cutting in this as well as other sections of Nebraska, according to the reports coming to this office during the past week. The heat has continued with little relief and on two days last week hot winds were reported.”⁵⁴ Conditions continued to worsen in Garden County. Two weeks later the Oshkosh paper reported that: “Last year here was reported a total fall of moisture of 12.04 inches up to the first day of July. Up to the first day of the month this season the amount is about half, 6.18 inches.”⁵⁵ Times remained difficult throughout much of the Sandhills for the remainder of the year.

By the spring of 1937, the arrival of April showers near Bassett would hopefully yield summer pastures and fall corn crops. Like the *Sheridan County Star* and *The Taylor Clarion*, the *Rock County Leader* brought its readers news of a hopeful shift to monsoon weather patterns in May of 1937. The *Leader* noted abundant rainfall in April in Rock County: “The generous rains of the past week, followed by several days of bright sunshine weather, has improved the local optimism (sic) and the general feeling is that there is a possibility of our dry weather spell being broken. While rains were general throughout the state, from all

⁵² *Rock County Leader*, July 2, 1936, 1

⁵³ *Rock County Leader*, August 13, 1936, 1

⁵⁴ *Garden County News*, June 25, 1936, 1

⁵⁵ *Garden County News*, July 9, 1936, 1

reports this section received a more generous amount of moisture. According to local records, the rainfall for the past week totaled 2.85 inches.”⁵⁶ By summer, these April showers were all but forgotten. In late-June 1937 the *Leader* reported:

The blistering heat was swept across the western section of the state by heavy winds and season high temperatures were established. At North Loup a high temperature of 110 was recorded for Tuesday. Local thermometers showed a high of 100 on Tuesday and 104 on Wednesday. The hot winds whipped many of the light soil fields where crops were not high enough to offer much protection. This particular section of the state has had no rain since June 14 when a .05 of an inch was recorded with a fall of .20 of an inch the week previous. These light showers offered but little in the way of sufficient moisture for growing crops...According to weather forecasts little encouragement is seen for most of the state in the line of showers, altho (sic) slightly cooler weather is predicted for the northwest section.⁵⁷

In late-July, the weather had not improved much near Bassett as only a slight drizzle was recorded on July 23rd when other parts of Nebraska received half an inch to nearly four inches of precipitation depending on one’s location.⁵⁸ A week later the situation changed as Rock County received some much needed moisture and rainfall was again making headlines. According to the *Rock County Leader*: “Rain began falling here late last Thursday afternoon, accompanied by quite a little hail storm and much lightning and thunder...The rainfall amounted to 1.10 inches according to the local rain gauge...Late Sunday afternoon another rain fell over this section amounting to 1.05 inches. This rain was fairly general and in some sections the rainfall amounted to several inches. A section south of Newport reports 4 inches;...”⁵⁹ However, by mid-August reports of moisture were once again few and far between as Sandhills residents and their surrounding landscape suffered from blistering heat. The *Leader* commented in its August 12, 1937, edition on the record setting heat: “Coming into the second week of August the weather continue hot and dry with Monday of this week

⁵⁶ *Rock County Leader*, May 6, 1937, 1

⁵⁷ *Rock County Leader*, June 24, 1937, 1

⁵⁸ *Rock County Leader*, July 29, 1937, 1

⁵⁹ *Rock County Leader*, August 5, 1937, 1

probably being the record breaker of the season for heat. Local thermometers registered from 108 to 110 above during the day. Tuesday was a little cooler, with a north wind, with Wednesday afternoon again registering close to the century mark during the afternoon. A good general rain is needed this week to help crop conditions especially corn, which up to this week has been showing every sign of making one of the best crops in this section for several years.”⁶⁰ The following weekend temperatures were still fluctuating between 110 and 106 degrees for daytime highs.⁶¹ Finally by the first of September 1937 Rock County agriculturalists received some much needed relief. On September 2, Rock County received .17 inches of moisture and an additional .45 inches on September 7.⁶² These soaking rains were beneficial to the Bassett area’s newly planted crops and for pasture recovery. The *Leader* noted the reactions of locals stating: “Farmers report that the condition of the soil is the best it has been in several years for the fall planting of grain. Hay meadows that were cut early show such a growth of grass that some are taking a second cutting.”⁶³ Despite the good rains, conditions could have been better. In 1937, the situation remained equally troublesome as many pastures yielded short grass. The *Grant County Tribune* reported of a discussion about the nation’s pastures held at a range program meeting conducted in Alliance in September: “It was said at the meeting that the range land in the United States has been depleted 50 per cent, that for 30 years 75 per cent of it has been deteriorating because of overgrazing, and only 16 per cent has been improved in that time. The sandhill range has not suffered to the extent of that of the nation as a whole, it was said, but it has been badly

⁶⁰ *Rock County Leader*, August 12, 1937, 1

⁶¹ *Rock County Leader*, August 19, 1937, 1

⁶² *Rock County Leader*, September 9, 1937, 1

⁶³ *Rock County Leader*, September 9, 1937, 1

depleted because of drouth and over grazing.”⁶⁴ Thus, in 1937 high yielding crops and green pastures were uncommon in much of the northern and central Great Plains. By the spring of 1938, weather conditions turned favorable in the northern Sandhills as Rock County received 3.10 inches of rain in a two day span in late-April.⁶⁵ Despite these indicators, drought conditions persisted throughout much of the Sandhills as the 1930s came to a close and the decade of the 1940s dawned.

In McPherson County, reports of drought ending rains continued to be common place, but when such meteorological elements events did not occur the drought remained a constant presence in Sandhillers lives. By 1938, drought conditions seemed to be improving. *The Tryon Graphic* reported on rains in early June: “Over an inch and a half of rain fell here the first of the week to further add to the already fine moisture supply stored in the soil. An inch of rain fell Sunday night and about sixty one-hundredths Monday afternoon and evening. The soil is by far in the best condition for several years. Crops are now growing rapidly since the weather turned warmer and the small grain crop continues to look promising.”⁶⁶ One such crop was rye. Two weeks later, *The Graphic* updated readers on the county’s burgeoning rye crop, noting: “As the days pass there is further indications that many fields of rye here will produce bumper crops this year. Many farmers report their rye the best they can ever remember and the sand hill country has produced some very fine crops in the past. The grain is tall, the straw heavy and the heads long and those fields having a good stand should produce some excellent yields. Rye shoulder high is not uncommon.”⁶⁷ By 1939, as Sandhills climate fluctuated, such positive outlooks were once again few. The September 21,

⁶⁴ *Grant County Tribune*, September 15, 1937

⁶⁵ *Rock County Leader*, April 28, 1938, 1

⁶⁶ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 2, 1938, 1

⁶⁷ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 16, 1938, 1

1939, issue of *The Tryon Graphic* under a heading entitled, “Sandhills Said Dryest (sic) In State’s History,” reported on the reemergence of the old drought nemesis:

Hot and dry weather continues throughout the sand hills and all of western Nebraska. Many long time residents claim they have never seen the country so dry. Many lagoons, never before known to be dry, have completely dried up. Crop conditions and hay and grass land show this extremely dry weather. Some corn fields are as brown as in December and those who planted early rye have reported the loss of the crop. Some are seeding now, while others expect to wait for moisture. Despite this extreme drouth some parts of the county will produce a part of a corn crop, reports indicate.⁶⁸

At times the drought in the Sandhills was inconsistent as the environment provided all too brief glimmers of hope. Thus, for many long term Sandhillers the drought reached its zenith in 1939, not with the severe heat wave of 1934 or 1936.

Conditions were equally difficult in 1939 in neighboring Logan County. Weather observer Earl Glandon wrote in *The Stapleton Enterprise* of the environmental challenges Logan County agriculturalists faced in 1939: “While the summer of 1939 has not been as extremely warm as several summers during the drouth period, it has been the driest on record here. During the 18 years covered by local records, in only two was the total rainfall for July and August combined below two inches. In 1936 the two months brought 1.89 inches while in 1939 the total was 1.67 inches.”⁶⁹ By November, the plight of farmers and ranchers was extremely bleak in the entirety of Nebraska, not just the Sandhills. According to *The Graphic*: “Acting to facilitate relief of distressed farm families, the farm security administration Wednesday designated all counties in North and South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas as potential emergency areas. This action FSA officials said would make it possible to extend emergency subsistence grants to farm families throughout these states.”⁷⁰ Thus, in

⁶⁸ *The Tryon Graphic*, September 21, 1939, 1

⁶⁹ *The Stapleton Enterprise* in *The Tryon Graphic*, September 21, 1939, 1

⁷⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 9, 1939, 1

1939 high yielding crops and green pastures were uncommon in much of the northern and central Great Plains.

In the spring and summer of 1940, moisture was again newsworthy. “Over three and one half inches of rain fell here last week to break the most severe spring drouth remembered by long time settlers in this part of the sandhills. The rains began Monday night and shower after shower came to add to moisture total. The rains were climaxed Thursday night by a steady rain which brought an inch of moisture. Some parts of the county received more than four inches of rain last week...”⁷¹ Contrastingly, in April, weather conditions remained less than ideal for agriculturalists in the southwestern hills. The *Garden County News* described the county’s arid conditions: “Dry weather has continued to prevail during the month of March, only .82 of an inch of moisture having visited this community, according to the official weatherman, Robert Quelle.”⁷² By July, drought headlines were again replacing those discussing downpours, even if some crops were surviving. *The Graphic* noted in its July 11, 1940, issue:

Light rains have fallen over this section of the country during the past week, but moisture has not been sufficient to break the drouth. A light rain fell here Saturday evening with the east and south part of the county reporting about an eighth of an inch of moisture. On Monday evening another shower was received with the fall in some localities measuring up to a quarter of an inch. Here only about a tenth of an inch fell. Pastures are badly in need of moisture and the dry land hay crop is deteriorating rapidly due to the drouth. The corn crop is still in good condition and most fields are making rapid growth.⁷³

Ranchers in Garden County also suffered the ill effects of extreme heat in mid-July. The *Garden County News* noted: “Reports from the sandhill ranchers are not encouraging and prospects of a hay shortage make it possible that numbers of herds may have to be reduced for the winter carry over. Last Saturday was the hottest day of the summer here. On that day

⁷¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 13, 1940, 1

⁷² *Garden County News*, April 4, 1940, 1

⁷³ *The Tryon Graphic*, July 11, 1940, 1

the mercury ran up to 101. Sandhill pastures are reported very short and ranchers say they will not cut over one half of the normal crop of hay.”⁷⁴ A week later drought conditions were somewhat alleviated in Garden County by a passing thunderstorm; however, this storm also brought devastating hail damage to the building windows at Dan Kingery’s ranch.⁷⁵ Thus, rain storms sometimes brought further hardship to Sandhillers suffering in the grip of the drought disaster.

The drought that relentlessly baked much of the Great Plains during the 1930s persisted in the Nebraska Sandhills into the 1940s. Due to the longevity of this climatic event, Sandhills agriculture changed in the period in that small farmers gradually passed from the agrarian Sandhills scene. Sandhills newspapermen reported rainfall events as exuberant boosters of the Sandhills region in order to save garden-like images associated with Henry Nash Smith’s nineteenth century Americans and to deter negative rhetoric associated with the Dust Bowl on the Southern Plains. In many ways this was an understandable and legitimate goal as the Sandhills region weathered the drought better than the Southern Plains or the Dakotas. Nonetheless, the precipitation respites that these individuals fondly wrote of did not succeed in breaking the overall grip of the drought during the period even though they were significant for providing Sandhills agriculturalists often too brief glimmers of hope. The unremitting heat wrought hardships on cattle ranchers. Many dropped dead due to thirst. In early-August 1941, the McCarty Brothers Ranch lost sixty head of cattle due to an absence of adequate water sources.⁷⁶ The *Garden County News* reported of how desperate some of the cattle had become in their search for water: “Twelve head of the dead cows were in the

⁷⁴ *Garden County News*, July 11, 1940, 1

⁷⁵ *Garden County News*, July 18, 1940, 1

⁷⁶ *Garden County News*, August 14, 1941, 1

watering tank, and the remaining number were scattered about the pasture.”⁷⁷ Due to such agricultural losses, many Sandhillers got fed up with waiting for better days to come and simply left due to the drought. Historian Richard Lowitt wrote of the results of the exodus from Nebraska during the 1930s: “The 1940 decennial census recorded a population loss of 62, 129 for the state, with the heaviest loss concentrated in the central and southwestern counties, the area hardest hit by drought.”⁷⁸ One such Sandhills county that experienced population loss throughout the 1930s was McPherson. *The Tryon Graphic* reported on the county’s population decline following the release of the 1940 census that: “According to a preliminary survey of the 1940 census for McPherson County, the county’s population has dropped from 1358 in 1930 to 1175 in 1940. The farm census showed a decrease in the number of farm units with there now being 264 farms and ranches in the county as against 275 in 1930. The census gives the population of Tryon at 165.”⁷⁹ Despite these losses, many Sandhills individuals persevered through the drought and prospered agriculturally. Beyond extreme heat and intermittent showers, Sandhills agriculturalists had to endure other environmental factors related to the drought and climatic fluctuations. One such obstacle was a common scourge on the Great Plains: severe summer thunder storms.

DROUGHT AND THE APOCALYPSE: WIND, HAIL, DUST, PLAGUES, AND FIRE

During the 1930s, rainstorms in the Sandhills did not always yield positive agricultural results for farmers or ranchers. Many storms brought devastation in the forms of flooding, hail, and tornados. Sandhills farmers and ranchers whose agricultural commodities may have survived drought during many of the summer seasons in the 1930s could lose

⁷⁷ *Garden County News*, August 14, 1941, 1

⁷⁸ Richard Lowitt, *George W. Norris: The Triumph of a Progressive, 1933-1944* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 406

⁷⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, May 9, 1940, 1

everything if devastated by one of these calamities. Wind was an invisible enemy that Sandhills farmers contended with as it could destroy their crops whether accompanied by rain and hail or not. In June of 1932, McPherson County farmers faced the loss of their corn and rye crops due to such conditions. *The Tryon Graphic* reported on the county's potential agricultural losses that:

The strong winds of the past two weeks have done considerable damage to corn in this part of the country and in some localities have made it necessary for farmers to replant. It seems that a sufficient amount of moisture has fallen during the past month, but many farmers complain that the soil hasn't been well moistened and that the winds seem to sap the soil of what moisture falls. There will be a poor rye crop over the county due to the heavy winds this spring.⁸⁰

Beyond straight line winds, which could dry crops and move soil, Sandhills residents faced greater dangers when tornados dropped from the Nebraska sky to the Sandhills' soil. Such events could destroy buildings and claim lives as well as obliterate cattle and crops. In May 1933, McPherson County was again hit by high winds as nine people from the county were killed in a tornado.⁸¹ This tornadic storm also did damage in nearby Thomas and Hooker Counties. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* reported on the local weather damage: "At Seneca the Welch opera house was practically demolished, the falling cement blocks and timbers doing a great deal of damage to the Proud (sic) Lumber Co. hardware building. Other buildings and homes damaged at Seneca were Farmers Union warehouse, badly damaged 'Mitie' McCawley' house...blew over four box cars...We understand Mullen was also damaged to a certain extent."⁸² This same tornado also caused havoc in Sheridan County in the northwestern Sandhills; however, it did not solely impact the hills' human population. It also affected some of its native wildlife. The *Anselmo Enterprise* described Sheridan County's stormy, acrobatic flying fish noting:

⁸⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 9, 1932, 1

⁸¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, May 24, 1933, 1

⁸² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, May 24, 1933, 1

The twister which cost the lives of several and doing a great deal of damage over western Nebraska 3 weeks past, proved more peculiar by a recent discovery of S. B. Soward, rancher 25 miles northeast of Ellsworth, when it was discovered that the twister scooped the water from one lake to form another smaller lake in a nearby low place and stocked the new lake with hundreds of fish. The bullheads are about 10 or 14 inches long. Water in the newly formed lake is about 18 inches deep. Before the storm it had never been known that the lake on the Soward ranch contained any fish. Dead fish and debris marked the route the wind took in moving the water into its new location.⁸³

While such an account seems to be a realistically “fishy” tale, stranger phenomena have been known to happen on the Great Plains when tornadoes occur (i. e. hay straws through tombstones, one house in a neighborhood destroyed while the one beside it is left unscathed, etc.). From this example it is clear that Sandhills natural resources (i.e. water ponds) could also be damaged by tornadoes, thus impacting how or if ranchers could water their cattle herds. Tornadoes remained common in the hills for the rest of the decade. In August 1935 a twister touched down at the Garfield County fairgrounds and did extensive damage to the grandstand and the arena roof.⁸⁴ In late-April 1938, Garden County was also devastated by a tornado. The *Garden County News* described the tragedy: “Three school children were killed and several other persons injured in a tornado, which covered a narrow strip approximately 20 miles long in Garden county Tuesday afternoon about 3 o’clock...The children were in the school house in Lone Star district when the twister struck and completely demolished it. Betty Lou Zorn and Ellen Brown were killed when the building crashed and their little bodies were picked up a quarter of a mile from the school house site. Jean Ruth Zorn, who was fatally injured, died at the Oshkosh hospital at 1:30 Wednesday morning.”⁸⁵ No corner of the Sandhills was immune from potential tornadic devastation.

Another danger for Sandhills agriculturalists carried by the storm clouds of the Nebraska skies was hail. Severe thunderstorms spawned wind and tornadoes and unleashed

⁸³ *Anselmo Enterprise in Blaine County Booster*, June 15, 1933, 1

⁸⁴ *The Burwell Tribune*, August 22, 1935, 1

⁸⁵ *Garden County News*, April 28, 1938, 1

devastating hail stones on crops and pastures. In June 1932, a hail storm wreaked havoc in the northeastern Sandhills in Holt County as a large portion of the county's potato and rye crop was destroyed.⁸⁶ In 1933, a month after McPherson County lost lives to a tornado and S. B. Soward's fish took flight, the Sandhills again fell victim to severe weather. This time hail was included. *The Tryon Graphic* noted the storm's wide swath:

A hard straight wind and heavy hail storm swept the west and southwest part of the county Wednesday evening, damaging a number of barns and outbuildings and destroying crops. At the Thompson farm near Thune the only building left after the wind was the house. His neighbors all lost small buildings. The same evening hail storms over a wide area of Nebraska did much damage to buildings and crops. Here but little hail fell and only a light shower of rain... The hail of that afternoon did much damage in Lincoln and Logan counties and in east North Platte riddled roofs and broke out window lights in numerous dwellings. Trees were stripped of leaves, gardens, flowers and shrubs killed. Quite a loss of poultry was reported on the valley farms. In Logan county the hail damaged rye and wheat crops, gardens and hay lands. A good rain fell after the hail.⁸⁷

The loss of animals such as chickens could have a devastating effect on a small Sandhills farmer or rancher in that these animals served a double purpose for many of them. They could either sell the birds or their eggs for profit or they could eat them themselves. Thus, in lean drought years chickens and other domesticated birds, such as turkeys, could quite literally be the difference between sustainability and poverty and for some, more significantly, life or death as livestock and farm birds were utilized by some as a food source of last resort. Due to this possibility, Sandhills agriculturalists had an additional reason for despising hail.

In August 1933, hail storms continued to ravage the hills near Mullen. The *Hooker County Tribune* reported on the devastation to local crops: "Crops in the northwest country have suffered practically all season for the want of rain and we learn that during the past few weeks continued hail storms have just about wiped out all crop prospects in the Eck Cox,

⁸⁶ *Holt County Independent*, June 17, 1932, 1

⁸⁷ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 15, 1933, 1

Mayhew and Prentice neighborhoods, the last damaging hail storm having fallen in that vicinity last Friday afternoon. Mr. Mayhew called at this office the following day and related that folks in his area sure put one over on the weather man- in that it hailed like h-ll and there wasn't a thing left for it to pound out. The storm carried to the south and did much damage to crops at the Catron place and washed out abutments to the bridge just south of their place.”⁸⁸ Tornadoes and hailstorms remained common events for Sandhills residents throughout much of the Great Depression.

In May 1936, significant damage occurred in O'Neill from a wind and hail storm. The *Holt County Independent* reported on the event: “North of town the barn belonging to Don Murphy was blown down and there are several places where a small amount of damage was done. The storm seemed to come from the west to a little south, and was of tornado symptoms. A window was taken out of the court room in the court house and one from the old Nebraska State Bank building and some trees were blown down in O'Neill with a lot of branches being broken off.”⁸⁹ In June, at the opposite corner of the Sandhills, car roofs and windows were damaged by large hail in Oshkosh and in September a storm near Bassett deposited hailstones the size of chicken eggs, tore down trees, and flattened farm buildings.⁹⁰ Beyond buildings, large wind storms could also destroy ranchers' windmills and fence lines. Such devastation happened near the McPherson County community of Ringgold in April 1938. *The Tryon Graphic* reported: “There no doubt was much other damage not learned and many losses of small buildings and damage to windmills. Throughout the storm area fences were flattened as posts were snapped off and the wire was rolled and tangled badly. In many

⁸⁸ *Hooker County Tribune*, August 24, 1933, 1

⁸⁹ *Holt County Independent*, May 1, 1936, 1

⁹⁰ *Garden County News*, June 11, 1936, 1; *Rock County Leader*, September 17, 1936, 1

places the fence was carried several rods. Thistles filed against the fences were responsible for much of this damage.”⁹¹

In June 1938, a large hailstorm also fell across Loup and Garfield counties doing significant damage. In Garfield County trees were shredded, gardens were beat up, and pastures damaged.⁹² In Loup County, one prominent rancher suffered hail damage to his car from once again egg-like hail. *The Taylor Clarion* reported: “F. R. Satterfield of Taylor was at his ranch in the Calamus country and reported the hail as large as hen eggs and falling in great numbers. The roof of his car was punctured in a number of places and the windshield was shattered.”⁹³ In early-July 1938 severe storms once again pummeled Garden County. This time its animal inhabitants were as impacted as well as its human population. The *Garden County News* described the damage: “...the Charles Cross home was unroofed and a steel granary at the Albert French home was totally destroyed. Meadows and grazing land in that part of the hill country was mowed down by hail which piled high in drifts. Rabbits and other small animals were killed where they were unable to find shelter.”⁹⁴ One year later a tornado touched down near Rushville in Sheridan and did significant damage to the farm of Carl Dreyer. According to the *Sheridan County Star*: “A tornado struck at the Carl Dreyer place ten miles southwest of Rushville near the Lutheran Church, Wednesday night about eleven thirty. The barn, a 52 x 60 building, was completely wrecked and strewn about, wheel

⁹¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, April 28, 1938, 1

⁹² *Burwell Tribune*, June 16, 1938, 1

⁹³ *The Taylor Clarion*, June 16, 1938, 1

⁹⁴ *Garden County News*, July 7, 1938, 1

taken from the windmill, and hay rack and many other things moved for many feet.”⁹⁵

Severe storms continued to ravage the hills at the outset of the 1940s.

In Hooker County in May of 1940 a tornado struck the D. A. Haney ranch and inflicted significant damage. “Forty year old trees were uprooted, a horse and several sheep were killed- chickens killed by the dozens. It is said every building on the ranch was totally wrecked. The Haney’s were returning from Mullen when the storm struck.”⁹⁶ Hooker County residents were not the only ones to be impacted by severe storms that summer. In July of 1941, Garden County residents once again felt the wrath of large hail. The *Garden County News* reported the severe damage: “The storm center appeared...at the ranch of County Commissioner August Buske, north of Lisco, where the hail ruined all crops and where the stones assumed the size of golf balls. Mr. Buske was in town Tuesday and he reported the loss of over one hundred chickens. Dead rabbits and pheasants were numerous around his place, Buske said, and he doubted if any could survive the storm.”⁹⁷ At the same time Garden County agriculturalists were suffering from the after effects of another round of storms, McPherson County rye farmers were once again victims of Mother Nature’s cruel tricks. *The Tryon Graphic* noted storm damage near Ringgold:

Hail damaged the rye crop in several communities in the county on Saturday afternoon, the hail coming on the eve of the harvest. The most severe damage is reported in the Ringgold community where grain fields that were expected to yield better than 20 bu. of rye to the acre were damaged from a third to a half or perhaps worse. The Monroe Bender farm was particularly hard hit and the crop there is near a total loss. The hail damage was heavy north and north-west of Ringgold and in the Miller Chapel community. Some damage was done to corn in these communities also.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Sheridan County Star*, July 6, 1939, 1

⁹⁶ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, May 1, 1940, 1

⁹⁷ *Garden County News*, July 3, 1941, 1

⁹⁸ *The Tryon Graphic*, July 3, 1941, 1

Six weeks before the attack at Pearl Harbor, McPherson County agriculturalists experienced further damage from wind as fences were blown over and windmills knocked down.⁹⁹

Sandhills residents were negatively impacted by severe storms during the Great Depression on a regular basis. If the drought did not force many small agriculturalists to sell out and leave, then hail or severe winds could also be a cause of their downfall. A further environmental hazard could be wrought by these deadly and destructive winds: dust storms.

As in the southern Great Plains, Nebraska Sandhills residents also faced significant dust storms which were a result of the seemingly unremitting drought. Much of the dust from these storms came from the farmlands in the southern part of the state. Such storms were common throughout the 1930s. Many dust storms became part of Great Plains lore during the era. Historian T. H. Watkins wrote of the dark humor that was sometimes associated with such events: "...stories became part of each family's collective memory- as did the jokes with which the toughest of them tried to counter disaster. A farmer sitting on his porch in Nebraska in the middle of a dust storm was asked what he was doing, one story went. 'I'm counting the Kansas farms as they go by,' he answered. In another, a Texas farmer said he was on his way to Kansas to pay his taxes because that was where his farm had gone."¹⁰⁰ Long time Hooker County resident Frank Harding described the dust storms impact in the county and the differences between Sandhills dust storms and the more well-known ones on the southern plains: "...we did not have dust storms like they did further south because this was grass country although there was not near as much grass then as there is now, a lot of our hills still had sand and stuff and...the farmers would come in here, the

⁹⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, October 30, 1941, 1

¹⁰⁰ W. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 430

Kinkaiders would come in 1904 from there to 1920 and plowed up a lot of our valleys and when it quit raining and then we had nothing but sand and a lot of our good grass valleys the sand blew terribly, they blew out clear down to a clay type of thing, and, uh, but we didn't have dust storms as that but we did have a lot of destruction of our ground with that."¹⁰¹ Even though Sandhills dust storms were not as massive as those in Kansas or South Dakota they were just as prevalent, annoying, depressing, and seemingly unrelenting.



(Dust Storm near Naponee, Nebraska, March 26th, 1935. Such dust storms were common in the Sandhills throughout the Depression era. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG3349, photo 13.)

¹⁰¹ Taped Interview conducted by the author with Frank Harding, Mullen, Nebraska, October 4, 2014. Mr. Harding granted written permission according to the IRB regulations of the Oklahoma State University Graduate College. Written permission letter is filed with the OSU History Department.

The Sandhills community of Tryon experienced several such storms during the period but none were considered humorous like Watkins' Nebraska farmer alluded to. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of one storm in May 1935: "Dust which reduced visibility to less than a block was carried into this part of the state by a strong south to southeast wind...The dust penetrated that tightest of buildings, doing considerable damage and angering housewives who had started their spring house cleaning believing the dust storms ended by last week's rains. The storm in Nebraska extended from Big Springs east to Grand Island and along the Platte Valley the dust reduced visibility to zero."¹⁰² McPherson County housewives were still digging their living rooms out in 1939. According to *The Graphic*: "Local housewives found plenty of cleaning to do on Monday and then on Monday evening another dust cloud rolled over from the south-east and much of the work had to be done again. It is said that in the south part of the state fields, bare of any vegetation, are blowing badly, with fences already drifted under at many points."¹⁰³ In December of 1939, windy dirt storms in western Nebraska aided in once again burying McPherson County farmers. *The Graphic* noted of a winter dust storm in western Nebraska: "The wind velocity was as high as 58 miles an hour at some points and in the panhandle region of the state, a dust blizzard raged. Here the damage was confined to the rye crop, which was already poor due to lack of moisture...Erosion from the wind was serious in many fields."¹⁰⁴ McPherson County was not alone in experiencing dust storms.

¹⁰² *The Tryon Graphic*, May 2, 1935, 1

¹⁰³ *The Tryon Graphic*, October 5, 1939, 1

¹⁰⁴ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 7, 1939, 1



(Standard image of the dust menace approaching a town in the “Middle West.” Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, RG3349, photo 18.)

In 1933, a large dust storm did significant damage to O’Neill that was similar to storms forcing farmers from the southern plains. The *Holt County Independent* described the damage: “A fifty mile an hour wind and dust storm hit O’Neill Sunday morning and all afternoon it was very bad, the dust being so thick that you could hardly see across the street. Many trees were blown down, the west end of the roof of Bazelman Lbr. Co. building was blown off, windows were broken and sand piled up in places where it could stop behind some building. It extended all over Nebraska and we understand it came from as far as North Dakota.”¹⁰⁵ This example is significant for demonstrating how the drought conditions in the nearby states to the north could also impact Nebraska Sandhillers. In 1934, dust storms continued to darken the skies in the northern hills as winter turned to spring. The *Rock County Leader* took note of one such storm commenting: “This section of the country experienced another severe dust storm Friday afternoon. With warm, sunshiny weather prevailing during the forenoon a sudden change developed during mid-afternoon when the

¹⁰⁵ *Holt County Independent*, November 17, 1933, 1

wind started out of the northwest blowing black clouds of dust that soon darkened the skies like heavy storm clouds. Colder weather prevailed Saturday and Sunday.”¹⁰⁶ To the east in Holt County even somewhat famous and prominent individuals of the day were not protected from the ravages of such storms. Historians Gene Budig and Don Walton wrote of the difficulties prominent Nebraska Senator George Norris encountered in the Sandhills during his bid for reelection in 1934: “With John Robertson at his side, they drove on against the combined force of both political parties and the weather. Their car’s fenders were stripped of paint by the blinding dust and gravel. The windshield became so pitted at one time that one could barely see through it. West of O’Neill in north-central Nebraska, a terrifying dust storm halted them only temporarily. South of Lincoln- with the wind howling and the dust swirling about in hazy columns- Norris spoke from atop the tailgate of a wagon.”¹⁰⁷ For Norris, the importance of national politics trumped one’s personal safety. Most Sandhillers did not tempt fate in such a fashion when the storms swirled. Norris felt he had few options if he was to remain one of President Roosevelt’s closest advisors. Due to such resilience, he thus became a representative of how best to survive the Depression in Nebraska even though it might not be comfortable or easy: put one’s head down and drive through.

¹⁰⁶ *Rock County Leader*, March 22, 1934, 1

¹⁰⁷ Gene A. Budig and Don Walton, *George Norris, Going Home: Reflections of a Progressive Statesman* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 57



(Dust storm along highway near Pleasanton, Nebraska, 1935. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG3349, photo 15.)

Dust storms were still prevalent in the northern hills in 1935. Some could be deadly. Historian Nellie Snyder Yost wrote of two such tragic deaths in Holt County: “During the drouth years when the frightful dust storms blew endlessly across the prairies, two of the sisters at St. Mary’s died of dust pneumonia, one in February and one in March of 1935. Both were elementary teachers.”¹⁰⁸ In neighboring Rock County dust storms remained harsh and psychologically devastating in May of 1937. The *Leader* noted the results of these storms: “High winds and dust storms raised havoc with plowed fields this week and absorbed quite a lot of moisture that this section had received during the past week. High winds

¹⁰⁸ Nellie Snyder Yost, *Before Today: The History of Holt County, Nebraska* (O’Neill, Nebraska: Miles Publishing Co., 1976), 148

prevailed all day Monday which blew up the clouds late in the evening and gave approximately .20 of an inch of moisture.”¹⁰⁹ Dust storms also brought chaos to the south of Rock County in nearby Garfield County in the spring of 1937. *The Burwell Tribune* noted the event: “Burwell housewives, merchants, and the public in general is (sic) still digging out of the severe wind and dirt storm that visited this section last Friday, Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night and Sunday. It was one of the severest wind and dirt storms that has visited this section for several years. At times the wind reached destructive proportion, and small buildings were wrecked and unroofed (sic). Small grain is said to have suffered considerably as a result of the storm.”¹¹⁰ Morrill County, in the southwestern hills, was not immune to the perils of dust storms. *The Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of the effects of one storm in late-March 1935:

One of the worst dust storms in recent years took possession of Western Nebraska the greater part of last Friday afternoon. The dry condition of the soil, due to the drouth, made the storm condition far worse than would have been the case in ordinary years. At times during the afternoon it was virtually impossible to see a hundred feet. On the highways traffic was slowed considerably, at times the range of vision being limited to less than a dozen feet off north and south roads. Several accidents were reported in various parts of western Nebraska, chiefly on the roads. No accidents were reported in this immediate vicinity.¹¹¹

Rather they occurred in the northern, southern, western, or eastern Sandhills dust storms further destroyed croplands and pastures by removing topsoil from fields and creating blowouts in pastures. Dust storms were common at any time of year in the Sandhills and served to provide more work, mental anguish, and personal depression for Sandhills residents who felt that they might economically drown under such environmental tidal waves.

Pestilential plagues further exacerbated such feelings.

¹⁰⁹ *Rock County Leader*, May 13, 1937, 1

¹¹⁰ *The Burwell Tribune*, April 29, 1937, 1

¹¹¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, March 21, 1935, 1

During the drought of the 1930s, Sandhillers also contended with grasshopper and rabbit plagues that destroyed crops and personal gardens. The insect infestation was common throughout the Great Plains region during times of extreme drought. John Opie wrote of the difficulties wrought by grasshoppers in the southern plains during the worst days of the late-1930s: “A grasshopper invasion in 1937 and 1938 seemed a final blow, to be followed by army worms; stretches of the Oklahoma Panhandle and eastern Colorado roads were slick with dead insects.”¹¹² Sandhills counties from the region’s northeastern to southwestern boundaries were equally impacted by the threat of grasshoppers in 1931. The *Hooker County Tribune* noted in its July 30, 1931, issue that:

Lincoln and Keith counties have suffered more or less from grasshoppers from many years. A grasshopperless season is practically unknown... This year they have been more numerous than ever before, and the damage they have wrought is noticeable especially in gardens. The prevalence of the ‘hoppers in other sections of the state, particularly in Keya Paha, Boyd, Brown, Knox, and Holt counties, is causing great uneasiness in those sections because of the possibility of a severe ‘hopper invasion next year. This will explain why preparations for fighting off the invasion are under way in practically every county in the northern and western parts of the state.¹¹³

Grasshoppers also ravaged the northeastern hills in late-July. Their numbers were so extensive that they ate anything in their path. Thomas Smith of Norfolk reported that grasshoppers had eaten part of his jacket while it hung in the back of his car when he travelled to Holt County for the Nebraska Mutual Insurance Company.¹¹⁴ One week later, Holt County residents were utilizing unproven and unsafe methods to deal with the grasshopper problem. The August 7, 1931, issue of the *Holt County Independent* described their new solution: “Thursday noon as we passed the Texaco station on our way to dinner we found Forest Smith experimenting with gasolene (sic) and grasshoppers. He found that one

¹¹² John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 105

¹¹³ *Hooker County Tribune*, July 30, 1931, 1

¹¹⁴ *Holt County Independent*, July 31, 1931, 1

drop of gas on a hopper would kill it almost immediately and to a certainty. One drop of gas on a hopper's leg would cause the leg to straighten out and the hopper not able to hop.”¹¹⁵

As summer turned to fall, Sandhills residents in the western county of Box Butte also were aware of the threat grasshoppers posed. The *Alliance Times-Herald* noted residents' concerns in its October 16, 1931, issue stating:

Enough grasshopper eggs have been found in some parts of western Nebraska to cause a serious condition next year, according to S. D. Butcher, entomologist for the department of agriculture. Eggs were found to be numerous in places in the valley and unless extermination methods are resorted to may cause a plague locally. Mr. Butcher states that most of the egg deposits were found in fence corners, irrigation canal banks and other weedy spots; that it is unusual for hoppers to leave the egg deposits in open fields. He recommends that trash and weeds be burned or removed in such places, leaving the ground as bare as possible.¹¹⁶

In July 1932, grasshoppers once again inundated Holt County and this time they ate more than collars. The *Holt County Independent* of O'Neill reported in mid- July: “Out on the Fred Grandorff farm, four miles northeast of town, it has been noticed for several days that the milk cows were losing the hair on the tip of their tails and if it keeps on the cows will have nothing but stumps to fight flies with. They account for this peculiar situation by noticing a number of hoppers hanging on the tails and say they are eating the hair from their tails.”¹¹⁷ There was no end in sight to the grasshopper apocalypse.

The situation became worse year after year as more eggs hatched. If grasshopper eggs were not discovered before they hatched, most likely Sandhills agriculturalists faced a bleak financial outcome in the year ahead for reasons beyond their cattle losing some tail hair. This was the case in Rock County in the summer of 1933. The *Rock County Leader* noted a grasshopper infestation within the northeastern Sandhills in June of 1933 stating:

¹¹⁵ *Holt County Independent*, August 7, 1931, 1

¹¹⁶ *Alliance Times-Herald*, October 16, 1931, 1

¹¹⁷ *Holt County Independent*, July 15, 1932, 1

“During the past week or ten days many reports are coming in from various sections of the county that grasshoppers are again menacing crops. While the condition is spotted as yet the weather has been ideal in spreading the pests from drying pastures to corn and other crops. Some are resorting to poison bran as there has been a supply available left over from last year. Much damage is reported in Holt, Boyd and Keya Paha counties.”¹¹⁸ Nearly a year later, the *Holt County Independent* reported the return of the grasshopper scourge: “Reports from Northern Holt County indicate that grasshoppers are hatching in large numbers. In order to prevent considerable crop damage at a later period the poisoning should be done within the next ten days or two weeks.”¹¹⁹ To the east of the Sandhills near Oakdale in Antelope County grasshoppers were also an unrelenting menace. Barbara Eymann Mohrman wrote of the experience of Antelope County farmer Chriss Eymann on one summer day in 1936: “He was out working in the fields that July in 1936. It was another torrid, dry, dusty, day just like all of the other summer days he had endured for the last two years...He heard the swarming before he saw them or maybe he just sensed their presence...Chriss peered at the sky to the west and then he saw it- the swirling, churning teeming dark cloud. The cloud mass was moving toward him and the farm with relentless purpose. The flow of darkness spread and stretched across the sky for miles. What had seconds ago been bright daylight was now bathed in darkness as if it were the middle of the night...as the darkness approached him he could hear a distinct zzzzzzzz reverberation radiating from the pitch-black cloud and he knew it was not simply a weather system moving in.”¹²⁰ No part of the hills or nearby counties was spared from the grasshopper scourge.

¹¹⁸ *Rock County Leader*, June 22, 1933, 1

¹¹⁹ *Holt County Independent*, May 18, 1934, 1

¹²⁰ Barbara Eymann Mohrman, *Four Blue Stars in the Window: One Family's Story of the Great*

Grasshoppers not only wrought havoc in the rural hills, they also were unwelcome guests in Sandhills communities. One such town was Rushville. The *Sheridan County Star* reported on a grasshopper invasion within the community on July 9, 1936:

Last Thursday evening about 9 o'clock a horde of grasshoppers approximately one fourth of a mile wide arrived in Rushville to spend the evening. Report has it that so completely did they cover the city that in some places it was impossible to take a step on the sidewalk without stepping on one of the insects also that buildings and parked cars were massed with them. The hoppers were apparently not very impressed by Rushville hospitality for they left at day break the next morning, flying south.¹²¹

Two weeks later, in the Loup Valley of Garfield County, grasshoppers were everywhere; however, locals took solace in the fact that the drought had already eliminated most of their crops thus robbing the pests of their desired meal.¹²² The problem was so extensive in the fall of 1936 that O. S. Bare, extension entomologist of the Nebraska College of Agriculture, suggested measures should be taken to prevent its expansion in 1937. The *Sheridan County Star* reported that Bare contended: "...that the farmers should do something now to destroy eggs. In areas such as packed turnrows (sic) at ends and along sides of fields, around alfalfa stacks or old stack locations where the eggs were laid, he recommends a thorough disking, wherever possible, between now and the time the ground freezes up. Probably 80 percent of the eggs could thus be destroyed."¹²³ The grasshopper plague became so rampant in the Sandhills and the whole state of Nebraska that in July 1937 Nebraskans had completely used up their eight thousand ton allotment of Federal grasshopper bait.¹²⁴ This led Sandhills residents to come up with innovative solutions for dealing with these agricultural pests. Agricultural Agent W. F. Crozier informed readers of *The Stapleton Enterprise* how one

Depression, The Dust Bowl, and the Duty of a Generation (Omaha, Nebraska: Bern Street Publishing, 2013), 57-58

¹²¹ *Sheridan County Star*, July 16, 1936, 1

¹²² *The Burwell Tribune*, July 23, 1936, 4

¹²³ *Sheridan County Star*, November 12, 1936, 1

¹²⁴ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, July 22, 1937, 1

could kill grasshoppers without bait in the paper's July 22, 1937 issue stating: "Grasshopper 'dozers' are being used successfully when bolted to the front bumper of a car or truck. The essential parts of these are a curved sheet iron back with an oil trap the bottom into which the hoppers fall. They may be used successfully when placed back of the platform canvas on a binder."¹²⁵ Following this instruction, some extra bags of bait were found during the next week and were made available for purchase for \$0.35.¹²⁶ The newspaper did not specify if this was government issued bait or local homemade grasshopper bait, which was also available in the region during the period. In any event, by either using bait or "dozers," Sandhills residents in Logan County demonstrated how severe the grasshopper problem was by their desperation to get rid of it. Despite their desperation sometimes these remedies were slow to work. This proved to be the case in Garden County. The *Garden County News* reported: "In some places the work is accomplishing results, while in other sections of the county the effects of the poison is not discernable. The dry hot weather is very favorable for the hatching and growth of grasshoppers and should nature fail to assist by giving cooling weather and rains the problem of controlling them in this county is going to be a serious one to solve."¹²⁷ An additional supply of poison bait arrived in Oshkosh a week later and agriculturalists were encouraged to purchase them at \$0.20 per bag.¹²⁸ Despite efforts to eliminate the grasshopper menace, the pests remained in the hills into 1938.

In 1938, in Loup County the infestation of biblical pests remained severe; however, local residents believed they saw evidence that natural enemies were aiding in the grasshoppers' demise. According to the July 21, 1938, issue of *The Taylor Clarion*:

¹²⁵ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, July 22, 1937, 1

¹²⁶ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, July 29, 1937, 1

¹²⁷ *Garden County News*, July 8, 1937, 1

¹²⁸ *Garden County News*, July 15, 1937, 1

An interested resident of Taylor whose name is not disclosed, has made a examination of the grass hoppers that are devastating the gardens in this vicinity, and find that about one in every ten infested with red lice, as they are called for want of a better name. The parasite is comparatively large at maturity and bores into the body of the hopper. The opinion of the person investigating is that the parasite deposits its eggs in the body of the hopper causing death, and the dead body furnishes protection and nourishment for the larva. Whether the infestation will spread and destroy the destroyers is a matter of conjecture. In the meantime a large amount of poison is being spread.¹²⁹

While grasshoppers in Loup County suffered from parasitic infection, the grasshoppers in Logan County were still wreaking havoc in the final year of the decade. Earl G. Reed, the supervisor of agricultural development for the Union Pacific, reiterated the necessity of grasshopper bait, provided a homemade formula, and described the agricultural losses attributed to these winged pests in the April 28, 1939, issue of *The Stapleton Enterprise*:

Mr. Reed gives the following as a batch mix of poisoned bait; 100 lbs. of mill feed, 300 lbs. of sawdust, 2 gallons of sodium arsenite, about 50 gallons of water, one handful of ground-up onions and 6 gallons of blackstrap molasses. Suggestion- in order to save wear and tear(s) on eyes, grind the onions under water. Warning that the railroads will not haul, or the farmers get paid for any crops eaten by grasshoppers, Mr. Reed said estimated losses to farmers last year from these pests and Mormon crickets amounted to more than 65 million dollars.¹³⁰

Grasshoppers further devastated Sandhillers' pastures and crops in 1940. In June, Oshkosh residents readied themselves for the annual impending plague. The *Garden County News* reported of their preparations: "The Oshkosh grasshopper poison bait mixing plant has begun operation, in order to get an early start in the war against that pest in Garden county. At present the plant, under the management of Charles Cross, is operating on a reduced schedule but it is thought that within the next week farmers will begin spreading the poison rapidly. Heavy infestations of 'hoppers are reported from several communities in the county at this time. They are said to be found mostly along pastures and road sides."¹³¹ Two weeks later, the *News* reported that large hatchings were continuing in the county even though they were

¹²⁹ *The Taylor Clarion*, July 21, 1938, 1

¹³⁰ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, April 28, 1939, 1

¹³¹ *Garden County News*, June 6, 1940, 1

not widespread.¹³² Nonetheless, grasshoppers remained a continual pest for Garden County agriculturalists in the early-1940s. Thus, in the Sandhills during the 1930s and early-1940s, grasshopper infestations coincided with drought like conditions, thus leading to multiple frustrations and annoyances for Sandhills settlers. It seemed that neither technological innovations nor the use of poison could rid the hills of the grasshoppers. Sandhills residents faced other pests seeking to destroy their pastures and fields. They were rabbits.

During the 1930s, rabbit hunts became commonplace on the southern Great Plains as Kansas and Oklahoma residents banded together to kill these hopping pests by the thousands in order to prevent them from finishing off what was left of their withering fields. The rabbits made horrible squealing sounds, like human babies crying for their mothers as they were clubbed or shot. While such methods may seem inhumane by current standards, they were nonetheless effective for controlling the rabbit population, which continued to grow exponentially. Kansas historian Craig Miner wrote of the efficiency of such hunts in the Sunflower State: “There were 6,000 rabbits killed in a single drive around Garden City early in 1935, and that sort of take was not unusual. There were several huge hunts. One at Dighton in February 1935 had 10,000 citizens killing between 30,000 and 50,000 rabbits. There were 15,000 killed in one hunt near Scott City. The granddaddy of them all, to be held near Kalvesta in March 1935 with an expectation of killing 100,000 rabbits in a day, was postponed so often by dust storms that the plan was abandoned. A typical hunt, like the one at Gove City in January 1935, drew 2,000 people corralling about 2,500 rabbits.”¹³³ Ellen May Stanley wrote of larger numbers of rabbits eliminated in one hunt in Lane County,

¹³² *Garden County News*, June 20, 1940, 1

¹³³ Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 274

Kansas, in early-1938: “Lane County residents began 1938 with a rabbit and coyote drive. A large crowd from Lane and Gove counties participated in the 130-acre drive in the northern part of the county, on Saturday, January 1. Between four and five thousand rabbits and seven coyotes were rounded up and exterminated. Four men and their dogs took part in the coyote chase, which was the most exciting spectacle. The slim lines on two sides at the start, allowed hundreds of rabbits to escape. However, the animals that were killed would help the farmers of that area.”¹³⁴ The rabbit plague was thick all across the Great Plains.

In Nebraska, Sandhills agriculturalists also struggled with a growing rabbit population as well as an overabundance of prairie dogs and coyotes during the drought years of the 1930s. Coyotes were numerous enough that Civilian Conservation Corps enrollee Charles E. Humberger kept a coyote as a pet at the CCC camp at Crescent Lake Wildlife Refuge in 1934. Humberger wrote of his pet: “I captured a coyote pup and made a pet of her. She was a cute, shy little animal and liked to sleep on the foot of my bed... Maybe she would have become an asset in a duck blind if she had not disappeared one day.”¹³⁵ Humberger’s care for his pet was the exception during the dusty days of the 1930s as coyotes were hunted down by most Sandhillers along with rabbits and prairie dogs. At the turn of the 20th century, some Sandhills counties had paid bounties to their residents for keeping wild predatory-type animal numbers down if they had become too extensive. Thomas County conducted one such program from 1890 to 1919. For turning in 3 coyote pelts on February 26, 1890, J. W. Purdum received \$3.00 from Thomas County officials.¹³⁶ From 1890-1919, all entries

¹³⁴ Ellen May Stanley, *Golden Age, Great Depression, and Dust Bowl* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press, Inc., 2001), 317

¹³⁵ Charles E. Humberger, “Memoirs of Company 762,” 10, Charles E. Humberger Collection, MS1574, Folder 1, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹³⁶ *Thomas County Bounty Record 1*, 1890-1919, Thedford, Nebraska

recorded in the Thomas County Bounty program were for coyotes except for one wolf turned in by W. J. Noel on October 19, 1901, and another wolf taken by J. O. Spurgin on December 26, 1901, as well as wildcat pelts turned in by W. R. Wiles on April 10, 1891, and A. T. Stacy on April 15, 1893.¹³⁷ Sandhillers' desire to keep the coyote population in check carried into the Depression. Coyote hunts were sometimes carried out separately from rabbit hunts. One such hunt was held in Holt County at the John Storjohann place on January 3rd, 1937.¹³⁸ The *Holt County Independent* requested in the hunt's advertisement: "Bring shotguns- no rifles. Everybody urged to be there."¹³⁹ Thus, Sandhills coyotes and their human counterparts maintained a somewhat tempestuous relationship.

Contrastingly, rabbits became so numerous that they interfered with safe traveling on Sandhills highways. Harding noted the rabbit problem in Hooker County: "We had hundreds of jack rabbits in the thirties."¹⁴⁰ The *Grant County Tribune* reported of one dangerous rabbit-motorist encounter in September 1931: "Mr. and Mrs. George Hawes and baby had a narrow escape from serious injury one day the past week while enroute from Tekameh to Oakland. A jack rabbit suddenly appeared in the road and becoming frightened, jumped toward the machine, with the result that the animal went through the windshield of the car with such force that he was carried on through the car and struck the rear window and cracked it, then fell dead in the rear seat. The three occupants of the car were showered with glass. Mr. Hawes had his shoulder cut, but the baby who was sitting between them escaped

¹³⁷ *Thomas County Bounty Record 1*, 1890-1919, Thedford, Nebraska

¹³⁸ *Holt County Independent*, January 1, 1937, 1

¹³⁹ *Holt County Independent*, January 1, 1937, 1

¹⁴⁰ Taped interview conducted by the author with Frank Harding, Mullen, Nebraska, October 4, 2014

harm.”¹⁴¹ Whereas rabbits were not usually a physical threat to Sandhillers, their negative reputation in the hills grew as the decade wore on.

In the mid-1930s, the Sandhills rabbit problem had intensified to the point that it was common for bounties to be placed on the animals just had been the case with coyotes twenty years earlier. *The Burwell Tribune* wrote in late-August 1934 of what was happening in the western hills: “Out in Box Butte county rabbits have become such a nuisance that the board of county commissioners have placed a bounty of three cents each on them. In order to get the bounty the ears must be cut off and strung on a wire and presented to the county clerk in not less than one hundred lots. The jacks have become so numerous in that section that a big complaint has been put in by farmers and ranchers. It is thought that the bounty will reduce the supply in short order.”¹⁴² While bounties helped reduce the pests, other larger hunting methods were soon utilized.

Large scale rabbit hunts such as those conducted in Kansas and Oklahoma also became utilized in the Sandhills during the dustiest years of the Depression. Some hunts became contests in which the group was divided into teams and whoever killed the most rabbits won. One such hunt was held in Morrill County in mid-August 1936. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported on the results: “The Bridgeport Rifle club has (sic) a very successful rabbit hunt last Sunday afternoon in which a total of 127 rabbits were killed. Harold Dean’s side was the winner with 84 bunnies, while Clarence Larsen’s team gathered in 43. Rex Wilcox was the high man in the individual shooting with a total of 23 rabbits.

¹⁴¹ *Grant County Tribune* in *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 2, 1931, 6

¹⁴² *The Burwell Tribune*, August 30, 1934, 4

Byron Branson was second with 22.”¹⁴³ In the winter and early-spring of 1937 multiple rabbit hunts were also held in Lincoln and Logan counties. Each hunt required a large number of participants to squelch the rabbits. *The Stapleton Enterprise* described the methods of one such hunt that was to take place in nearby Lincoln County on February 21, 1937:

George Kellogg, Lincoln County ag agent announced today a change in the date for the big rabbit hunt to Sunday, Feb. 21st. The location of the hunt is being changed to somewhere between Sutherland and Wallace, due to the fact there was some objection to the hunt being held on Sunday at the tentative location south of Hershey...It is planned to put this hunt on with each side of the square six miles, so that each man will walk straight forward for exactly three miles. To cover the ground properly will take 20 men to the mile or a total of 480 men. It is planned to make this the largest and most successful hunt of its kind ever staged in Nebraska, and if rabbits are as plentiful as they are said to be, the kill should be the largest on record. It is also thought with the hunt organized and properly manned on so large a square of territory, the kill of coyotes should be the largest on record.¹⁴⁴

Following the example of this large hunt, Logan County residents put forth plans for their own attempt. The county’s first hunt required one hundred men and was scheduled to take place eight and a half miles south of Stapleton at the Ralieg Reynolds farm on February 28, 1937.¹⁴⁵ The following week *The Enterprise* reported on the hunt’s success:

The rabbit hunt scheduled last Sunday was held on the Reynolds section and the four sections nearby. Between 100 and 125 men and boys gathered for the occasion and 310 rabbits and 1 coyote were killed. Another hunt for next Sunday afternoon has been planned...¹⁴⁶

The county’s second hunt on March 7th was also successful. According to *The Enterprise*: “The second rabbit hunt of the Stapleton Hunt Club was held Sunday March 7 in North Lincoln County. In spite of a bad dust storm the hunt was well attended and eight sections were hunted. Two hundred eighty-eight rabbits were taken.”¹⁴⁷ From these results it is apparent that the Sandhills in general suffered from a large rabbit infestation. The large

¹⁴³ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, August 20, 1936, 1

¹⁴⁴ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, February 11, 1937, 1

¹⁴⁵ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, February 25, 1937, 1

¹⁴⁶ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, March 4, 1937, 1

¹⁴⁷ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, March 11, 1937, 1

numbers of rabbits in just a two week span in a relatively small, localized area of the Sandhills, suggests that the rest of the hills were experiencing a similar blight. In the southwest hills of Garden County rabbits were everywhere.

Sandhillers near Oshkosh were as tired of the rabbit menace by the late- 1930s as their brethren in Logan County. Like elsewhere, large organized hunts for rabbits and coyotes were not uncommon in the southwest hills in the late-1930s. One such hunt took place on February 28th, 1937. The February 25th, 1937, issue of the *Garden County News* noted the expectations and preparations for the upcoming hunt:

The Shaw-Jeppson post of the American Legion is sponsoring a big drive for rabbits and coyotes here next Sunday and the members are planning on having four or five hundred people on the ground. The members are asking everyone to turn out and help to make this a record hunt in number of coyotes captured. The south line will be two miles north of Oshkosh, the east line will be three miles east, the north line eight miles north and the west line three miles west of town. The hunt will center at the Lone Star Grange hall, where provisions have been made for a big lunch to be served.¹⁴⁸

Three days later the hunt proved successful for rabbit hunters as the total killed in Garden County easily topped the number eliminated in Logan County around the same time; however, the hunt proved less successful for those seeking coyote pelts. The *Garden County News* reported on the successes and failures of the hunt:

According to reports turned in there were 1302 rabbits taken in the drive here last Sunday. Only two coyotes were captured, however, to the disappointment of all. Approximately 450 to 500 men and women were in the lines. The rabbits were sold for \$65.00 and the coyotes brought \$13.00 which will be turned over to the Red Cross. The Auxiliary served the dinner at the Lone Star Grange hall and these ladies made a nice profit from the venture. They reported serving three hundred dinners.¹⁴⁹

Nearly a year later, rabbits remained a problem in the hills, requiring hunts to eliminate them. In early- 1938, a recurrent rabbit plague in Grant County resulted in significant damage to some of the county's trees. The *Grant County Tribune* reported of the tree decimation on Dr. Kreamer's property in mid-March: "In going out to his ranch southwest of town after his

¹⁴⁸ *Garden County News*, February 25, 1937, 1

¹⁴⁹ *Garden County News*, March 4, 1937, 1

return from wintering in Alabama, Dr. Kreamer made a disappointing discovery. Rabbits (sic) had girdled about 200 young trees on his ranch, killing the trees.”¹⁵⁰ The loss of rare environmental assets, such as trees, through this type of destruction required action and hunts were the best method utilized to eliminate large numbers rapidly. The *Garden County News* noted the results of one such hunt conducted on February 6, 1938:

It is estimated that 600 hunters attended the rabbit and coyote roundup north of town Sunday, many of those participating coming from Lewellen and Lisco. When totaled after the roundup it was found that 484 rabbits and three coyotes had been killed. Hunters attending reported that many coyotes got through the lines, as the north line formation was not very close. The honors for killing coyotes went to F. Roudebush, Walter Riley and Jack Robinson. Archie Johnson of Lewellen was high man killing rabbits. He bagged twenty to win first prize...A big free lunch was served at the roundup and it is said the hunters did plenty to that; as all were ready to eat after the morning’s tramp. Members of the Shaw-Jeppson post who sponsored the hunt, were well pleased with the success of the venture and state that the proceeds from the sale of the rabbits and coyotes will go into the American Legion relief program fund.¹⁵¹

Thus, while many hunts conducted in Garden County and other parts of the Sandhills never netted large amounts of coyote pelts, they were successful in curtailing the rabbit scourge which was common to much of the Great Plains during this period. Hunts also served to unify communities as they became excuses for social gatherings and dinners. In this regard, large scale rabbit hunts served a doubly positive purpose in that they eliminated pests and brought people together in a time of strife and difficulty.

Beyond an excessive rabbit problem, Sandhills ranchers also contended with an abundant prairie dog population. Prairie dogs were nuisances as they tore up pastures when their “towns” were established and cattle could also be hurt by an errant step into one of their holes. Thus, ranchers wanted them eliminated. In the spring of 1935, efforts were made by the Rock County Agricultural Committee to encourage farmers and ranchers to participate in an orchestrated county wide extermination. The one gallon poison they were to buy and

¹⁵⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, March 16, 1938, 1

¹⁵¹ *Garden County News*, February 10, 1938, 1

utilize would roughly cover about fifteen acres.¹⁵² In theory, this mass application agreed upon by individual agricultural neighbors should have proven successful. While such coordination was encouraging in battling these pint-sized pests in Rock County, ranchers in the southern Sandhills of Arthur County were still struggling with prairie dogs in 1937 and 1938. In March 1937, fur trader C. M. Rumbaugh, learning of the county's problem with these pests, sought one thousand prairie dog hides from Arthur County residents and was willing to pay \$0.10 per hide if they were adequately stretched and dried.¹⁵³ Rumbaugh would gladly pay in person if they brought the hides to town on April 1st.¹⁵⁴ While some Arthur County ranchers were willing to be paid to get rid of the prairie dog infestation, others seem to have taken a lackadaisical attitude towards the pests. The problem remained severe enough in the county that nearly a year later local government officials made edicts to encourage locals to handle the problem. An advertisement placed in the February 17, 1938, issue of *The Arthur Enterprise* by the Arthur County Commissioners exclaimed:

NOTICE to all LAND OWNERS...Notice is hereby given that on and after April 1st, 1938, it will be the duty of all road overseers to kill all prairie dogs found in their respective districts, and to charge the costs thereof of taxes against the land on which they are found.¹⁵⁵

Thus, for pests that were not as thoroughly destructive to crops or pastures as rabbits and grasshoppers, some Sandhillers required further incentive for action. Beyond severe storms, dust storms, and plagues of various pests, Sandhills agriculturalists also contended with one other very serious threat that was a consequence of perennial drought conditions: prairie fire.

In the 1930s, prairie fire was a constant threat to the dry Sandhills prairie and the individuals who lived there. In comparison, the Dust Bowl area of the southern plains did

¹⁵² *Rock County Leader*, March 14, 1937, 1

¹⁵³ *The Arthur Enterprise*, March 25, 1937, 4

¹⁵⁴ *The Arthur Enterprise*, March 25, 1937, 4

¹⁵⁵ *The Arthur Enterprise*, February 17, 1938, 4

not suffer from fire near as much as that country was suffering instead from blowing topsoil with little vegetation due to over farming. In 1935, the approximate land area of Haskell County, Kansas, was 369,280 acres.¹⁵⁶ In 1934, Haskell County contained only 10,850 acres classified as “other” pasture.¹⁵⁷ In other words, it was considered non-plowable pasture. In 1935, nearby Ellis County, Kansas, had a total land area of 576,640 acres of which 212,939 acres was considered non-farmable or “other” pasture.¹⁵⁸ Miner wrote of the prairie fires that did occur in the dry lands of western Kansas: “Prairie fires, thought nearly extinct, returned with a vengeance to the grazing areas that had been spared from dust, only to blow ash.”¹⁵⁹ In the drought ridden Oklahoma panhandle, counties also generally had more acres in cultivation (at least attempted acres) than in pasture, thus limiting their exposure to the fire threat. One such county was Texas County. In 1935, Texas County, Oklahoma, consisted of an approximate land area of 1,321,600 acres of which 232,300 acres were categorized as “other” pasture.¹⁶⁰ Texas’s neighboring county, Cimarron, was an exception as its total approximate land area was 1,183,360 acres of which 684,962 acres were pasture.¹⁶¹ Thus, over half of Cimarron County lands were prairie. In the Nebraska Sandhills, the majority of all county acres were classified as “other” pasture or not in cultivation. In 1935, Arthur County had an approximate land area of 461,440 acres and of these acres 358,249 were pasture.¹⁶² Likewise, Sheridan County in the northwestern Sandhills consisted of an approximate land area of 1,580,160 acres of which 1,008,903 were pasture lands.¹⁶³ Thus,

¹⁵⁶ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 355

¹⁵⁷ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 355

¹⁵⁸ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 354

¹⁵⁹ Miner, *Next Year Country*, 237

¹⁶⁰ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 722

¹⁶¹ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 717

¹⁶² 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 326

¹⁶³ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 333

the Sandhills were more susceptible to prairie fires as they were indeed largely undisturbed natural prairie. This did not mean that farming was not occurring in the Sandhills, it was just not happening to the level that it was in western Kansas and Oklahoma. Likewise, prairie fires could happen in Kansas and Oklahoma counties as well if dry wheat stubble or wilted fields caught fire. Their smaller pasture lands could also act as a tinderbox. However, in comparison to the wilted and scorched pasture lands of the Nebraska Sandhills, there were not as many incidents of prairie fire in the Dust Bowl region like Sandhills residents dealt with on a consistent basis.

Fire was a very dangerous threat to Sandhills ranchers in the 1930s as it could destroy valuable pasture lands for cattle grazing. While most pastures were burnt and dry from hot temperatures in the 1930s summer months, leading ranchers to import feed, the occasional rains could sometimes revitalize pastures enough to provide some grazing for cattle. A well-placed lightning strike, spark from a vehicle, or an ill-thrown cigarette could destroy these hard earned and sometimes rare opportunities at a pasture come back quickly and in a matter of minutes when driven by the unforgiving wind. Likewise, dry and brown pastures only served as fuel for fires and made their revitalization from drought when there was little rainfall difficult. Such possibilities made Sandhills ranchers prudent stewards of the land and always on-call firefighters in case their pastures or their neighbors' was in danger of being engulfed in flame. Historian Julie Courtwright wrote of the origins of Great Plains ranchers' attitudes regarding fire in her work, *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History*, stating: "Ranch managers and owners also believed that the farmers responsible for fencing the land, thereby closing the range, did not participate aggressively in prairie firefights if the range alone was threatened. Removed from complete dependence on the grass, farmers did not feel the

urgency of a prairie fire unless their buildings, animals, or crops were in its path.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, ranchers became self-reliant to deal with this threat to their livelihood. However, there does not appear to be such animosity between Sandhills ranchers and farmers, especially since farmers were very much in the minority. Their fields were very near pasture lands, indeed for many their farmlands were surrounded by steep hills covered in all too flammable grass during the 1930s. If farmers had any semblance of a crop during this period it was also in their best interest to be concerned with potential prairie fires and to help when called upon to suppress them or else they risked their crops turning to ash.

In contrast, Sandhillers attitudes differed from their agricultural contemporaries to the south as Kansans traditionally utilized controlled burns frequently on their pastures. Frank Harding spoke of the differences between Sandhills pastures and Kansas ones and why Sandhillers attitudes toward fire were different in the 1930s: “One of the reasons is because of our sandy soil, the Flint Hills of Kansas is great cattle country but its hard country and they can burn their grass in the spring and the new grass comes to make pasture and here we get a prairie fire to burn our grass you better not put any cattle on it the next year or all you’ll have is sand... because we have a pretty thin layer of sod on here that’s nothing but sand underneath it.”¹⁶⁵ Kansas historian Jim Hoy wrote of methods and tools Kansas agriculturalists used for controlled burns in the Flint Hills in the 1930s: “Chet Unruh, who as a young man started working on the Santa Fe at Cassoday in the later 1930s, said that they were supposed to use matches, rakes, and wet gunnysacks to set and control the fires. Instead, they would use a pipe filled with gasoline-diesel fuel mixture used in handcars to

¹⁶⁴ Julie Courtwright, *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 77

¹⁶⁵ Taped interview conducted with Frank Harding by the author, Mullen, Nebraska, October 4, 2014

start the fires. Fuel-saturated cloth at the bottom of the pipe acted as a wick when set alight.”¹⁶⁶ During the Great Depression, Kansas ranchers were impacted by New Deal era policies that frowned on such pasture control methods. Courtwright wrote of their consternation: “...the federal government became more interested in planting trees through its shelterbelt program, to try to limit wind erosion, than in maintaining the prairie through...traditional burn techniques...the newly organized Soil Conservation Service and the older Forest Service were both adamantly opposed to the intentional burning of prairies in the drought-plagued 1930s.”¹⁶⁷ Sandhillers agreed with government policies as fire was a menace during the 1930s. A controlled burn during this period could very quickly become uncontrolled even if monitored. Fires threatened not only cattle pastures but also ranches, farms, and communities. One such community that was scarred by flame was Rushville in 1932.

During the Great Depression, fire could happen at any time and anywhere. Some of the most dangerous fires sparked at night. This type of fire occurred in Rushville on June 5, 1932. *The Rushville Recorder* reported the devastating event in its June 9, 1932, issue, exclaiming:

Last Sunday night Rushville was visited by one of those mysterious fires which baffle all attempts to account for, when a string of barns, garages and outhouses burst into flames and cast a lurid glare over the west side of Emmet Street. Lew Rogers who lives on the west side of Emmet Street had company and happened to go out doors and saw a blaze on the alley at the rear and told those in the house to turn in an alarm. Rogers secured a knife and went into the Dennis Wofford barn and cut four horses loose. After that the wind blowing from the south spread the flames almost clear through the alley, as the wood of the buildings were as dry as tinder. The fire department immediately responded and soon had three lines of hose at work, but the flames leaped across the alley and totally destroyed a barn and garage for George Greer who lost an auto and other things stored in the garage...Before the fire was controlled about seven buildings were destroyed, and the hose boys were much worried over the electric wires and post which caught fire while they were playing the flames. All buildings were

¹⁶⁶ Jim Hoy, *Flint Hills Cowboys: Tales From The Tallgrass Prairie* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 164

¹⁶⁷ Courtwright, *Prairie Fire*, 173

reduced to charcoal, except the extreme north end. Fortunately no one was hurt, but the fierce flames made things look very terrible till subdued on account of the wind. Little insurance was carried except on the barn of Mike Parker.¹⁶⁸

The town of Dunning in Blaine County also experienced a similar disaster earlier in 1932.

The *Blaine County Booster* described the event: “The building owned by the Standard Oil Company, located near the storage tanks west of the depot, was completely destroyed by fire late Sunday evening. Jim Anderson was in the building and had started the engine of the truck which back- fired. Almost instantly the place burst into flames and it was impossible to save anything. A practically new Chevrolet truck owned by C. M. Anderson, nine or ten barrels of oil and considerable equipment also burned. Mr. Anderson carried not insurance.”¹⁶⁹ Dunning suffered another fire in mid- August 1933 when the top floor of the Stoltenberg hotel and café and its electric wires were struck by lightning.¹⁷⁰

While the source of some fires was unknown, such as in Rushville, others, such as the Dunning fire, were easily identified. Common unintentional “arsonists” that started fires were lightning or passing trains which kicked out sparks from their wheels onto the dry prairie. Some fires spread into trees near homesteads which quickly burned due to the drought. Such losses were unfortunate as trees, with the exception of the National Forest at Halsey, were rare on the Sandhills prairie. One such fire caused by a locomotive occurred in Thomas County in April 1934. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* chronicled the event: “Last Saturday afternoon it was reported that a train had set a fire near the Tate Milroy place...Fortunately Clarence Odell, Ted Hoffer and another man, the first to fight the fire, whipped it out near buildings. A hay stack near the barn was also saved. The greatest loss was the cedar trees that Mr. Milroy had planted many years and of which were good height.

¹⁶⁸ *The Rushville Recorder*, June 9, 1932, 1

¹⁶⁹ *Blaine County Booster*, March 24, 1932, 1

¹⁷⁰ *Blaine County Booster*, August 17, 1933, 1

He had also planted several hundred small trees some time ago which were burned over and killed, besides many of the large trees.”¹⁷¹ A tree fire in McPherson County also occurred later that summer. *The Tryon Graphic* reported on the incident in its July 19, 1934, issue: “Volunteers were called out to fight a prairie fire which started last Thursday afternoon near the old Seeley grove three miles east of town. The fire started about 100 yards west of the grove and burned through the north half killing many of the trees. Before being put out it had burned a narrow strip about a half mile long.”¹⁷² Thus, while tree/forest fires were extremely rare within the grasslands of the Sandhills when they did occur they could be extremely damaging.

In Custer County a fire had similarly been started in 1934 just as it had been at Tate Milroy’s in Thomas County. The *Custer County Chief* reported of the incident in late-March 1934: “Last Sunday a prairie fire started near Linscott, near the Ed Knoell ranch, is thought was set by a train. It burned Sunday afternoon and destroyed hundreds of acres or range and many stacks of hay.”¹⁷³ During severe drought the loss of such hay sources could be financially debilitating for ranchers who may have not had enough income to replace what was lost. Later in the summer of 1934, devastating prairie fires broke out in Rock County that unfortunately also destroyed many promising pastures. The *Rock County Leader* reported:

About 3 to 3 ½ sections of good hay land was burned over and the balance was pasture land. The surrounding country turned out quickly when the alarm was given and firefighters from Newport and Bassett also responded. With the extreme high temperature of the weather coupled with the fierce heat generated by the burning grass the fire was hard to combat and but for the promptness of help arriving the flames would have spread over a much larger area. The hay land burned over carried good green grass two foot high and the surprising part was that when the flames hit this it was consumed as rapidly

¹⁷¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 25, 1934, 1

¹⁷² *The Tryon Graphic*, July 19, 1934, 1

¹⁷³ *Custer County Chief* in *The Tryon Graphic*, March 29, 1934, 1

as though it was so much tinder. Ranchers in that section could ill afford the loss occurring in the destruction of their hay crop and will be harder pressed than ever for their winter stock feed.¹⁷⁴

Such a loss of promising pasture made life difficult for Sandhills ranchers in the cold winter months ahead when it was more difficult to feed their cattle. A rare positive that came from such fires was that it unified Sandhillers in their resolve to persevere and be resilient against such environmental obstacles as they assisted one another in fighting fire.

Fires persisted in the hills throughout the decade. In early-August 1936, prairie fire destroyed the home of Clarence Greeley in Wheeler County. The *Wheeler County Independent* wrote of the loss of buildings and feed for livestock: “A prairie fire destroyed the home and other buildings on the Clarence R. Greeley place, 8 miles north of Bartlett Saturday noon...John Nichols lost hay valued at \$100. Only one stack was destroyed on the Greeley place.”¹⁷⁵ Fires were a menace all throughout the northeastern hills that summer. In late-July fires raged near Ainsworth in Brown County. The *Rock County Leader* commented: “One of these fires did considerable damage about 15 miles south of Ainsworth Wednesday afternoon. A strip of country five miles wide by about 15 miles was swept by the flames, destroying a farm home and considerable hay pasture and meadow.”¹⁷⁶ In neighboring Rock County multiple fires occurred later in the summer with usual and unique causes. A usual cause of fire was lightning. A lightning storm caused a fire near Long Pine in August that fortunately did no harm.¹⁷⁷ A unique cause of fire happened later in the month when a fire started by the sun shining on a glass bottle in the back of Ernest Lanz’s wagon nearly destroyed the Andy McNance home a mile away.¹⁷⁸ In September, a spark

¹⁷⁴ *Rock County Leader*, July 26, 1934, 1

¹⁷⁵ *Wheeler County Independent*, August 6, 1936, 1

¹⁷⁶ *Rock County Leader*, July 23, 1936, 1

¹⁷⁷ *Rock County Leader*, August 6, 1936, 1

¹⁷⁸ *Rock County Leader*, August 27, 1936, 1

from an automobile caused yet another blaze. The *Rock County Leader* reported in its September 3, 1936, issue that: “A short in the electrical wiring system of the Frank Clark car is blamed for a fire originated on the old Will B. Good place, near Rose, Monday morning. Clark had been called to the place to put down a well and in driving across the fields he hit an old trail that knocked off the horn of his car...this caused a short and melting insulation dropped off into the only high grass there and started a blaze. The fire was cornered on the Ehram place, within a short time. No hay was destroyed, however, a considerable amount of pasture was burned off...”¹⁷⁹ Random causes of fire continued in Rock County in 1937. In September it was believed that the sun shining on a piece of glass was responsible for a forty acre fire in the William Maves pasture.¹⁸⁰ One wonders if such uncertain deductions were extrapolated by local residents or newspapermen in an era when better forensic methods were unavailable in order to give people some sense of closure over the event. Otherwise, Sandhills residents could have become skeptical of their neighbors intentions towards them and this in turn would damage the cohesiveness of many Sandhills communities. In any event, fires continued in the hills as the decade came to a close. In late-March 1938, Garden County was struck by the flaming menace as a prairie fire burned the Pat Norton’s pasture north of J. C. Reed’s farm west of Oshkosh.¹⁸¹ A week later, Anton Mezzano’s barn on the north side of Oshkosh burned to the ground.¹⁸² The *Garden County News* reported the damage: “Several head of stock, stabled in the barn were saved, but an automobile, all harness, saddles, tools, etc., together with eight tons of hay, 300 bushels of oats and about ninety bushels of barley were burned. Mezzano estimates his loss at \$2,500, which was

¹⁷⁹ *Rock County Leader*, September 3, 1936, 1

¹⁸⁰ *Rock County Leader*, September 2, 1937, 1

¹⁸¹ *Garden County News*, March 24, 1938, 1

¹⁸² *Garden County News*, March 31, 1938, 1

partially covered by insurance.”¹⁸³ In late- June 1938, fires occurred in the dry grass of Holt County near O’Neill. The *Holt County Independent* described the incidents: “The fire department was called out Monday morning for a grass fire just north of the Dick Morrison home. The four-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Morrison had got hold of a match some place and had set fire to the grass. He got his eyebrows and hair singed, but otherwise escaped from any burns. The fire department was called out again at 6:20 Wednesday evening for a grass fire south of the Burlington tracks and a block west of the depot.”¹⁸⁴ More fires continued the following year. In the fall of 1939 the farm home of Mrs. R. B. Lewis in Loup County burned to the ground while she and her son were away from home.¹⁸⁵ Thus, throughout the Great Depression fires were unpredictable in the Sandhills, had multiple origins, and could happen at any time in such a dry environment. These events affected rural agriculturalists and town residents alike.

Floundering Fowl and Fish: The Effects of the Sandhills’ Environmental Challenges on Wildlife

Sandhills’ wildlife was greatly impacted by the effects of drought and storms during the Great Depression as many died from inadequate food and water sources or disease. Whereas animals such as rabbits and prairie dogs flourished in plague like numbers, ducks and fish had periods of low population and survival rates. In comparison to present times, many large game animals were not hunted in great numbers in the hills during the 1930s as their population numbers were lower than they are today. Sandhillers displayed progressive attitudes through the application of conservation principles that diverged from old frontier ideologies which encouraged game eradication (i.e. overhunting buffalo) as they worked to

¹⁸³ *Garden County News*, March 31, 1938, 1

¹⁸⁴ *Holt County Independent*, June 24, 1938, 1

¹⁸⁵ *The Taylor Clarion*, October 19, 1939, 1

protect wild animals that were endangered by the drought. Deer were one such species. During the Depression, deer were generally protected and poachers, no matter the species, were frowned upon. At the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey, coyotes were regularly trapped by Federal hunters to prevent them from killing off deer with excess in the forest. Sometimes they dispatched other four legged pests in an extremely prejudicial manner as well. The December 11, 1930, issue of the *Blaine County Booster* described one such hunting incident: “While riding his bait line for coyotes on the Nebraska National Forest, near Halsey, recently, Government Hunter Earl Campau of the U. S. Biological Survey, accompanied by F. G. McGuinn of Anselmo, found a large doe that had been freshly killed by a mongrel hound dog. As they rode up, the dog was busily engaged in eating on the deer. Neither of the men had a gun, so they caught the dog with a lasso and fed it three strychnine pills used for coyote bait. That particular dog will no longer kill deer.”¹⁸⁶ Ranchers were also concerned with poachers and most sought to protect deer herds from them. The August 27th, 1931, issue of *The Burwell Tribune* highlighted the deer experience of Garfield County resident George Lange: “George Lange saw an unusual sight on the old Williams ranch on the Gracie Tuesday. With another party he was driving across the hills in that section when three deer jumped up a short distance from them. A buck, a doe with a young fawn by her side. They did not appear to be very wild and showed no apparent haste to make a get away. A game warden that keeps in touch with wild life told not long ago that there was bunch of some thirty deer in that vicinity and these there are probably a part of that herd. Ranchmen in that vicinity say that it is not an unusual thing to see some of the herd quite frequently.

¹⁸⁶ *Blaine County Booster*, December 11, 1930, 1

Ranchmen keep pretty close tab on them and would go pretty hard on the poacher caught trying to kill them off.”¹⁸⁷

Through Sandhills’ ranchers’ conservation efforts, the deer population became so abundant five years later that they became difficult to contain. Many fed on Sandhillers’ gardens as the drought worsened, thus creating a further hassle for the people of the hills. The *Rock County Leader* reported of the effects of an increased deer population near Bassett in mid-August 1936:

Clark, who lives along Pine creek, northwest of Bassett, was in town the first of the week looking for a game warden to find out just what he could do to keep the animals off his place. He reported that from six to eight young deer had discovered that his large garden spot was good grazing and were making regular trips there until they had almost ruined it. Of course Clark did not like the idea of his garden being ruined as he was growing vegetables for the market and that meant the loss of his summer’s work.¹⁸⁸

In the 1930s, Sandhillers cooperated to protect deer herds from withering into non-existence; however, when deer numbers rebounded in the middle years of the decade these animals had to rely on Sandhiller grown vegetable gardens as the drought ravaged pastures of the hills could not support all of them. Thus, helping wildlife could inadvertently impact one’s own food sources. Despite these consequences, Sandhills residents’ continued to maintain a somewhat symbiotic relationship with the region’s wildlife. One such species that Sandhillers endeavored to protect was pheasants.

Throughout the Depression, pheasants were generally protected by Sandhillers as they were considered useful combatants against the region’s numerous pests by agriculturalists. At the outset of the Depression this was not the case as some Sandhillers hoped to hunt the birds as they had done in the 1920s and agriculturalists hoped to make a

¹⁸⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, August 27, 1931, 1

¹⁸⁸ *Rock County Leader*, August 13, 1936, 1

profit from their success. Times were economically difficult enough, however, that cash payments for birds could not even be assured. *The Burwell Tribune* reported of Garfield County's pheasant hunting prospects and the expectations for a huge profit from bird hunting in its October 22, 1931, issue: "Garfield County formers (sic) profited but little financially by reason of the recent open pheasant season. Land owners were allowed to collect fifty cents each for each bird killed, that amount to be paid in script, the script being procurable in books of -2.50 each at the office of the County Clerk. County Clerk Anderson tells us that during the entire open season only three books were sold through this office."¹⁸⁹ As the decade progressed, pheasant hunting became frowned upon and decreased in the hills until finally some counties were placed under pheasant hunting bans. In September 1934, Box Butte, Cherry, and Sheridan counties prevented hunting pheasants whereas two years later Box Butte and Sheridan were removed from the restricted list and Arthur, Grant, Garden, Keith, Hooker, McPherson, Lincoln, Logan, Brown, Rock, and Holt were placed on it.¹⁹⁰ Beyond sparing birds from overhunting, there was a more pragmatic reason for protecting them. The *Rock County Leader* wrote in mid-August 1936: "...the restrictions in territory and time is due to the request of many counties where farmers feel the birds should be protected this year on account of their work in holding down the grasshoppers."¹⁹¹ In 1938, the survival of pheasants in Howard County, to the south of Greeley, was directly impacted by a combination of drought and overhunting. The situation was so precarious that more birds had to be shipped in from elsewhere to insure their survival within that eastern county. *The Burwell Tribune* mused over the situation in early-September 1938: "The State Game and Forestation Department recently transplanted five hundred pheasants in Howard County.

¹⁸⁹ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 22, 1931, 4

¹⁹⁰ *Blaine County Booster*, September 20, 1934, 1; *Rock County Leader*, August 13, 1936, 1

¹⁹¹ *Rock County Leader*, August 13, 1936, 1

Less than ten years ago pheasants became so plentiful in Howard county that farmers were complaining that they were doing damage to their crops and hundreds were trapped by the state department for transplanting in parts of the state where they were not so numerous. Their near extermination in so short a time is given as dry weather which is said to have destroyed the young and hunters following the open season killed the older birds. There will be no open season in Howard county this season and probably for other seasons until the birds become more numerous in that locality.”¹⁹² Pheasant hunting bans remained in partial effect until the end of the Depression. In October 1939 pheasant hunting was again closed in Garfield County to the dismay of the Burwell newspaper editor who, finally begrudgingly accepting the ban, wrote in the newspaper: “If the closed season, however, has a tendency to improve the grasshopper situation it was a wise move.”¹⁹³ As with deer, Sandhillers developed a communal relationship with wild birds that ensured mutual survival. The birds were not shot in exchange for eating grasshoppers which, if allowed to run rampant, would destroy farmers’ crops and hinder one’s own economic survival. Thus, for Sandhillers conserving nature became fiscally prudent as well as a moral responsibility.

Beyond pheasants, ducks were another type of wild fowl negatively affected by drought in the Sandhills. In 1932, ducks died in the thousands in northern Sandhills lakes from a seemingly unexplainable ailment. The *Hooker County Tribune* reported of Valentine Game Preserve Superintendent Gano Amundson’s investigation into the problem in mid-September 1932: “Gano Amundson, superintendent of the game preserve near Valentine, accompanied by Dan Janzen of Kansas City, also one of the bureau of biological survey drove to the Irwin community Monday to investigate tales of ducks dying in large numbers

¹⁹² *The Burwell Tribune*, September 1, 1938, 1

¹⁹³ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 19, 1939, 1

because of some sickness. These men patrolled (sic) about two-thirds of the shoreline of north Gay lake and found by actual count 2,250 ducks either dead or dying. Mr. Amundson states that a conservative estimate would place the death loss at over 5,000 during the past three weeks.”¹⁹⁴ It was soon discovered that the mysterious deaths were linked to the drought but not due to starvation or overheating. *The Valentine Republican* further reported: “Mr. Amundson states that this sickness in wild fowl has been investigated by the biological survey, and that it has been found to be due to the presence of a germ in the food eaten by the ducks on or around dried up lakes and ponds, which gives them an intestinal infection. The only remedy is to remove them to fresh water before they are too far gone...”¹⁹⁵ Through this human stewardship the duck intestinal ailment eventually subsided and later in the decade due to a return of limited rain showers the lakes had recovered as well thus eliminating the deadly germ. By the late-1930s, the duck population had recovered enough to once again be legally hunted by Sandhills outdoorsmen. While duck hunting was legal, it was still conducted within reason so the duck population was not threatened. Duck hunters in Grant County tempered their efforts in 1937. The *Grant County Tribune* wrote of the opening of duck season in mid- October: “A few local hunters were out but most of them are waiting for colder weather and the flight of northern ducks. While there are not as many ducks or as much water in the sandhill country as in past years, there are a good many ducks here...That there will be more hunters out this season than last year is indicated by the fact that Postmaster Johnson has sold 35 federal duck stamps to date. This is the same number as sold for the entire season of 1936. This, however, is far below a few years ago when

¹⁹⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, September 22, 1932, 1

¹⁹⁵ *The Valentine Republican*, September 16, 1932, 1

approximately 175 stamps were sold at the local post office.”¹⁹⁶ Thus, the duck population was rehabilitated but it was a long process further lengthened by the continued drought. Despite this, Sandhillers took an active effort in saving the region’s duck population, demonstrating a sustained interest in ecological conservation.

Like ducks and deer, Sandhills’ conservationists also worked to save the region’s declining fish population during the Depression. The receding lakes that produced germs harmful to waterfowl also were deadly to fish as they left them little habitat in which to live. Sandhillers began preserving fish populations as soon as the summer of 1930. Elizabeth Egan of Grant County posted a notice in the Hyannis newspaper in early-July notifying fishermen to stay off her land under threat of legal prosecution.¹⁹⁷ Later in the decade state conservation officials began seining Sandhills lakes in an effort to save fish which were threatened by low lake levels and moved them to other lakes and ponds in other parts of the state which contained more water. The *Grant County Tribune* reported of seining efforts in the hills in May 1937: “The famous fishing lakes of the sandhills are not what they were a few years ago, Lee Hudleson, superintendent of state conservation force reports. Mr. Hudleson, with a crew of four men, has been busy the past three weeks seining fish from lakes in this area and moving them to the sandpit lakes in the vicinity of Fremont and Louisville, and other points in the eastern part of the state where there is deep water...Mr. Hudleson said that practically all of the scale fish in the sandhills lakes died during the past winter, due to shallow water which froze to the shallow bottom in some places. Bullheads are the only variety that survived, excepting in a few scattering deeper lakes.”¹⁹⁸ Later in the

¹⁹⁶ *Grant County Tribune*, October 13, 1937, 1

¹⁹⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, July 9, 1930, 1

¹⁹⁸ *Grant County Tribune*, May 5, 1937, 1

month Hudleson and his crew began seining lakes in Garden County near the Crescent Lake Game Refuge. The *Garden County News* reported on what they discovered: “The men reported finding no bullheads or perch in Blue Lake but they pulled out about eighteen or twenty large carp. Ed S. Wood brought one of the carp into town and weighed it in at 14 ½ pounds. In Crane Lake there were perhaps a thousand small carp pulled out and a few perch and bullheads were found in that lake.”¹⁹⁹ The seining operations continued into the fall of 1937 as the lakes remained low. Thousands of bullheads were taken from Frye Lake near Hyannis in late-September and transported east.²⁰⁰

The situation worsened in October as Hudleson and his men doubled down on their efforts in Grant County. The *Tribune* reported on why so many Grant County fish were removed at that time:

Low water is making it necessary to remove the fish in order to save them from freezing during the winter. Nothing but bullheads are being found by the seining crew as all other bass and other scale fish winter-killed last year...the fish are being taken to a state owned lake at Memphis, Nebr., to keep through the winter. That lake is closed to fishing and if the sandhill lakes come back to normal next spring the fish will be brought back here.²⁰¹

A week later it was reported that thirty-five tubs of fish were removed from Frye Lake which were eventually placed in tanks on a truck for transportation.²⁰² By the spring of 1938, the environmental situation had improved somewhat as fish were being replanted in Sandhills waterways. The *Garden County News* reported on such efforts in the southwestern hills in early-March 1938: “Harry Runyan, superintendent of the Benkelman hatchery, was here with the state fish truck loaded with 2,000 fingerling rainbow trout, which were planted in Blue Creek. The young trout varied in length from four to seven inches and this batch will form a

¹⁹⁹ *Garden County News*, May 20, 1937, 1

²⁰⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, September 29, 1937, 1

²⁰¹ *Grant County Tribune*, October 20, 1937, 1

²⁰² *Grant County Tribune*, October 27, 1937, 1

nice nucleus which will develop in a short time, some excellent fishing for sportsmen of this section. Under present conditions Blue creek is listed by the state game forestation and parks commission as an ideal stream for the propagation of trout...²⁰³ Through tactics such as monitoring fish and water levels, preventing deer poaching by man or animals, rescuing ducks from disease infested shores, and encouraging pheasant preservation to assist with pest removal, Sandhillers exhibited conservationist tendencies as a method to protect the region's ecological balance from further damage. In this regard they followed the ideology preached by Frederic Clements, which supported conservation on the Great Plains, albeit primarily regarding soil conservation, in the late-1930s²⁰⁴ and thus further differentiated themselves from their Great Plains brethren who plowed more lands than they protected during this era.

Conclusion

Drought, when coupled with dust storms, grasshopper plagues, summer heat, and fires made life extremely difficult for Sandhills residents. Rural Sandhillers who did not have adequate roads were at times cut off from town and due to such remoteness the idea that they were alone on the "frontier" was reinforced. Wild animals were also negatively affected by the deteriorating Sandhills environment as lake levels declined, disease contaminated food sources, and heat wilted food sources. Through a concerted effort by local agriculturalists and state officials, wild animals were protected from further harm. In so doing, Sandhillers displayed progressive attitudes that were not necessarily indicative of practices elsewhere on the Great Plains. Due to the multitude of environmental hardships for many Sandhillers, it

²⁰³ *Garden County News*, March 3, 1938, 1

²⁰⁴ Frederic E. Clements, "Climatic Cycles and Human Populations in the Great Plains," *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. XLCII, No. 3, (September 1938), 193-210, 201, Box 63, Folder 15, Coll. 1678, Edith S. and Frederic E. Clements Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

seemed like all of creation itself had abandoned them to a world where any opportunity at agricultural economic success was quickly snuffed out by any or all of these vicious factors. Faced with these environmental problems many individuals, whether they lived in the country or in town, sought other methods of economic and personal survival to protect their way of life. Several of these people had to leave the Sandhills to do so. Many sold out, lost their mortgages, or simply abandoned their lands and properties. Farmers or ranchers who held onto small acreages of six-hundred forty acres or less generally had to abandon the traditional American dream of their own Jeffersonian utopia, rather they knew of this yeoman farmer ideal or not, as the drought and the aforementioned climatic factors that went with it forced their failures. No Sandhills county was immune from a decline in the farming population and or the number of acres farmed. All were impacted by environmental calamities in one way or another as were the agricultural groups and businessmen who lived within their boundaries. Despite these challenges, many Sandhills residents were able to profit and sustain themselves and their families while others had their individual spheres shrink all around them. Those who survived left an indelible mark on Sandhills society throughout the rest of the Depression and World War II as well as into the Cold War era. These individuals were land speculators and large ranchers.

Chapter Two

Sheriff Sales, Speculators, and Sand: The Struggle for Sandhills' Agricultural Supremacy during the Great Depression

During the Great Depression, the ever unsettled and difficult Sandhills environment took its toll on Sandhills agriculturalists, whether farmer or rancher, and forced many to sell their holdings. Several found new occupations and remained locally in a different capacity, but the majority of small land holders who failed ignominiously sought a fresh start and migrated to other places in the United States. Just as many of their contemporaries in other parts of the Great Plains did, most of these sojourning Sandhillers sought new opportunities in places such as the Pacific Northwest or the bountiful fruit producing valleys of John Steinbeck's California. Despite the difficulties endured by the majority of Sandhills' agriculturalists and the failures suffered by many due to the prevalence of dust storms, drought, fire, and plagues, a significant number of Sandhills individuals prospered from the land during the Great Depression. Large ranchers were able to maintain their holdings and, in many, instances add to them by taking advantage of the agricultural misfortunes of the region's waning small farmer class by buying them out or acquiring their foreclosed lands at sheriff sales. Companies and/or individuals engaged in land speculating also financially benefitted during this time of economic strife by buying the lands of failed agriculturalists and reselling them for a

small profit. Many were left burdened with the mortgages of previous owners; however, those who were not profited in the following years and decades due to pragmatic insight and patience. Not all who failed agriculturally were small farmers. Many small to medium ranching operations did not survive the environmental travails of the 1930s. Of the smaller to medium agriculturalists those who engaged in diversified practices, such as crop growth coupled with limited livestock production, tended to fare the best during the Depression in comparison to their contemporaries who did not. Larger ranchers also survived as they held more lands which their cattle could be rotated on for grazing purposes. Life was not easy for many of these ranchers as they constantly had to sell off their cattle and buy new herds during a time of fluctuating cattle prices and government livestock purchases in order to remain solvent. This chapter will examine the agricultural economic conditions and identify the correlating environmental challenges faced in the Sandhills and in nearby Great Plains states at the outset of the Great Depression in order to discern the similarities and differences revolving around crop production in the region as a whole, how the difficult Sandhills' environmental conditions and declining economy led to a trend away from smaller agricultural units to larger ones, the agricultural foreclosures and ensuing migrations that were a part of Sandhills life, land speculators that profited from such foreclosures and agricultural failings, some examples of Sandhills ranchers who grew their holdings during the period, and how diversified agriculturalists navigated this time of environmental and financial uncertainty most successfully through utilization of various agricultural practices and business dealings.

Bankruptcy and Boom: Agricultural Challenges in the Sandhills and on the Great Plains, late-1920s to early-1930s

During the 1920s, prior to the more well-known drought years of the following decade, agricultural depression was common in many parts of the northern Great Plains and interior Rocky Mountain west even while much of the rest of the country was enjoying a seeming new gilded age. Wyoming agriculturalists neighboring Sandhillers to the west were some of the hardest hit as they faced hardships from drought following the conclusion of World War I and subsequent banking failures. Wyoming historian T. A. Larson wrote of the difficulties they faced: “Thousands of homesteaders gave up in the 1920s and either abandoned their lands before patent or sold them after patent to more successful neighbors... Wyoming homesteaders who were not just enlarging their holdings found it difficult to make a living because this period of farm depression reached almost everywhere and because little of Wyoming’s land can be farmed successfully without irrigation and even less can be ranched successfully in 640-acre units.”²⁰⁵ Times were equally difficult for agriculturalists to the north in Montana. Historian Earl Pomeroy wrote of agriculturalists’ plight: “Over a fourth of farmers in the northern counties of Montana lost their land in 1920-23...”²⁰⁶ They were not alone as their contemporaries in the region subsequently experienced similar issues. Times were equally challenging in Nebraska. Nebraska historians James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle wrote of the state’s agricultural challenges during the 1920s: “There was a corresponding decrease in farm values which dropped about 31 percent from \$4.2 billion in 1920 to \$2.9 billion in 1930. The value of land and buildings

²⁰⁵ T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, Second Edition, Revised (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 416

²⁰⁶ Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the 20th Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 66

decreased more than 48 percent.”²⁰⁷ Such decreases in property value and increases in foreclosure became common throughout the region. Pomeroy further wrote: “Plains states that had led in increases in homesteading, agricultural settlement, and new mortgage debt in the second decade of the century led in rates of foreclosure in the third decade as farmers who had overextended themselves lost what remained of their equities; in 1926-31 more than one in five in Montana and the Dakotas; one in eight in Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. Meanwhile, plantings in wheat and harvests of wheat again increased spectacularly in the 1920s but on fewer, larger farms.”²⁰⁸ The latter seemingly was viewed as the solution to the 1920s Great Plains agricultural depression. Plant more and the environment would take care of the boom and bounty. Historian R. Douglas Hurt wrote of how this strategy was seemingly implemented by agriculturalists on the southern plains with great consistency during this period: “Despite the farm depression of the 1920s, agricultural expansion in the southern Great Plains continued at a rapid pace, particularly in the region that would soon become known as the Dust Bowl...When wartime agricultural prices collapsed nationwide in the early 1920s, plains farmers broke more sod and planted more wheat to offset the economic loss. New technology and depressed farm prices stimulated southern Great Plains farmers to break 32 million acres of sod between 1909 and 1929 for new cropland, and wheat acreage expanded 200 percent between 1925 and 1931; in some counties, this expansion ranged from 400 to 1,000 percent.”²⁰⁹ For a time this solution seemed to work as the agricultural economy somewhat stabilized. One such area of the plains where economic and

²⁰⁷ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, Third Edition (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 307

²⁰⁸ Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the 20th Century*, 66

²⁰⁹ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011), 85

agricultural prosperity seemed certain to continue flourishing as the 1930s dawned was the Nebraska Sandhills.

In the days immediately following the Great Stock Market Crash of October 24th, 1929, agricultural prosperity continued unabated in the Sandhills as agriculturalists were seemingly unaffected or unaware of the dire economic storm brewing on the east coast. The daily lives of ranchers and farmers, and the business transactions that accompanied them, went on as usual in early-November 1929. Ranchers made significant financial profits from cattle sales that in the years to come were looked back upon with temporal envy and a heavy sense of nostalgia as cattle prices later plummeted. One such individual who made a significant financial windfall in the days following the onset of the Great Depression was P. H. Young. *The Valentine Republican* noted his prosperity from a large cattle sale held at Valentine in its November 1st, 1929, issue: “A large crowd of feeder and stock cattle buyers from South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and other states was present to bid at P. H. Young’s sale here Wednesday afternoon, and prices ranged high. At this sale the animals were sold by the head, in carload lots, and 1343 head brought a total of \$96,000. One lot of 46 heifer calves brought \$47.25 per head. One lot of 41 steer calves \$70.50 per head. One lot of 39 yearling steers brought \$74.25.”²¹⁰ Sandhills’ ranchers such as Young were not the only ones prospering. In nearby Sheridan County, as in other areas of the Great Plains, farming was booming as farmers continued to plant wheat in record numbers. *The Rushville Recorder* reported in its August 21st, 1930, issue under the heading, “Increase In Land Cultivation,” that the acres of improved land within Sheridan County had spiked from 168,890 acres in

²¹⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, November 1, 1929, 1

1925 to 293,899 in 1930.²¹¹ In 1929, the county had 221,060 acres of cultivated land and thus increased this number by 72,839 acres within the next year alone.²¹² While much of the county's farming took place on the county's non-Sandhills soil, the increase in acres under cultivation suggests that the county's Sandhills land, just as during the days of Jules Sandoz in the 1890s, was also utilized in some regard for farming operations. In any regard, the late-1920s and early-1930s was a prosperous time for Sheridan County agrarians. They were not alone in experiencing and enjoying this brief agricultural boom on the Great Plains.

As the 1920s came to a close, expanded cultivation similarly continued in other areas of the plains as well, with no plan of stopping in the foreseeable future. Kansas historian Craig Miner wrote of the importance of increased wheat production to the people of western Kansas in the late-1920s: "There were several major players in large-scale farming in Western Kansas in the early 1930s...The Wheat Farming Company, formed by six Ellis County farmers in September 1927 with a capital of \$150,000, got the most publicity. This was perhaps partly due to the fact that it was the first 'dirt farmer' corporation in Kansas...In 1929, its officers and foremen met at Colby with the staff of the experiment station there with a view to using the data that had been built up over the years. By then it controlled 33,000 acres of wheat in nine counties and would eventually operate over 70,000 acres. It had several superintendents, a shop foreman in charge of a machine shop in Hays, and a specialized foreman in charge of transportation and equipment. The common stock paid a dividend of 11.5 percent."²¹³ The planting of wheat was of primary importance for the agriculturalists of southwestern Kansas and southeastern Colorado as well. Hurt wrote of

²¹¹ *The Rushville Recorder*, August 21, 1930, 1

²¹² *The Rushville Recorder*, August 21, 1930, 1

²¹³ Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 246-248

their agricultural practices: “By the early 1930s, most of the good farmland had been planted in the southern Great Plains. In southwestern Kansas, more than 50 percent of the range had been plowed for cropland, and in Baca County, Colorado, about 60 percent of the sod had been broken for wheat. More cropland meant less protective grass cover to hold the soil against the nearly constant winds. Continued plowing by the farmers in the Great Plains pulverized the soil, and in little more than five years after the native sod had been broken, it was in an excellent condition for blowing.”²¹⁴ Not all Great Plains agriculturalists continually participated in the over plowing and planting practices exhibited by some of the wheat farmers of Kansas, Colorado, and Oklahoma.

By 1931 it was apparent that overplowing practices had run their course, at least to some people on the Great Plains, and that changes needed to be made. Whereas a year earlier, Sheridan County farmers had boasted of their wheat production in the Sandhills and on its hinterlands, they were now ready to cut back on their acreages in production. The January 8th, 1931, issue of *The Rushville Recorder* reported on the efforts of Nebraska farmers to cut back on their wheat acreages: “Winter wheat acreage in Nebraska have been reduced 12 percent, according to a report issued recently by the state and federal division of agricultural statistics. The acreage reduction for the country as a whole is placed at 1.1 percent. ‘Nebraska farmers,’ the report comments, ‘are taking the lead in adjusting their industry.’ A total of 3,269,000 acres of winter wheat were sown last fall as compared to the revised estimate of 3,715,000 acres sown in the fall of 1929. This is a reduction for the country as a whole is only 471,000 acres. ‘Apparently the farmers of other states are not cooperating with the farm board in reducing wheat acreage as they are in Nebraska,’ the

²¹⁴ Hurt, *The Big Empty*, 85

report suggests.”²¹⁵ Despite these efforts at early soil conservation and self-imposed grain market price controls, the hardships of Great Plains agriculturalists had already begun and only worsened as the Great Depression wore on into the 1930s. Olson and Naugle wrote of the rapidly declining conditions for Nebraska farmers during the Hoover administration: “Nebraska’s farm income was greater in 1929 than it had been in any year since the end of the war, but prices started to sag in the last quarter and continued to fall until December 1932, when they were the lowest in the state’s history-lower even than those of the middle 1890s.”²¹⁶ Whereas Sandhills ranchers were unaffected by the issues faced by wheat farmers in the Sandhills and in other parts of the Great Plains, they and their farming neighbors who had had prosperous years in 1929 and 1930 would not remain immune to the changing economic and physical environment of the early 1930s. Extensive drought, dust storms, severe weather, and animal plagues reshaped the holdings of Sandhills agriculturalists throughout the 1930s. Such a prognostication was not foreseen on that November day in 1929 when P. H. Young made a small fortune in cattle sales. As with their contemporaries in the Dust Bowl region of the southern plains, smaller Sandhills’ agriculturalists suffered greatly at the whims of the Sandhills environment even though they had not participated in over plowing or grazing to the extent of other areas. Many lost everything they had.

Sandhills Environment and Agricultural Acreage: The Decline of the Small Agriculturalist

In nearly every Sandhills county, the number of small farmers and ranchers was greatly reduced by the severe drought of the 1930s. With the passage of the Kinkaid Act in

²¹⁵ *The Rushville Recorder*, January 8, 1931, 7

²¹⁶ Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 309

1904, Sandhillers were allowed to homestead 640 acre sections instead of just 160 acres, as had been the norm in the mid-nineteenth century, due to the Sandhills' arid environment and sandy soils. This larger acreage allotment was the minimum required for success in region's difficult terrain. Despite this, larger operations still did not dominate agriculture in the region in the 1920s as there was a somewhat even division between the total number of larger and smaller operations. In 1925, Arthur County totaled 281 total farms of which 122 were comprised of 1,000 to 4,999 acres and only 8 owned more than 5,000 acres.²¹⁷ Many other Sandhills counties had a similar distribution of agricultural operations during the decade. In Blaine County in 1925, there were 252 total farms of which 113 had 1,000 to 4,999 acres wherein 6 consisted of more than 5,000 acres.²¹⁸ To the northeast, Brown County held a total of 765 farms in 1925 whereas neighboring Rock County totaled 600.²¹⁹ Of the 765 farms in Brown County, 157 of them totaled 1,000 to 4,999 acres and of these 6 were comprised of 5,000 acres or more whereas in Rock County 171 farms consisted of 1,000 to 4,999 acres and only 3 of these held 5,000 acres or more.²²⁰ In Garfield County there were 521 total agricultural operations in 1925 and of these only 37 were made up of 1,000 to 4,999 acres or more, 2 of which actually maintained more than 5,000 acres.²²¹ In the central Sandhills,

²¹⁷ 1925 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table I, 1122. The term "farm" was utilized in a general manner by United States Department of Agriculture Census records during this period. All agricultural operations were called farms whether they were ranches or not in order to make record keeping practices more efficient. In the Sandhills, agriculturalists that owned and managed large operations of 1,000 acres or more were ranchers due to topography, soil structure, and an abundance of quality grasses on which to graze livestock. Farmers typically farmed in areas where there were available small, flat valleys. The Sandhills rugged topography, which in its western part consists of extremely steep hills containing eroded "blowouts," coupled with an arid environment and sandy soil curtailed the economic profitability and environmental feasibility of large wheat or corn farms. The region's ranching tradition began in the late-1870s and early-1880s with the introduction of cattle. Those who maintained large agricultural operations into the twentieth century knew of their predecessors' success with cattle and continued the practice as it was more economically efficient as well as environmentally and agriculturally practical.

²¹⁸ 1925 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table I, 1123

²¹⁹ 1925 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table I, 1123, 1131

²²⁰ 1925 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table I, 1123, 1131

²²¹ 1925 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table I, 1126

Hooker County had a lower number of agricultural operations than these other counties. In 1925, it totaled only 155 operations and of these 81 consisted of between 1,000 to 4,999 acres.²²² The county only had 3 operations in the mid-1920s that totaled over 5,000 acres.²²³ These numbers changed ten years later as the Great Depression and the accompanying Great Plains drought was in effect.

The decline of small agriculturalists was highly apparent throughout the region by the middle of the 1930s. In 1935, in Brown County there were 210 farms of 1,000 acres or more, 74 farms or ranches that were medium sized operations of 700 to 999 acres, and 114 smaller classed operations consisting of 500 to 699 acres out of a total of 707 farms/ranches operating on 714, 526 acres.²²⁴ In 1940, in Brown County larger operations increased by five to 215, medium sized operations fell from 74 to 66, and smaller operations representing the traditional Kinkaidier faction were impacted the worst with a decrease by nearly thirty from 114 to 86.²²⁵ In the ranching paradise of neighboring Cherry County, small operations were also impacted. In 1935, the county held 750 large ranching operations of over 1,000 acres, 169 medium sized operations from 700 to 999 acres, and 170 small operations of 500 to 699 acres out of a total of 1,450 farms on 3,511,661 acres of agricultural land.²²⁶ Not surprisingly of the number of total farms/ranches in the county in 1935, almost half were of the large variety. In 1940, all three of these categories in Cherry County had dropped off as there were

²²² 1925 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 1127

²²³ 1925 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 1127

²²⁴ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 352

²²⁵ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 595

²²⁶ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 353

now “only” 679 large operations, 131 medium sized operations, and, once again with the largest fall off, 117 smaller operations.²²⁷ To the east, in Holt County, the pattern continued.

In 1935, Holt County contained 318 large operations which worked over 1,000 acres, 274 medium sized operations, and 272 smaller operations maintaining 500 to 699 acres out of 2,471 farms utilizing 1,435,057 acres of county land.²²⁸ By 1940, large operations had increased in number to 333, medium sized operations fell from 274 to 226, and smaller operations had shown a slight increase to 275.²²⁹ While this was a positive increase for smaller agriculturalist it did not mean that it was a good agricultural trend overall for the region. These changes were a result of some medium-sized agriculturalists increasing their holdings and becoming larger operators while others suffered large losses due to the drought and environmental calamities and became small farmers/ranchers. Such changes reinforced the generally negative situation facing agriculturalists with less than 1,000 acres in the Sandhills. Thus, the downward trend for 640 acre homesteads remained at the end of the Great Depression. Such was the case in Hooker County. In Hooker County large operators fell from 98 in 1935 to 73 in 1940, medium sized agriculturalists were impacted the least with a slight decline from 14 to 13, and small farmers and ranchers of 500-699 acres fell in number from 18 in 1935 to 9 in 1940.²³⁰ In Lincoln County, large operations increased from 376 in 1935 to 380 in 1940, medium operations fell from 204 to 197, and small operations of 500 to 699 acres fell from 285 in 1935 to 218 in 1940.²³¹ In Logan County, large agriculturalists fell from 75 in 1935 to 66 in 1940, medium sized farms and ranches increased

²²⁷ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 595

²²⁸ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 355

²²⁹ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 597

²³⁰ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 598

²³¹ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 599

from 28 to 33, and the big losers were once again small farmers and ranchers declining from 61 in 1935 to 49 in 1940.²³² Loup County large farmers and ranchers increased in number from 70 in 1935 to 80 in 1940 whereas their medium sized contemporaries working between 700 to 999 acres fell in number from 51 to 36 and their small agriculturalist neighbors decreased from 61 to 53 working operations.²³³ McPherson County, which had been repeatedly hit by dust storms, hail, tornados, and the excessive heat, decreased in total numbers across all three categories. The number of its larger operators fell from 151 in 1935 to 130 in 1940, its medium sized agriculturalists declined from 40 to 33, and, once again, small farmers and ranchers decreased from 62 to 52.²³⁴ Morrill County, renowned as geographic transitional zone consisting of Nebraska's geologic landmarks on the North Platte River, such as Chimney Rock, and the southwestern Sandhills, unsurprisingly also faced declining numbers. Morrill County's large operators fell from 185 in 1935 to 173, in 1940 medium sized farmers and ranchers decreased from 91 to 87, and its smaller agriculturalists fell from 125 in 1935 to 93 in 1940.²³⁵ In Rock and Sheridan Counties the numbers were different regarding small farmers.

In Rock County, in the northeastern Sandhills, medium sized operators were impacted the most. Rock County's large scale operators increased from 176 in 1935 to 181 in 1940, its medium sized farmers and ranchers significantly dropped off from 91 to 72, and its' smaller agriculturalists actually increased from 83 in 1935 to 90 in 1940.²³⁶ In Sheridan County only one of these three categories declined. Undoubtedly to the dismay of the

²³² 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 599

²³³ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 599

²³⁴ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 599

²³⁵ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, Table III, 599

²³⁶ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, Table III, 600

Sandhills most renowned small farmer and orchard grower, the late- Jules Sandoz, formerly of Sheridan County, it was the small scale agriculturalist. In Sheridan County, large scale agriculturalists increased from 361 in 1935 to 382 in 1940, medium sized operators increased from 147 to 150, and small farmers and ranchers fell from 210 to 162.²³⁷ Finally, contrastingly in Wheeler County the number of farms and ranches in the three categories remained somewhat stable. Large agriculturalists decreased from 76 in 1935 to 72 in 1940, medium sized operators increased from 41 to 47, and small farmers and ranchers fell from 64 in 1935 to 61 in 1940.²³⁸ In the Sandhills during the Great Depression each county in the region experienced agricultural changes caused by environmental factors. While not all were identical, two main patterns emerged. Either all three categories of agriculturalist declined or the number of large scale farmers and ranchers remained relatively stable with a decline in the other two categories. Small scale agriculturalists always were on the decline; however, in the examples of Rock and Sheridan County it may have been because of upward mobility instead of due to exodus and drought. Likewise, when medium scale agriculturalists declined and large scale agriculturalists increased it was generally due to upward mobility for these lucky few. In any regard, whether small scale agriculturalists left the hills or somehow managed to survive the drought and acquire lands of their failed neighbors, the days of small Kinkaiders and homesteaders were long past. The medium to large scale rancher, who was long a part of Euro-American Sandhills agricultural development, tended to survive the Great Depression better and solidified his hold on Sandhills agricultural power. One such county where this was apparent was Blaine.

²³⁷ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, Table III, 601

²³⁸ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, Table III, 601

Blaine County was founded in 1886 and was immediately utilized by Euro-American settlers for agricultural purposes. The Anna Smith family, early pioneers in the county, raised a sod crop and grew sorghum in the late- 1880s.²³⁹ By the mid-1930s, small agriculturalists such as the Smiths became a rare demographic as environmental factors drove most from the hills. In 1935, there were a total of 291 farms in Blaine County and of this number 132 were larger operations comprised of 1,000 acres or more.²⁴⁰ The county also held 38 medium sized agricultural operations consisting of 700 to 999 total acres and 41 smaller operations, categorized as such by Kinkaid Act standards, which were comprised of only 500 to 699 acres.²⁴¹ Despite the prevalence of larger agricultural operations, Blaine County still held a smattering of farmers who followed the traditional example/stereotype of Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer. In 1935, eight small farms in the county were made up of 140 to 174 acres and four farms even operated on an incredulous, difficult, and barely sustainable 3 to 9 acres.²⁴² In all, of the 291 agricultural operations working on 385,790 acres in Blaine County in the mid-1930s, 121 were smaller farms or ranches which held an average of 699 acres or less.²⁴³ The downward trend in small farming in the county continued into the 1940s

By 1940, larger agricultural operations of 1,000 acres or more had increased by three where smaller operations continued to decline.²⁴⁴ Farms or ranches consisting of 500 to 699 acres decreased from forty-one in 1935 to thirty-four in 1940.²⁴⁵ Agricultural operations

²³⁹ The Blaine County History Book Committee, *History of Blaine County, Nebraska, Volume I* (Curtis Media Corporation, 1988), 4

²⁴⁰ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 352

²⁴¹ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 352

²⁴² 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 352

²⁴³ 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table IV, 352

²⁴⁴ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

²⁴⁵ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

comprised of 380 to 499 acres also declined from twenty-four in 1935 to eighteen in 1940.²⁴⁶ Whereas only three farms were added to the large 1,000 acres or more category and medium sized operators declined from thirty-eight in 1935 to thirty-two in 1940, it is apparent that only a small percentage of Blaine County agriculturalists were successful enough to attain an upward shift in agricultural and economic status during this time of environmental difficulty.²⁴⁷ Operations with smaller acreages also declined between 1935 and 1940, as farms and ranches consisting of only 140 to 699 acres decreased by twenty.²⁴⁸ The only slight increase in the number of small agricultural operations in Blaine County were amongst those with 139 acres or less as the total number of these farms rose by twelve.²⁴⁹ Ironically, of this group the smallest category on the fringe of sustainability, farms consisting of 3 to 9 acres, increased from only four in 1935 to seven in 1940.²⁵⁰ Such numbers once again suggest that some agriculturalists had held larger acreages in the early to mid-1930s; however, by 1940 they were forced to accept shrinking acreages caused by the difficult Sandhills environment as part of one of the harsh realities of maintaining a solvent operation during this period. By 1940 for many remaining Blaine County farmers their acreages had decreased so much so that they were pushed to the extreme margins of viability. The total number of farms/ranches in Blaine County was similar to what it had been in 1935 but the ability for these small farms to realistically sustain themselves in the semi-arid environment and turn a profit was decreased considerably by the loss of acreage. Thus, by 1940 smaller agriculturalists were in decline in Blaine County, as they were in other parts of the Sandhills, while large ranchers were able to maintain their numbers.

²⁴⁶ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

²⁴⁷ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

²⁴⁸ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

²⁴⁹ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

²⁵⁰ 1940 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table III, 594

This consistent decline in viable small operations during the Great Depression led many small farmers to leave the region. In other parts of the Great Plains, such as Kansas and Oklahoma, those who left were all primarily farmers, no matter how large their acreages were, as there was less competition between differing agricultural types for land as it was primarily used for farming. Historian Donald Worster wrote of the decline of farming in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, by the end of the 1930s due to environmental conditions: “Altogether there were 605 farms and ranches in the county by the end of the decade, down by almost 40 per cent from a total of 975 in 1935, and from 887 in 1930. Most of the dirt farmers lived on the level plains, where the soils were the tight clayey loams that lay across the county like a dark-colored wedge, with its base the eastern boundary line and its apex jutting several miles west of Boise City. In the drought years those heavy soils blew badly at times, causing widespread farm abandonment.”²⁵¹ In the Sandhills, some who left sold their lands to neighbors, whereas others sold to strangers either from the Sandhills or who were outsiders. Many had their lands seized and sold in a Sheriff sale for not paying their mortgage. Others just left, leaving little clue as to their destination. Those small operators who remained in the Sandhills clung to so few acres that they wished they had left as well. For many all they had left were their dreams of the fertile valleys of the Pacific Northwest just as western emigrants did one hundred years earlier.

To Lien In or Leave: The Realities of Migration and Foreclosure for Sandhillers

Throughout the 1930s many small Sandhills agriculturalists who had seen their acreages steadily decline sold out or were forced out and moved from the region to start a new life elsewhere. Many sought new opportunity in the Willamette River valley of Oregon

²⁵¹ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 103,105

or the orange orchards of central California. By 1940, 3,234 Nebraskans who had called Nebraska home in 1935 now lived in California's San Joaquin Valley and made up three percent of the migrant population.²⁵² During the same year there were 22,128 Nebraskans living in Los Angeles who only five years earlier claimed the Great Plains as their home and now made up five percent of the emigrant population in that California city.²⁵³ Frank Harding remarked of the population drain from Hooker County during this period: "...by the end of the 1930s, we'd lost over half of our population."²⁵⁴ Such departures were common in other parts of the Great Plains. Sanora Babb commented of the migrants who were forced to leave the region: "The dryland farmers of the High Plains were generally literate, self-reliant, frugal people whose aim was to keep their families intact and eventually start a new farm. Former homesteaders, or children of homesteaders, many dryland farmers had owned equity in their farms. But when crop prices fell after World War I, they were forced into tenancy- or foreclosure. Subsequently, the combination of Depression and drought in the 1930s brought them down the economic scale yet another notch to become farm laborers and, finally migrants."²⁵⁵ Historian Donald Worster wrote of such migrations in the Oklahoma Panhandle and the attitudes shown to those who left by those who stayed:

A foreclosed farm usually meant that another Cimarron family was moving, or had moved, away...Some kind of agricultural employment elsewhere was what most hoped for. So they usually became Okies- panhandle versions of the Joads...As real-life individuals, however, the Cimarron exodusters are lost to history. Ask a farmer who survived down in the Felt area: Who left here back in the thirties? Where did they go? What happened to them? And he remembers nothing. Even as they were packing up, the migrants were ignored; their names never appeared in the newspaper except in the legal columns, although if a successful businessman left it was front-page news or if the Baptist church had a sale of baked goods all the details were written up. A few of those who stayed behind did correspond for a year or two with a departed neighbor, living, it might be, near Phoenix or Fresno or

²⁵² James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 83

²⁵³ Gregory, *American Exodus*, 83

²⁵⁴ Taped interview conducted with Frank Harding by the author, Mullen, Nebraska, October 4, 2014

²⁵⁵ Sanora Babb, *On the Dirty Plate Trail: Remembering The Dust Bowl Refugee Camps* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 20

Little Rock, then stopped. Cimarron, which had never been a close-knit community, regrouped quickly, parceled out the land among the more wealthy, and went on as before- as if the departed had never existed.²⁵⁶

Unlike Worster's exodusters from Oklahoma and Kansas who left the Great Plains without little fanfare, minimal follow-up contact, or well-wishes from those who remained, former Sandhillers frequently contacted their friends and family they left behind in the hills through letters, that were sometimes published in newspapers, in order to keep them updated on their job prospects and progress in their new location. Those they wrote were happy to hear from them even if they knew deep down that they themselves could at any moment be writing letters from a similar far-off and foreign land.



(Abandoned farm house located halfway between North Platte and Maywood in Lincoln County along the border of the southern Sandhills, November 1, 1934. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG3349, photo 16.)

²⁵⁶ Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 123

Not all who left the Sandhills were agriculturalists but instead were also townspeople, former businessmen, and widows who had reached rock bottom financially. Businessmen were negatively affected by Sandhills migration as it meant the departure of another client or a potential client and in turn meant that their own pockets became lighter and dustier. Widows who had relied solely on their husband's income struggled to find new revenue. Due to this problem some left to find more profitable opportunities or to stay with distant family members. Many regional newspapers posted updates of where departing emigrants were moving to or how they were doing. Most of these individuals chased their dreams of prosperity further west in Colorado, California, and the Pacific Northwest whereas others went in other directions to places such as Missouri and Arkansas. Many migrated prior to the dirtiest days of the 1930s environmental drought suggesting that not all Sandhillers were as fortunate as P. H. Young had been with his November 1929 cattle sale and more commonly struggled with foreclosure even in the late-1920s. Friends or relatives of these Sandhills exodusters published the letters that they received from them in the local newspapers so everyone in that particular part of the region could keep up with their news. One such Sandhiller to receive such notoriety was Mrs. Josephine Gross, formerly of Hyannis. Gross mailed a letter to the *Grant County Tribune*, which was published in early-January 1930, which described her new life in Weister, Idaho: "I had a very busy summer this last year. Went out to the orchard in April and remained there until November. My apple crop turned out fine; eight car loads, for which I received a good price, \$1.25 per box...Some of my apples this fall only culled 10 per cent. That is good but next year will endeavor to do still better, as I really enjoy the work...We have such wonderful weather here; the first snow this winter on Dec. 15th, and weather has not yet been cold. I like it here

better each succeeding year and would be quite happy if I still had Mr. Gross with me. I miss him so much and although I have many good friends I still feel so alone.”²⁵⁷ Gross was not the only Sandhiller who made a new life in the Pacific Northwest, even if it was a lonely one. Mrs. R. W. Hanna of Garfield County also eventually went west in the early-1930s even though she chose a serendipitous route to get there. *The Burwell Tribune* foretold her plans in late-October 1930: “Mrs. R. W. Hanna having disposed of her Burwell residence property is making arrangements to leave Burwell at an early date. She tells us that she will move to Florida for this winter and next summer will probably go to the state of Washington to make her home for a time. Andy Snyder was the purchaser of the Hanna home in Burwell.”²⁵⁸ While Gross and Hanna did not leave agricultural lands in the hills, their examples are important for demonstrating that life was difficult in Sandhills communities as well as on ranches and farms. If one was a single woman or widow with none or few agricultural lands or available profit from them, there were far more job opportunities for financial success elsewhere than in the Sandhills during the early years of the Great Depression. Beyond employment, these women undoubtedly also moved west simply for a fresh start.

Other individuals bolted the Sandhills for similar reasons. One such individual was Ben Mathewson of Grant County. Mathewson eventually settled in Zelia, Washington.²⁵⁹ The *Grant County Tribune* noted his departure: “Ben Mathewson, a resident south of Whitman for more than twenty years disposed of his real and personal property, purchased a Chevrolet from the Matthews Chevrolet Co., Mullen, and recently left for the west coast

²⁵⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, January 1, 1930, 4

²⁵⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 30, 1930, 4

²⁵⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, July 11, 1934, 4

country with a view of locating there, making the trip by auto...’’²⁶⁰ In Morrill County, H. E. Spanogle took his family from Bridgeport to sunny California in late-1930. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of their departure: “H. E. Spanogle, who has successfully handled the tank wagon service of the Continental Oil Company for a number of years, has disposed of his interest in the business to Marshall Larkins. Mr. and Mrs. Spanogle plan to leave about the first of December for California where they will make their future home...The Spanogle family will be greatly missed by the people of Bridgeport who will be a unit in wishing them much success in their new location.’’²⁶¹ Thus, Sandhills exodusters came from all parts of the hills and all walks of life. The Great Depression did not discriminate in parceling out its hardships. Sometimes the only remedy to these challenges was to leave if all other options of survival had been exhausted.

Migration from the Sandhills continued into the mid-1930s during some of the driest and dirtiest years of the Depression. One such Blaine County family with dreams of a Pacific Coast sunset was the Clinebells. The years of 1934 and 1935 took their toll on many Blaine County agriculturalists forcing their departure. Two such emigrants were former Blaine County farmers James and Cora Clinebell. Due to drought and the inability to pay off their mortgage, the Clinebells lost their 640 acre plus section in August of 1937. The sale of their land to the Federal Land Bank of Omaha was recorded in Blaine County Deed Record “O”:

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS: That James E. Clinebell and Cora F. Clinebell, husband and wife of the County of Blaine and State of Nebraska, in consideration of One Dollar (\$1.00) and the release from personal liability on Federal Land Bank of Omaha mortgage of \$2,000.00 recorded in Book “K” Page 598, hereby grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto The Federal LandBank (sic) of Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska, the following described real estate situated inthe (sic) County of Blaine

²⁶⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, July 11, 1934, 4

²⁶¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 13, 1930, 1

and State of Nebraska, to wit: All of Section 19; North Half of the North Half of Section 30, Township 23 North, Range 25 West of the Sixth Principal Meridian (sic);...²⁶²

The Clinebell family had been slowly losing the battle against the 1930s drought for years and had begun moving their family to the Pacific Northwest a year earlier in 1936 in preparation for the final sale of their lands. James H. Clinebell, son of James E. and Cora Clinebell, wrote of his family's struggles during the Great Depression and their eventual trek from the Sandhills to a new life in Oregon in *History of Blaine County, Nebraska, Volume I*:

Times were getting harder, the banks had already closed down, then the drought struck, along with the great depression. Everybody was affected one way or another. We finally had a sale in 1933, I think. Sold all the farm machinery and all the cattle, except two cows, one pig, and a team of horses. We were left a wagon and a mower. In 1935 or 1936 my mother, Ruth, Ruby and Ray, moved to Dunning. How come I lived out on the place I don't remember, but I was the only Clinebell that graduated from the Halsey High School...The drought began and hardly anybody would even get their seed back. Cattle was driven in from Texas, to get pasture there in the Sandhills. My Uncle Harold Stewart, from Broken Bow, brought some cattle up for pasture at our place. As times grew harder, the folks finally lost their place in 1936 and 1937. My father, Harry O'Neil, the two Thompson boys from Dunning, and I headed for Oregon on Dec. 26, 1936. My father stayed until the next year and went back and got Mom, Ruby, and Ray, and headed back to Oregon. Ruby and Ray were the only two children at home. My father got work on dairies, in nurseries, and most any place that needed help. They finally got a job down by Salem, Oregon, on a small farm, taking care of the place and some cattle. Later they moved to Salem, and got work in the University there. He worked there until the war broke out and then he went to Portland and worked in the (sic) shipyards, as a carpenter. His wages at that time was \$1.35 per hour. Which he thought was wonderful and it was. They bought a small acreage north of Salem, known as the Kaiser District, and built a house there...In about 1947 he went back to the University, and worked there again, and in the cannery. He also put in red raspberries and made a pretty good living off of them.²⁶³

In 1957, the Clinebells made a return trip to Nebraska for three weeks to visit old friends and were happily welcomed back.²⁶⁴ Like the letters former Sandhillers mailed to Sandhills' newspapers, the Clinebells' example is important as it also counters Worster's descriptions of Oklahoma hospitality shown to "exodusters" demonstrating that not all Great Plains residents shared negative views of those who had left the region in the 1930s due to economic reasons.

²⁶² *Blaine County Deed Record "O"*, Brewster, Nebraska, 51

²⁶³ The Blaine County History Book Committee, *History of Blaine County, Nebraska, Volume I*, 234-235

²⁶⁴ The Blaine County History Book Committee, *History of Blaine County, Nebraska, Volume I*, 235

Like the Clinebells, another family who trekked west to the fertile valleys of Oregon in the early summer of 1936 was the DeBoer family from Thomas County. Like the Clinebells, the DeBoer family's move was a gradual one. As was the case with many American husbands during the 1930s, Walter DeBoer had temporarily left his family behind prior to May of 1936 as he sought new and more prosperous employment in the Pacific Northwest. By late-May of 1936, it was finally time for the rest of the family to join him in the Oregon. The *Blaine County Booster* noted the DeBoers popularity in the Thedford area and the community's reaction to their departure: "Eighty neighbors and friends gathered at the Walter DeBoer home in North Thedford last Thursday evening and enjoyed the hospitality of Mrs. DeBoer and children before their leaving for Oregon the following Saturday. Each of the ladies present brought a friendship quilt block for a souvenir for Mrs. DeBoer. Delicious refreshments were also served at a late hour. Those who will join Mr. DeBoer at Oregon City and who left in the car Saturday were: Mrs. Walter DeBoer, and the following children: Don, Ralph, Marion, Gertrude, Chas. Dale, and Eureka. The large number gathering for the farewell party shows that the DeBoer's were held in high esteem and that they will be greatly missed is most evident."²⁶⁵ The DeBoer family was not alone in moving west from Thomas County that summer. The Warren family did likewise. Nat Warren wrote the *Thomas Herald-Clipper* from Portland, Oregon, on June 10th, 1936, providing the family's new mailing address and describing what the family thought of their new home.²⁶⁶ Warren wrote: "Have located two miles southeast from city limits of Portland. Have a fine place. Everything much different from back there. Have electric lights, city gas and automatic electric water system on place. paved (sic) road runs by place. Anyone

²⁶⁵ *Blaine County Booster*, May 21, 1936, 4

²⁶⁶ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, June 17, 1936, 1

around Thedford that might come west sometime, be sure to stop in and see us...Like the country fine out here, but sure miss the old friends we had back there. Tell all hello.”²⁶⁷

From Warren’s letter one discerns that during the mid-1930s, the town of Thedford lacked many of the modern amenities commonly found in larger communities in other parts of the American West. Thus, based upon the absence of these improvements the Sandhills still partially met the criteria of Frederic Jackson Turner’s frontier during the Depression and was discernible as such by those who had formerly called this land home.

And so the departures continued. The Hamer family left Garfield County prior to January 1937 and moved to the lush apple country of Cashmere, Washington, where, as they informed *The Burwell Tribune*, they profited from “running the Sunset Lunch room across the street from the city school.”²⁶⁸ Farmer Glen Barnard and family likewise left Garfield County later in the year. *The Tribune* noted that the Barnards planned to sell their personal property at the Griffin farmstead and remarked that “Mr. Barnard informs us that he expects to give up farming and that immediately after the sale with the family will move to northern Washington where he has a proposition in sight that should equal at least farming in this section of Nebraska.”²⁶⁹ Many Sandhillers who found their way west sometimes kept in touch with their contemporaries by holding reunions, picnics, and annual gatherings. Former Garden County Sandhillers held one such gathering in Pomona, California, in June 1937. The *Garden County News* reported on the event: “The following letter from Alvin Taylor, received by air mail from California tells of a picnic held by former Garden county residents in Pomona: ‘Over sixty folks gathered at Ganesha Park, Pomona, Calif., with well filled

²⁶⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, June 17, 1936, 1

²⁶⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, January 28, 1937, 1

²⁶⁹ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 7, 1937, 1

baskets (showing the depression is over here.) Following the lunch, some groups had snapshots taken, some went swimming near by and many of the old timers swapped stories of the good old days back in Garden county. Everyone of those present at the picnic had a wonderful time. It was agreed it should be made an annual affair. It really was good to see all the old familiar faces again...We are all looking forward to the next picnic in 1938 and hope that many more of the Garden county folks will be here to join us. Everyone says hello and sends their best regards to the folks back home.”²⁷⁰

A year later another such Sandhillers picnic was held in Los Angeles. The October 26th, 1938, issue of the *Grant County Tribune* reported: “On Sunday afternoon, October 16th a group of former Hyannis people got together for a picnic in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, Cal (sic) It was a quickly arranged and nobody was able to reach the McMahans, Dean Ashley and two or three others whose addresses just couldn’t be located.”²⁷¹ Former Sandhillers also held similar gatherings in eastern Washington as many had moved to the Spokane area. Former Holt County resident Jim Seybold wrote home to the *Holt County Independent* about the conditions in Washington and his run-ins with fellow Nebraskans and the paper in turn reported of Seybold that: “He...states that the weather is swell there, that he still has water in the radiator of his car, the grass is green, and the trees are just turning to the Autumn colors. There are over three hundred Nebraskans there and he states that he met thirty or forty of them...He further says that last week he was out in the west end of town and met another Holt county man, J. W. Moss,... There is also a Nebraska Club organized there and they had a picnic there last summer, and will have another get-to-gether (sic) meeting of some kind this winter. There is a good fruit crop there this year and there will be about two weeks of apple

²⁷⁰ *Garden County News*, June 24, 1937, 1

²⁷¹ *Grant County Tribune*, October 26, 1938, 1

picking yet.”²⁷² Through such gatherings former Nebraska Sandhillers kept their ties to home but also reinforced that they had made the right decision about leaving.

Unlike Oklahomans and others from the southern plains, Nebraskans were also more readily accepted by the local populace of California and the greater Pacific Northwest and thus were able to more easily adjust to their new homes. Dust Bowl migration historian James Gregory wrote of the societal reasons for this acceptance: “In Wasco some of the leading citizens thought the distinctions more than minor... ‘The people who were blown out from the dust bowl in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas are as good a class as you’ll find anywhere. But those from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas...are made up of the so-called ‘poor white trash’ which even the Negroes consider to be below them...About 95% of them are of that poor class. Underlying these discriminations were both old and new perceptions about regional character, understandings based on the recognition that the Southwest was part of the broader South. White Southerners (not to mention blacks) have probably always been subject to a certain level of unfriendly stereotyping in other parts of the United States, especially if they were poor. The historic tensions between North and South had much to do with this, but ancient understandings of Southern social structure were also involved.”²⁷³ Thus, Nebraska Sandhillers suffered less discrimination on the West coast as they were fellow Northerners who did not come generally from poor tenant farming backgrounds. In short, they did not suffer from a “Joadian” complex that many Oklahomans or Texans so frequently put up with in their everyday life in their new western locales. This lack of discrimination coupled with agricultural prosperity further reinforced to ex-Sandhillers that they were correct in their moves west. James Seybold wrote of the abundant crops prospects

²⁷² *Holt County Independent*, October 29, 1937, 1

²⁷³ Gregory, *American Exodus*, 104

and natural resource production around Spokane in the autumn of 1937: “There is a good fruit crop there this year and there will be about two weeks of apple picking yet. Lots of pine lumber and all kinds of lumber mills. Wheat made 35 to 40 bushels to the acre and was not under irrigation, but they only farm it every other year.”²⁷⁴ Unlike Oklahomans and Texans, for former Sandhillers life was renewed on the West coast.

Individual Sandhillers, whether they were agriculturalists or businessmen and women or service workers from Sandhills’ communities, continued to leave the hills in the late 1930s. The Ray Burdick family left for Oakland, California, in the late-summer of 1938 looking for a new life. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* reported on the Burdicks’ new employment opportunities: “Both have employment in a canning factory and believe it or not, Vera (the wife) is making more money than Ray. This would bear out the women’s contention that it would be well for every man to spend more time helping her in the kitchen, and become handy.”²⁷⁵ James Gregory wrote of the conditions typically faced by women such as Vera Burdick who sought employment in California during the Depression: “Opportunities, however, were more generally restricted in the 1930s than in previous decades as public opinion rallied around the primacy of the male breadwinner. What openings there were typically were limited to such traditional female preserves as clerical, service, and extremely low-wage factory and food processing work.”²⁷⁶ Despite these limited opportunities, Sandhills women such as Burdick were more than pleased with the opportunity to make any kind of income that helped them and their families survive and succeed in their new western homes as they could not find such opportunities in the

²⁷⁴ *Holt County Independent*, October 29, 1937, 1

²⁷⁵ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 8, 1937, 4

²⁷⁶ Gregory, *American Exodus*, 47

Nebraska. Thus, as with Gross and Hanna, life for Vera Burdick was more profitable on the west coast than it was in the Sandhills.

Sandhills migration continued into the last year of the 1930s. Another former Sandhiller who left for the sunny shores of California as the decade waned was Garland Gray. Gray wrote to his friend, Luke, about his experiences in Willow Brook, California, on February 6th, 1939: “The days are nice and warm and the nights are real cool, as we have had a couple of light frosts here the last two nights, although not bad ones. I am helping my brother build a new house and have not gone into anything for ourselves as yet, but expect to soon. Will let you know so that our friends from that part of the state can stop in and say hello and have a nice visit while here in southern California. Will be looking forward to the arrival of the paper every week as it is even better than a letter now and then.”²⁷⁷ Mr. and Mrs. John Burgett and their son John Clayton, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Zutavern, and Leo Doud of Dunning also left for California in early-1939 looking for work.²⁷⁸ John Burgett had worked at the A. R. Stevenson Cash Store and Fred Wagener garage in Dunning whereas prior to their arrival in Dunning, Burgett and his wife had owned a gas station in Halsey.²⁷⁹ The difficult Sandhills’ environmental conditions had limited business transactions with local farmers and ranchers who were financially strapped at the time. Thus, it was not uncommon for many town merchants and service providers, such as the Burgetts, to move on. Sandhills drought and depression had many victims.

During the Great Depression, some Sandhillers left without selling their lands, perhaps out of hope that they could return one day in the future and make a go of it. Two

²⁷⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, February 17, 1939, 1

²⁷⁸ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 25, 1939, 1

²⁷⁹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 25, 1939, 1

such individuals were R. F. and Harriet Kitterman. Like the Clinebells, the Kittermans hailed from Blaine County and due to agricultural hardship sought new lives in the west. After moving west, they eventually realized that it was more practical, as well as fiscally prudent, to sell their land in Nebraska. The Kittermans lived in southern California at the time they sold their small agricultural holdings in Blaine County. Their sale to William H. McAdams is recorded in Blaine County Deed Record N:

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS: That R. F. Kitterman and Harriet Kitterman, his wife, of Los Angeles County, and State of California, in consideration of the sum of Ten and no/100 Dollars, in hand paid by William H. McAdams of Douglas County, and State of Nebraska, do hereby sell and convey unto the said William H. McAdams and to his heirs, executors, administrators and assigns the following described premises situated in the County of Blaine and State of Nebraska, to-wit: Northwest Quarter (NW ¼) of Section Fourteen (14) and East Half of the Southeast Quarter (E ½ SE ¼) of Section Ten (10) and South Half of Section Eleven (S ½ Sec. 11) and west half of the Southwest Quarter (W ½ SW ¼) of Section Twelve (12), all in Township Twenty-three (23) North of Range Twenty-four (24) West of the 6th P. M. in Blaine County, Nebraska, containing 640 acres of land, more or less according to Government survey, Free and clear of all incumbrance (sic) whatsoever, except taxes...²⁸⁰

Besides providing an example of further westward migration by small Sandhills agriculturalists, the Kittermans relatively cheap sale of their land with no apparent mortgage hovering overhead to be released from, demonstrated the effects of drought and depression on Blaine County property values.

Contrastingly, many other Sandhillers sold their lands when they left or had been absent for a long time. In the late-1930s, the Pittenger family sold many of their land holdings in Thomas County which were significantly smaller than five hundred acres. As with the Clinebells and Kittermans, Pittenger family members lived in western states as the Great Depression waned and no longer had use for their Thomas County lands. Small Thomas County agriculturalist Clarence Ryman took advantage of the Pittengers' offers of

²⁸⁰ *Blaine County Deed Record N*, Brewster, Nebraska, 505

sale. Thomas County Deed Record No. 9 notes Clyde and Dorothea Pittenger's December 1938 sale to Ryman:

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS, That Clyde Pittenger and Dorothea Pittenger, his wife, of the County of Yuma and State of Colorado, for the consideration of one dollar & other valuable considerations..., in hand paid, hereby sell and convey to Clarence C. Ryman of the County of Thomas, and State of Nebraska, the following real property situate in the County of Thomas and State of Nebraska, to-wit: The West half of the Northeast Quarter (W ½ NE ¼) of Section 17, Township 23 North, Range 26 West of the 6th P. M. containing 80 acres according to Government survey.²⁸¹

The terms "other valuable considerations" infer that Clyman was picking up an unpaid mortgage of the Pittengers as the warranty deed does not specify that the property was free of encumbrance.²⁸² Earlier in December 1938, Clyman acquired further lands from the Pittenger family members who resided in Tulare County, California, purchasing 80 acres from Milton and Ethel, 80 acres from Lee and Kittie, and 80 acres from O. S. and Luelle.²⁸³ All three of these acreages comprised halves in quarter sections in Section Seventeen, Township Twenty-three, north of Range Twenty-six in Thomas County and were purchased for ten dollars apiece without encumbrances.²⁸⁴ Former Sandhillers with small holdings who were far from the region sold cheap to eliminate the hassle and burden of owning what they viewed as once prosperous lands but now saw as marginal. Sales were also sometimes relatively cheap without encumbrances due to a decline in property value.

Former Sandhills residents who moved to the west coast sometimes sold their land for a relatively modest fee. One such resident was George Lewis of Logan County. Lewis was living in Logan County in the early 1920s when he acquired lands in Section Thirteen, Township Seventeen, Range Twenty-Eight. *Logan County Deed Book 9* records his transaction with E. D. and Blanche Gould on January 15th, 1920:

²⁸¹ *Thomas County Deed Record No. 9*, Thedford, Nebraska, 667

²⁸² *Thomas County Deed Record No. 9*, Thedford, Nebraska, 667

²⁸³ *Thomas County Deed Record No. 9*, Thedford, Nebraska, 668-669, 671

²⁸⁴ *Thomas County Deed Record No. 9*, Thedford, Nebraska, 668-669, 671

Know all Men by these Presents: That E. D. Gould and Blanche C. Gould (Husband and Wife) of the County of Buffalo and State of Nebraska, for and in consideration of the sum of Three Thousand and No/100 Dollars in hand paid, do hereby grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto George F. Lewis of the County of Logan, and State of Nebraska, the following described real estate situated in Logan County and State of Nebraska, to-wit: The South East Quarter of the Northeast Quarter and the East Half of the Southeast Quarter of Section Thirteen (13) in Township Seventeen (17) Range Twenty Eight (28) west of the Sixth P. M.²⁸⁵

While it is unclear if Lewis was wealthy enough to pay the Gould's \$3,000.00 outright or if he had to take out a loan, it is clear that by the end of the 1930s Lewis' residential, agricultural, and financial status had changed. In 1939, Lewis and his wife lived in Idaho and were willing to part with their Nebraska lands for a significant financial loss. On February 23rd, 1939, Lewis sold the 120 acres he had purchased from the Gould's in 1920 for \$10.00 to Henry Martin of Bonneville County, Idaho.²⁸⁶ Four days later Martin in turn sold this land for the same fee to Frank Becker of Logan County.²⁸⁷ In this instance, the \$10.00 cheap fee suggests that Lewis parted with the land due to other financial issues and not declining property values. The deed between the Lewis's and Martin on February 23, 1939, stipulated that: "the said premises are free and clear from all liens and encumbrances..."²⁸⁸ However, the deed also states that they sold Martin the land for "the sum of Ten Dollars and other good and valuable considerations..."²⁸⁹ If it was not clearly stated in the deed that there was an encumbrance connected to acquiring title, the latter terminology used in most Sandhills land transactions of the period generally inferred a mortgage burden that was picked up by the grantee. Rather Lewis owed creditors or not he parted with the land for practically nothing at a time when typical Logan County land sales were conducted with the exchange of larger sums. For instance, on September 21st, 1940, S. C. Beaver, of Lancaster

²⁸⁵ *Logan County Deed Book 9*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 580

²⁸⁶ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 484

²⁸⁷ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 485

²⁸⁸ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 484

²⁸⁹ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 484

County, Nebraska, sold 320 acres of the South Half of Section Nine, Township Twenty, North of Range Twenty-Seven, to Helen S. Reasoner of Logan County for \$640.00.²⁹⁰ Likewise, Frank Moran, a local resident of Logan County sold 640 acres of the South Half and the South Half of the Northwest Quarter of Section Eleven and the Northeast Quarter and the North Half of the Northwest Quarter of Section Fourteen in Township Eighteen, Range Twenty-eight, to Harry E. Wells on April 5th, 1940, for \$2,850.00.²⁹¹ Thus, Lewis's situation was similar to other small agriculturalists that had been unable to survive the perils of drought and depression in the Nebraska Sandhills. He left, moved to the Pacific Northwest, and parted with his lands at a significant loss in order to cut the cord with his personal failings.

In Loup County, former small farmers who left the region were also still tied to the hills in the 1930s by land and mortgages. Two such former Loup County residents were Walter and Belva Coates. In January of 1934, Walter transferred ownership of his land in Loup County to Belva even though neither still lived there. Loup County Deed Record No. 12 notes the Grant Deed:

Walter E. Coates, Husband of the grantee in consideration of ---Ten---Dollars, to him in hand paid, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, does hereby GRANT TO BELVA LOCKWOOD COATES, his wife, all his right, title, and interest in and to that parcel of land situated in the County of Loup, State of Nebraska, described as: THE NORTHWEST QUARTER OF SECTION TWENTY-SIX (26) IN TOWNSHIP TWENTY-TWO (22) NORTH OF RANGE TWENTY (20) WEST OF THE SIXTH (6) principal meridian in Nebraska, containing one hundred and sixty acres (160) more or less.²⁹²

The deed also noted that the land was not free of encumbrance as it was “subject to a mortgage of record.”²⁹³ While the deed does not specify the Coates' residence, it was witnessed and notarized by Lance D. Smith, a Notary Public for the County of Los Angeles

²⁹⁰ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 716

²⁹¹ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 712

²⁹² *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 52

²⁹³ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 52

and State of California on January 12th, 1934, when Walter Coates came to him to have the transaction finalized.²⁹⁴ This suggests that the Coates were residents of California and to avoid dealing with creditors Walter transferred ownership to Belva feeling that they may be more forgiving and lenient towards her. Walter Coates' health may have also been failing during the mid-1930s and he wanted to pass the land on to his wife before his death so that it would not be immediately sold in a sheriff sale. The latter seems more likely as within a few years Belva was forced to deal with the situation revolving around their small Loup County holdings by herself following Walter's passing. On March 28th, 1938, Belva relieved herself of this responsibility. On this day she sold the 160 acres in Loup County to Alice Vinnedge for \$500.00 and was released from the mortgage liability.²⁹⁵ The Quit Claim Deed also noted that Belva was a widow and that she was still living in California as she appeared before Los Angeles County and State of California Notary Public S. G. Knupp on May 13th, 1938, to close the transaction.²⁹⁶ Vinnedge later paid off the mortgage and profited from the land when she sold it to Hannah E. Fales of Loup County for \$600.00 on February 18th, 1941.²⁹⁷ In comparison to George Lewis and the Pittenger family, former Sandhiller Belva Coates succeeded in making a modest profit from her small Sandhills' land holdings due to her husband's relinquishment maneuverings and Vinnedge's ability to cover the mortgage. With the profit from the sale, she was in a better position to continue to support her life in southern California. Thus, for some Sandhills west coast migrants final profits such as these from their old Sandhills agricultural lands represented a fond farewell to their past lives and

²⁹⁴ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 52

²⁹⁵ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 301

²⁹⁶ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 301

²⁹⁷ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 492

dreams that poetically and appropriately provided them a bridge for success in their current west coast lives and aspirations.

During the Great Depression, not all Sandhillers who failed at agricultural ventures fled the Sandhills for faraway “gardens of Eden” in new locales. Many remained within the state of Nebraska and sold their lands primarily to Nebraskans. One such former resident was Harry Reed. By the late-1930s following the death of his wife, Reed, a former Loup County agriculturalist, was living near Grand Island, Nebraska, in the eastern part of the state. By 1938, Reed was ready to sever his ties (at least in an agricultural and business sense) with Loup County. Fortunately for him he found a willing and congenial buyer. Loup County Deed Record No. 12 chronicled his May 21, 1938 land transaction:

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS: THAT Harry H. Reed, a widower, of the County of Hall and State of Nebraska for and in consideration of the sum of Valuable Consideration and ONE and no/100 DOLLARS in hand paid do hereby grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto Harvey M. Reed, of the County of Loup and State of Nebraska the following described real estate situated in in (sic) Loup County, and State of Nebraska to-wit: East half of the Southeast Quarter (E ½ SE ¼) of Section ten (10) North half of the Southwest Quarter of Section eleven (11); Southwest Quarter SW ¼ of Section fourteen (14); East half (E ½) of Section Fifteen all in Township Twenty-two North of Range Seventeen West of the 6th P. M. Subject to all existing encumbrances but Grantee does not assume personal liability.²⁹⁸

By selling his 640 acres to his relative Harvey, Harry Reed assured that the land went to someone he trusted would use it for agricultural purposes and not immediately resell it. Reed also did not relieve himself of the mortgage undoubtedly out of fairness to Harvey. In this regard he kept a personal and family connection within the county. In short, he left Loup County on good terms. Another Sandhillers to sell his agricultural holdings and not travel far was H. L. Wells. On June 20th, 1939, Wells sold his six horses, four dozen white rock hens, one hog, and fifty-five cattle at public auction nineteen miles north of Lewellen.²⁹⁹ The sale

²⁹⁸ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 318

²⁹⁹ *Garden County News*, June 15, 1939, 6

was conducted at his farmstead, which he had already sold as he planned to move only into the town of Oshkosh and end his rural lifestyle.³⁰⁰ Once again, Reed's example demonstrates that even though many Sandhillers left the region during the Great Depression they still remained in contact with friends and relatives who remained and likewise Wells' shows that many remained tighter still with their friends and neighbors and did not have to travel far to change occupations.

As with the Reed example, departing Sandhillers ensured that if given the opportunity their remaining Sandhills brethren could benefit from their departure in some fashion whether personally or economically. This differed from parts of the southern plains, such as Haskell County, Kansas, which lacked a feeling of neighborliness and social cohesion due in large part to the type of wheat farming utilized within this region. Historian Donald Worster wrote of this type of agro-social behavior in southwestern Kansas: "...it was almost the pure essence of wheat country, which, it might seem, would have given it, through a more unified economic base, greater social coherence. Notwithstanding all those qualities, this Kansas community was a most unstable place. The reason for this was essentially the kind of farming the county followed, and would not give up: a cash-crop system that had proved to be not only destructive to the land, but to the communal order as well, . . . nowhere, for that matter, were the problems associated with non-resident, speculative ownership, factory monoculture, or self-seeking values more entrenched."³⁰¹ Small Sandhills agriculturalists differed from this model in that most lived on the lands they farmed and when they departed still held a personal connection to the people they left behind.

³⁰⁰ *Garden County News*, June 15, 1939, 6

³⁰¹ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 141-142

Beyond Reed, in the late-1930s, other former Sandhillers who remained in Nebraska disposed of their Sandhills lands. One such individual was Millie Wickersham. Wickersham sold her 320 acres of the north half of Section Ten, Township Twenty-four, North Range Fifteen, to Garfield County resident Arthur Rowse for \$1.00 and other valuable consideration (taxes for 1938 among others) on November 8th, 1938.³⁰² By 1938, Wickersham was living in the Omaha area as a widow where she appeared before Leslie Smith, Notary Public for the County of Douglas and the State of Nebraska on November 8th.³⁰³ In 1939, former McPherson County residents were also selling their lands. Two such individuals were Jennie and Clarence Doxsee who lived in nearby Lincoln County. On March 13th, 1939, the Doxsees sold 120 and 6/100 acres of the Northwest Quarter of the Northwest Quarter of Lot Four of Section Three and the East Half of the Northeast Quarter of Lot One and the Southeast Quarter of the Northeast Quarter of Section Four in Township Nineteen, North Range Thirty-two to Clyta Carlsen of McPherson County for \$150.00, the only encumbrance being the 1939 taxes.³⁰⁴ In 1938, Francis Thomas Harvey, was living in Morrill County following the death of his wife. He sold 640 acres of his lands in McPherson County Sections Two and Three to James Calhoun of Lincoln County for \$1,100.00 on July 28, 1938.³⁰⁵ Thus, beyond agricultural difficulties many, like Josephine Gross, left the hills due to the absence of a spouse and the subsequent grief and loneliness caused by empty chairs and beds. Others did not move far but still no longer needed lands in certain counties. Thus, small Sandhills agriculturalists moved within the state for other reasons that were not solely environmental. Personal issues guided many to sell.

³⁰² *Garfield County Deed Book 21*, Burwell, Nebraska, 288

³⁰³ *Garfield County Deed Book 21*, Burwell, Nebraska, 288

³⁰⁴ *McPherson County Deed Record 7*, Tryon, Nebraska, 459

³⁰⁵ *McPherson County Deed Record 7*, Tryon, Nebraska, 417

Remaining owners of small agricultural holdings who continued to struggle in the hills sold their holdings, livestock, and equipment in the waning years of the decade. On Saturday, January 29th, 1938, Mrs. James Overman sold the 641 acre Overman farm two miles south of Ashby in Grant County at a public auction conducted by Col. D. F. Bryson.³⁰⁶ Twenty-eight cattle, six horses, fourteen hogs, one disk, one harrow, one sod plow, one walking potato digger, one corn sheller, and two John Deere “mowing machines” were also sold.³⁰⁷ Small farmers in the eastern hills also sold out in early-1938. *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of Harry Alberts farm equipment and livestock sale and the reasons for it: “Because he expects to move to Ansley at an early date Harry Alberts will hold a public sale on what is known as the E. A. Hess place 21 miles north and 11 miles west of Burwell on Monday, February 21st. Some twenty head of cattle, six head of horses and farm machinery is included in this sale.”³⁰⁸ A similar sale was held in Garfield County two years later when W. B. Johnson sold sixty head of cattle, which included some Holstein milk cows, twelve horses, thirty-four hogs, and numerous pieces of machinery at the Hoyt farm near the county seat of Burwell.³⁰⁹ A year later in late- February 1941, Garfield County farmer Charles Meyer conducted a similar sale of his livestock and farm goods as he prepared to move to California, possibly only temporarily.³¹⁰ *The Burwell Tribune* detailed the sale and their wishes for Meyer: “One of, if not the largest public sales to be held in this vicinity this season, will be that of Chas. Meyers, . . . Mr. Meyer states as his reason for holding a big clean-up sale at this time, that he has rented his farm land and expects to leave with his family for California. In this huge sale is included some two hundred head of cattle, twenty-

³⁰⁶ *Grant County Tribune*, January 26, 1938, 4

³⁰⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, January 26, 1938, 4

³⁰⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, February 17, 1938, 1

³⁰⁹ *The Burwell Tribune*, February 22, 1940, 1

³¹⁰ *The Burwell Tribune*, February 20, 1941, 1

eight head of horses and mules, one hundred and forty sheep, twenty-two hogs and one of the most up-to-date line of farm implements ever offered at public auction in this vicinity.”³¹¹



(Farm Equipment Auction at the Zimmerman Farm near Hastings, Nebraska, March 1940. Such equipment and land sales were common throughout the Sandhills in the Great Depression. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, RG4289, photo 1.)

Farm sales remained common throughout the region as the decade came to a close. In Cherry County in the late-1930s several county farms were sold, sometimes in large joint auctions. *The Valentine Republican* reported on one of these typical auctions: “That there is still a market for Cherry county land, in spite of the discouragements of recent years, was

³¹¹ *The Burwell Tribune*, February 20, 1941, 1

shown here Saturday when the Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank held a sale of four farm properties. The prices of course were low, but the fact that the properties were all bought by local people showed that faith in farm land has not died out. The belief is general that the end of the 'Great Drouth' has come, as predicted by scientists... The north part of the old John Jackson ranch, or farm, was sold to Henry and John Jackson, sons of the original founder, the 1198 acres going at \$4.90. The White quarter north of town, occupied by Dalbert Gowler, went for \$3.90 per acre to Mike Davis... The old Joe Bristol place, near the Berry bridge on the north side of the Niobrara, containing 1832 acres, was sold in four tracts."³¹² While Cherry County residents' environmental faith was still to be further tested, this example is significant for demonstrating that some rare Cherry County Sandhills farmers had held larger acreages but due to a combination of environmental and/or unforeseen personal issues were not able to survive through the last year of the decade.

Sometimes Sandhillers did not have a choice if they stayed or left. During the arid 1930s, when small Sandhills farmers were getting smaller or leaving the area entirely, bank foreclosures, the calling in of tax liens, and sheriff sales were an all too common occurrence. From 1932-1941, as in the early days of the great crash, the majority of Sandhills counties District Court cases were civil cases that dealt with mortgage foreclosures, tax liens, suits over money or land, or equity cases. From March 6, 1933 to December 22, 1941, in Blaine County the District Court heard 167 total cases and of which 137 were civil cases.³¹³ The Arthur County District Court likewise heard 124 cases between April 16, 1932 and December 20, 1941, of these 84 were civil cases.³¹⁴ In Loup County there were 160 civil

³¹² *The Valentine Republican*, August 18, 1939, 1

³¹³ *Blaine County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket #3*, Brewster, Nebraska

³¹⁴ *Arthur County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket #3*, Arthur, Nebraska

cases dealing with foreclosures, credit agencies, and personal suits out of a total of 221 that appeared before the county's District Court between January 12, 1931 and December 15, 1941.³¹⁵ Suits over land, money, and unpaid mortgages were also high during the Great Depression in Garfield and Garden counties. Between November 12, 1930 and April 15, 1940, 316 cases appeared before the Garfield County District Court and of these 249 were civil cases.³¹⁶ In Garden County, the foreclosures were so numerous that the Garden County Clerk had to acquire an additional appearance docket for the Great Depression era whereas many of the other Sandhills counties did not. Between March 31, 1931 and June 11, 1937, the Garden County District Court heard 278 cases of which 191 were civil cases.³¹⁷ In the waning days of the Depression, from February 26, 1938 to December 3, 1941, the county's District Court heard an additional 186 cases of which 139 dealt with foreclosures and loan cases.³¹⁸ The number of civil suits was also high in Brown County. Between November 13, 1930 and August 31, 1936, 332 cases appeared before the Brown County District Court of which 263 were civil.³¹⁹ Foreclosures continued unabated in the late-1930s and early-1940s. The Brown County District Court heard 242 cases between August 31, 1936, and February 3, 1942, of which 156 dealt with tax liens, foreclosures, and equity cases.³²⁰ In Wheeler County, 161 cases were heard before the Wheeler County District Court between January 2nd, 1934, and March 21st, 1942, of which 120 were civil cases which dealt with foreclosures and suits over land.³²¹ Other Sandhills counties from Holt to Lincoln to Cherry to Box Butte also

³¹⁵ *Loup County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket #5*, Taylor, Nebraska

³¹⁶ *Garfield County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket 6*, Burwell, Nebraska

³¹⁷ *Garden County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket #4*, Oshkosh, Nebraska

³¹⁸ *Garden County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket #5*, Oshkosh, Nebraska

³¹⁹ *Brown County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket M*, Ainsworth, Nebraska

³²⁰ *Brown County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket N*, Ainsworth, Nebraska

³²¹ *Wheeler County, Nebraska, District Court Appearance Docket G*, Bartlett, Nebraska

faced a large flux of civil cases dealing with failed agriculturalists, businessmen, and struggling homeowners.

Foreclosures were common throughout the Great Plains, and even the country as a whole, during the period. Donald Worster wrote of the conditions in other plains states: “In 1933, farm foreclosures such as these reached a national as well as a state and county high. Over 5 per cent of the farms across the United States were subject to forced sales that year—more than \$3 billion worth of property. For every 1000 farms in Oklahoma, 45 went up for bids, which was near the average for the ten Great Plains states; in Kansas, the proportion was 53, in South Dakota, 79.”³²² Historian Gerald Nash observed: “On the Great Plains during the 1930s, at least 400,000 farm families lost everything they had.”³²³ Thus, Nebraska Sandhillers shared a similar concern with their neighbors to the south and the north. Foreclosures and the resulting court cases they brought left an undercurrent of stress in the region that served to intensify the nerves of many residents. Those who typically brought suit were creditors. One such creditor that played an important role in the financial stability of the Nebraska Sandhills during the Great Depression was the Federal Land Bank of Omaha.

During the Great Depression, the Federal Land Bank of Omaha made thousands of transactions dealing with loans or foreclosures while striving to revitalize the region’s struggling economy. In early-January 1935, the *Holt County Independent* reported on the Federal Land Bank’s economic influence in Holt County alone up to that point: “The Federal Land Bank of Omaha has made 438 loans totaling \$1,093,600 to farmers in Holt County

³²² Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 123

³²³ Gerald D. Nash, *The Federal Landscape: An Economic History of the Twentieth Century West* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999), 27

since the Farm Credit Administration began functioning in May, 1933, the land bank reported today.”³²⁴ The land bank loaned significant sums throughout the Sandhills during President Roosevelt’s first administration. In early-1935, Garden County likewise had received 174 loans totaling \$454,600 from the Federal Land Bank of Omaha since May 1933.³²⁵ While the Federal Land Bank of Omaha provided some monetary resources to Sandhills agriculturalists, it more often than not was left the unenviable task of foreclosing on many small agriculturalists in the Sandhills who had taken out loans in the 1920s and could no longer make their payments as the Depression and drought progressed. Many times suit was brought against multiple individuals, generally family members, who had taken out loans together on one section of land. This was the case with the Viehmeyer and Uphoff families from Logan County.

On September 26th, 1932, the Federal Land Bank of Omaha brought suit against the Viehmeyer and Uphoff families for an unpaid mortgage dating from 1921. According to the Petition of Logan County District Court Case #252: “That on the 13th day of December, 1921, George J. Viehmeyer and Clara B. Viehmeyer, husband and wife, and Fred H. Uphoff, a widower, in consideration of a loan to them by the plaintiff in the sum of \$2,000.00, made, executed and delivered to the plaintiff their certain promissory note of that date for the principal sum of \$2,000.00, whereby they promised to pay to the plaintiff said sum of money, with interest at the rate of 6% per annum, payable in sixty-five semi-annual payments or installments of \$70.00 each, on the day of December and June of each year, and a final payment of \$58.35 on the first day of December, 1954...”³²⁶ When the drought hit Logan

³²⁴ *Holt County Independent*, January 18, 1935, 1

³²⁵ *Garden County News*, January 17, 1935, 1

³²⁶ *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha v. George J. Viehmeyer, et.al.*, District Court of Logan County,

County in 1931, the Viehmeyers and Uphoffs quit making their payments. They missed their June 1931 payment of \$70.00 on 640 acres in Sections 21 and 28, Township 19, North Range 28 West, the subsequent payments in 1932, interest on said payments, and the land taxes for 1930 and 1931, totaling \$34.22 and \$30.44 respectively, which the Federal Land Bank had to pay instead.³²⁷ The Logan County District Court ruled in favor of the bank, foreclosed on the property on March 6, 1933, and the property was to be sold and the profits earned put toward satisfying the lien on the property and court costs³²⁸ The Viehmeyers and Uphoffs did not put up a fight against this ruling as they were nowhere to be found. They did not answer, demur, or make a plea in the case.³²⁹ They left the hills without saying goodbye.

In Arthur County, Charles and Pearl Foster faced a similar suit from the Federal Land Bank of Omaha in December 1932 for missing their mortgage payments. On June 15th, 1921, they had taken out a \$1,600.00 loan with a 6% annual interest rate payable semi-annually in May and November, on all of Section 22, in Township 17 North, Range 37, in Arthur County, which contained 640 acres.³³⁰ Like their contemporaries in Logan County, they quit making their \$56.00 semi-annual loan payments in May of 1931 thus owing for the subsequent three payments through November 1932, interest on the payments, and land taxes for 1930 and 1931, which the Federal Land Bank of Omaha was left to pay.³³¹ The court

Nebraska, Case No. 252, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³²⁷ *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha v. George J. Viehmeyer, et al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 252, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³²⁸ *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha v. George J. Viehmeyer, et al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 252, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³²⁹ *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha v. George J. Viehmeyer, et. al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 252, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³⁰ *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha, a corporation v. Charles Scott Foster and Pearl Foster*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 378, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³¹ *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha, a corporation v. Charles Scott Foster and Pearl Foster*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 378, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

ruled with the Federal Land Bank and a Sheriff sale was instituted to pay off the debt.³³² The Fosters did not resist.

Earlier in 1932, the Federal Land Bank of Omaha had taken similar action against Ernest and Erma Holcomb in Blaine County for a mortgage dating back to 1927. The Petition of Blaine County District Court Case No. 863 noted: “That on the 11th day of January, 1927, Ernest Holcomb and Erma R. Holcomb, husband and wife, in consideration of a loan to them by the plaintiff in the sum of \$2,500.00, whereby they promised to pay to the plaintiff in the sum of \$2,500.00, made, executed and delivered to the plaintiff their certain promissory note of that date for the principal sum of \$2,500.00, whereby they promised to pay to the plaintiff said sum of money, with interest at the rate of 5% per annum, payable in seventy-one semi-annual payments or installments of \$75.00 each, on the first day of January and July of each year, and a final payment of \$116.40 on the first day of January 1963;...”³³³ The Custer County National Farm Loan Association, from Broken Bow, Nebraska, was also listed as a defendant in the case as they had guaranteed the payment of the Holcomb’s note.³³⁴ As in other parts of the United States, banks and lending agencies failed and/or became embroiled in mortgage foreclosure lawsuits when their clients were unable to honor their mortgage commitments. It was no different in the Sandhills with an agency such as the Custer County National Farm Loan Association. Unlike the previous cases, the Federal Land Bank came down on the Holcomb’s after only one missed payment, that being the one for

³³² *The Federal Land Bank of Omaha, a corporation v. Charles Scott Foster and Peal Foster*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 378, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³³ *The Federal Land Bank v. Ernest Holcomb, et.al.*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 863, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³⁴ *The Federal Land Bank v. Ernest Holcomb, et.al.*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 863, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

January of 1932.³³⁵ Undoubtedly, the accumulation of multiple missed payments by mortgagees and numerous foreclosure lawsuits in and around Blaine, Custer, Loup, and Garfield counties led the bank to have little sympathy for those who did not pay and to move quickly so they were able to recoup some of the financial loss. The Holcomb's also had a mortgage for more acres than the previous examples, 1,029.38, on numerous lands in Sections 30, 31, and 32, Township 21, Range 21 of Blaine County.³³⁶ Thus, more acres led to tighter oversight. They may have also had a history of not paying back loans from other banks, thus making the Federal Land Bank wary of their financial status. The case was filed on January 15, 1932, and the Holcombs were summoned but no answer, demur, or plea is found with the case³³⁷ The Holcombs too had abandoned their property due to the unremitting drought.

Many foreclosures in the Sandhills were sad for reasons beyond just agricultural failings. In July 1936, the Federal Land Bank of Omaha brought foreclosure proceedings against Elizabeth Einspahr and her son Albert in the Brown County District Court. Elizabeth had been widowed by her husband George and was no longer able to pay on a loan they had taken out from the Federal Land Bank in January 1922. This loan was for \$1,400.00 with an annual interest rate of 6% payable in sixty-five semi-annual installments with its final payment due on January 1, 1955.³³⁸ Beginning in January 1933, the Einspahrs quit making their mortgage payments, land taxes, and property insurance, the latter two of which the bank

³³⁵ *The Federal Land Bank v. Ernest Holcomb, et.al.*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 863, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³⁶ *The Federal Land Bank v. Ernest Holcomb, et.al.*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 863, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³⁷ *The Federal Land Bank v. Ernest Holcomb, et.al.*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 863, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³³⁸ *Federal Land Bank v. Elizabeth Einspahr, et.al.*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3801, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

ended up paying.³³⁹ Drought and George's death were factors that financially crippled the Einspahrs. The court ruled in favor of the Federal Land Bank, ruling that the Einspahrs were in default; however, Albert, as he was a minor of fourteen, was found to not be in default and allowed to maintain an undivided one-half interest in the 640 acre property on lands of Sections Nineteen and Thirty, Township Twenty-five North, Range Twenty-Two West in Brown County, under the condition that the first lien on this remaining property was still in effect.³⁴⁰ Eventually, all of the land was sold to satisfy the mortgage in a sheriff sale that was confirmed by the Brown County District Court on February 19, 1937.³⁴¹ While it may seem unjust that a widow and her fatherless son were forced from their home, the Federal Land Bank of Omaha had little recourse when so many mortgages were being unpaid by small agriculturalists due to the difficult environment of the Nebraska Sandhills during the Great Depression. This was life and its harsh reality in the region in the 1930s.

In Rock County, small operators lost property they had lived and worked on for years due to the drought, harsh storms, and pestilential plagues. Two such operators in Rock County were John and Anna Hughes. The Hughes took out a \$2,200.00 mortgage with a 5% annual interest rate payable in seventy-one semi-annual monthly installments on December 20, 1917.³⁴² The mortgage was for lands containing 640 acres in Sections Twenty-seven and Thirty-four, Township 25 North, Range 18 in Rock County and was due on January 1,

³³⁹ *Federal Land Bank v. Elizabeth Einspahr, et.al.*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3801, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴⁰ *Federal Land Bank v. Elizabeth Einspahr, et.al.*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3801, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴¹ *Federal Land Bank v. Elizabeth Einspahr, et.al.*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3801, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴² *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et.al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

1954.³⁴³ As with the previous cases, the Hughes were unable to pay their mortgage back beginning in the early 1930s when the drought began in earnest. The Federal Land Bank of Omaha brought suit before the Rock County District Court on July 18, 1935, as the Hughes had stopped making mortgage payments on July 1, 1932, owed for back land taxes beginning in 1930, and also owed for not paying property insurance on their buildings.³⁴⁴ The case was made more complicated by the fact that the Hughes also owed money to the Farmers Bank of Burwell, Nebraska, which by July 1935, was insolvent and its assets were controlled by the State of Nebraska Department of Banking.³⁴⁵ This entity filed an answer and cross-petition and John Hughes asked for a nine month stay anticipating that there would be a land sale.³⁴⁶ The latter did not matter as on September 5, 1935, the Rock County District Court ruled that the land should be foreclosed on and sold to satisfy the liens of both the Farmers Bank and the Federal Land Bank of Omaha.³⁴⁷ However, this was not the end of the Hughes struggle. John Hughes filed multiple applications for stays throughout the subsequent years and the Rock County District Court, perhaps taking pity on Hughes or having personal familiarity with his circumstances, granted them as long as a reasonable rental fee was paid.³⁴⁸ The Hughes' luck finally ran out in 1942 as a new District Court Judge sat behind the bench and the rental agreements ended. A sheriff sale was conducted to pay off the debt and on November 16, 1942, the Hughes' twenty-five year agricultural struggle in the Sandhills

³⁴³ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴⁴ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴⁵ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴⁶ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴⁷ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁴⁸ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

ended as new owners finally took possession of the land.³⁴⁹ Despite their eventual failure, the Hughes are significant for demonstrating that not all small Sandhills agriculturalists slunk quietly away from the region in disgrace or easily capitulated to the larger banks. They did not go quietly into that good night. Nonetheless, there were many who did.

And on the tale went for Sandhillers throughout the 1930s. Only towards the end of the decade was there positive news to report regarding interactions between the Federal Land Bank of Omaha and Sandhills agriculturalists. The *Rock County Leader* noted an increase of land sales through the bank in its July 14th, 1938, issue: “Nebraska’s waving grain fields looked good to farm buyers during June. Spurred by good crop prospects, sales of farm land spurted sharply upward. Charles McCumsey, president of the Federal Land bank of Omaha, announced Saturday the sale of 50 Nebraska farms during the month by representatives of the land bank and the Federal Farm Mortgage corporation at Omaha. Last year the bank and the corporation sold 21 Nebraska farms in June.”³⁵⁰ Despite such positive exchanges at the end of the decade, Federal Land Bank foreclosure cases nonetheless impacted nearly all Sandhills counties throughout the Great Depression assisting in relocations to the west coast and other parts of the United States. The Federal Land Bank of Omaha was not alone as many local entities also had no choice but to foreclose on overdue mortgages and tax liens. Two such entities were the Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank and Bills and Cline, Incorporated.

Bills and Cline, Incorporated dealt in mortgages and land sales in the Nebraska Sandhills in the 1920s and 1930s, just as the Federal Land Bank of Omaha did, only it was a private lender. During the difficult 1930s it risked its own losses just as entities such as the

³⁴⁹ *Federal Land Bank v. John W. Hughes, et.al.*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3396, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁵⁰ *Rock County Leader*, July 14, 1938, 1

Farmers Bank from Burwell did. For instance, in September 1932 the corporation sold 2,012 acres on Sections Eleven, Fourteen, Fifteen, Twenty-two, and Twenty-three, Township Twenty, Range Seventeen and Sections Thirty-one and Thirty-two, Township Twenty-one, Range Thirty-six in Grant County for \$1.00 and other considerations to Edward Eldredge, of Washington County, New York.³⁵¹ Bills and Cline, Incorporated, did not need the burden of a hefty mortgage from a previous owner so they in turn handed it off to Eldredge who would have subsequently desired to sell the land for a profit. Such deals were not unusual during the period.

Despite utilizing these common “land flipping” practices, sometimes Bills and Cline, Incorporated, could not free itself from responsibility for a mortgage quick enough and became caught in foreclosure suits, similar to the Farmers Bank in Rock County, and had to deal with the stigma associated with such public scrutiny. One such incident occurred in early-1937 in Grant County. Bills and Cline, Incorporated, were listed as defendants with Barney and Tacy Sterbinz in a Grant County District Court Case in which they were sued for mortgage indebtedness by Kenyon Pruyn.³⁵² The court ruled for the plaintiff and on February 1, 1937, Grant County Sherriff Albert Metcalf, Sr., sold the foreclosed lands to high bidder Roy Abbott in a sheriff sale conducted from the front steps of the Grant County Courthouse in Hyannis.³⁵³ While the corporation was not responsible for Sterbinz’s unfortunate monetary choices and/or poor agricultural circumstances, being named as a co-defendant in a sheriff’s sale when one was a lender and still solvent during a difficult economic period for the entire country was bad for business. This was a negative aspect of

³⁵¹ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 497

³⁵² *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 628

³⁵³ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 628

lending in the Sandhills during the period that such agencies accustomed themselves to. These companies had to move on from such events fairly quickly in order to keep promoting and conducting their business in the drought stricken Sandhills.

Besides Bills and Cline, Incorporated, another significant lender in the Sandhills was the Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank. Located in the state's capitol city, the Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank leased many land and property mortgages in the Sandhills during the 1930s. Several of its transactions were highly profitable and its land purchasers pleased with what they had acquired. In late- May 1935, the *Holt County Independent* reported of one such large transaction: "M. O. Howard, agent for the Lincoln State Joint Land Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska completed a deal the first of the week whereby Charles Peterson of Amelia purchased five ranches totaling 10,000 acres. The deal was for cash and amounted to \$40,000. Mr. Peterson also owns approximately 10,000 acres of land in this same territory, and is one of the largest breeders of cattle in the country."³⁵⁴ Unfortunately, such wealthy clients and easy transactions were rare. Due to the relentlessly difficult environment of the decade, the bank, like so many other lenders, had to foreclose on many of its mortgagees. One such case in Custer County occurred in 1936. In that year, the Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank brought suit in Custer County District Court against agriculturalists John and Josephine Conway for not honoring their mortgage payments from a loan taken out in 1921. The Petition in Equity of Custer County District Court Civil Case No. 11801 noted: "THAT on November 1st, 1921, defendants John Conway and wife, Josephine M. Conway, executed and delivered to the plaintiff their promissory note for \$20,000.00 by which they agreed to pay said sum to the plaintiff with interest at six per cent per annum from November 1st, 1921,

³⁵⁴ *Holt County Independent*, May 24, 1935, 1

interest and principal payable in semi-annual installments of \$700.00 on May 1st, 1922, and each six months thereafter until sixty-five semi-annual payments shall have been made, and a final installment of \$584.60 payable on November 1, 1954...”³⁵⁵ Unfortunately for the Conways, they never were able to complete their sixty-five payments. John and Josephine Conway quit paying their mortgage owed to the bank in May 1933. The Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank sued them for the money and interest owed for the missed payments as well as the City National Bank of Lincoln, the Security State Bank of Broken Bow, and the Lincoln Safe Deposit Company, all of whom were listed as co-defendants in the case as they had interests in the land or mortgages on it.³⁵⁶ As with the other examples, lending could get quite complicated in the Sandhills when other banks and lending agencies collapsed and mortgagees in turn took out additional loans. The Lincoln Safe Deposit Company was no longer even in business when Custer County Sheriff Claude P. Hensel and Deputy E. C. Ward served summons in Lincoln to the company’s trustee, L. A. Ricketts, and its former Vice-President E. H. Mallowney on April 16th, 1936.³⁵⁷ On June 22nd, 1936, the Custer County District Court rendered judgment for the Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank and ordered the multiple sections and parcels of sections the Conways operated on in Custer County foreclosed and sold in a sheriff sale.³⁵⁸ The banks (or former banks) that were listed as co-defendants did not even show up to the trial but were still listed as being in default on the mortgage by the Decree of the Custer County District Court.³⁵⁹ Just as in the many examples

³⁵⁵ *The Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska v. John Conway, et.al.*, District Court of Custer County, Nebraska, Case No. 11801, Custer County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

³⁵⁶ *The Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska v. John Conway, et.al.*, District Court of Custer County, Nebraska, Case No. 11801, Custer County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

³⁵⁷ *The Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska v. John Conway, et.al.*, District Court of Custer County, Nebraska, Case No. 11801, Custer County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

³⁵⁸ *The Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska v. John Conway, et.al.*, District Court of Custer County, Nebraska, Case No. 11801, Custer County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

³⁵⁹ *The Lincoln Joint Stock Land Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska v. John Conway, et.al.*, District Court of Custer

of Sandhills foreclosure, the Conways' experience demonstrates that there were many losers created each time a dust or hail storm decimated crops and pastures in the Sandhills. There was no better illustration of this than what appeared almost every week during the 1930s in Sandhills newspapers.

During the Great Depression, sheriff sales became a part of life for farmers and ranchers on the Great Plains. Civil suits over mortgage foreclosures between creditors and mortgagees nearly always ended with a sheriff sale in order for the creditor to recoup some, hopefully all, of their financial losses. Such sales were published almost weekly in all Sandhills counties newspapers. Such publications were not that dissimilar from other areas of the Great Plains. Historian Donald Worster wrote of the practice of foreclosure sales in the Oklahoma panhandle: “‘Forced sales’ may be too strong a phrase to describe all of these cases; often the Cimarron debtors put up no resistance, were in fact relieved to see the matter settled, and sometimes were already living far off in another state.”³⁶⁰ In the Nebraska Sandhills, each weekly publication of sale symbolized another agricultural dream blowing away from the region like a blade of junegrass caught by the searing summer winds. In the 1930s it was not uncommon to open one’s weekly Sandhills newspaper and find whole columns, if not an entire page, of sheriff sales. In the July 2nd, 1930, issue of the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, page five was filled with twenty-one notices of sheriff sales.³⁶¹ Two years later the foreclosure situation in Thomas County had only worsened. In the April 27th, 1932, issue of the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* one and a half whole pages were filled by Thomas County Sheriff Nick Shriner as he notified Thomas County residents of thirty-six

County, Nebraska, Case No. 11801, Custer County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

³⁶⁰ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 123

³⁶¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, July 2, 1930, 5

such sheriff sales.³⁶² While this may seem insignificant when compared to the numbers of foreclosures and homeless individuals in the more heavily populated areas of the United States, such a number was enormous in the sparsely populated Sandhills. On March 14, 1935, Loup County Sheriff George Brock listed twenty notices of sale in *The Taylor Clarion*.³⁶³ Most of the sales were of lands totaling a section or less, each having a name under them. When they were read in the paper they were recognized as friends, relatives, or acquaintances. Sometimes the reader even read their own name. Two of the twenty March 1935 Loup County notices were for Carlton L. Dunham who had lost all of Section Five, Township Twenty-four, Range Eighteen in Loup County, and W. T. Detweiler who lost the east half of Section Five, Township Twenty-three, Range 20.³⁶⁴

Advertisements such as these appeared everywhere in Sandhills newspapers. In mid-July 1931, a sheriff sale in Holt County was held for the Graver ranch near Ewing as 560 acres of land and \$5,000.00 worth of improvements were up for auction to whoever had the deepest pockets.³⁶⁵ In the June 2nd, 1932, issue of the *Blaine County Booster*, Sheriff Fred Schipporeit placed a notice for the sale of Ethel Perkins lands in Townships Twenty-two and Twenty-three in Blaine County which totaled 1,160 acres.³⁶⁶ In May 1935, Shriner sold lands on Section Eleven, Township Twenty-one, Range Twenty-nine, that Ralph Jameson was foreclosing on and Bills and Cline, Inc., were, once again, responsible for.³⁶⁷ Sheriff sales continued into the late-1930s. Blaine County Sheriff Fred Wegener held two such sales on June 22nd, 1939, from the Blaine County Courthouse in Brewster for 160 acres of land in

³⁶² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 27, 1932, 2-3

³⁶³ *The Taylor Clarion*, March 14, 1935, 3

³⁶⁴ *The Taylor Clarion*, March 14, 1935, 3

³⁶⁵ *Holt County Independent*, July 17, 1931, 8

³⁶⁶ *Blaine County Booster*, June 2, 1932, 1

³⁶⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, May 1, 1935, 4

Township Twenty-three and 160 acres in Township Twenty-one of Blaine County.³⁶⁸ During the 1930s, properties in Sandhills communities were also foreclosed on in moderate numbers as many could not repay home or property loans. In mid-November 1932, Arthur County Sheriff F. M. Hayes made arrangements to sell Lot Ten, Block Eighteen of the town of Arthur that had formerly been in the possession of Fred Soehl and W. L. Harlan.³⁶⁹ Likewise, in Valentine in October 1933, Cherry County Sheriff W. B. Hammon prepared to dispose of Lots Five and Six in Block Twelve and Lot Twenty-two in Block Five all of which had been connected to The Farmers Union Cooperative Association which was being sued by the State Savings and Loan Association.³⁷⁰ Each notification exclaimed another personal failing as bluntly as if the foreclosed were paraded through the street. It is difficult to determine what psychological impact such weekly, public denunciations of Sandhills agricultural prosperity had on Sandhills residents. The stress and uncertainty of the period wore on many people as few smaller agriculturalists built their financial empires in the 1930s. However, some found this era prosperous. While small agriculturalists and their mortgage lenders teetered daily on the Sandhills blowout of financial ruin or disappeared sight unseen, others reaped a bounty from their mistakes and losses. These were the land speculators.

Profiting From Pestilential Prairies: The Success of Land Speculation in the Sandhills during the Great Depression

In the Sandhills during the 1930s there were profits to be had for individuals who demonstrated foresight, perseverance, patience, and an astute sense of financial timing. These individuals, who had also been found in other parts of the American West in the

³⁶⁸ *Blaine County Booster*, June 1, 1939, 8

³⁶⁹ *The Arthur Enterprise*, November 17, 1932, 2

³⁷⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, October 6, 1933, 8

nineteenth century, were land speculators. Speculators were individuals who purchased the properties and lands of those whose agricultural dreams had turned to sandy, arid nightmares and, as in the past, profited from their demise. Many of these individuals tended to always be found at or near the next sheriff sale, waiting to pounce on the potential windfall in land profits, like so many Sandhills coyotes finishing off a sick or injured deer. However, not all speculators were local. Some were from the eastern United States, whereas others were from within the state, near or in Nebraska's metropolitan centers. Two such individuals were Besse and E. C. Foote from Adams County, Nebraska. Adams County contained the large community of Hastings, was near the transportation hub of Grand Island, and was an hour and a half drive from Lincoln and the state capitol. Thus, the Foote's were perfectly situated to have knowledge of western lands for sale and/or those interested in buying or selling them from the east. They utilized this successful formula in the summer of 1929 prior to the Great Crash. On July 6th, 1929, Besse Foote purchased parts of Sections Two and Three, Townships Twenty-four, and Range Fifteen in Garfield County and parts of Sections Twenty-seven, Twenty-eight, Thirty-four, and Thirty-five, Township Twenty-five, Range Fifteen in Holt County from fellow Adams County resident, H. Gandreault for \$1.00 and other valuable considerations.³⁷¹ With this purchase, the Footes claimed responsibility for a \$16,200.00 mortgage on the property.³⁷² The Footes successfully navigated this burden surviving the worst years of drought and depression as they sold all of the Garfield County lands associated with this purchase and Section Thirty-Five, Township Twenty-Five, Range Fifteen in Holt County to Holt County resident John Hall ten years later in 1939 for the

³⁷¹ *Garfield County Deed Record No. 19, Burwell, Nebraska, 127*

³⁷² *Garfield County Deed Record No. 19, Burwell, Nebraska, 127*

significant profit of \$7,000.00³⁷³ Hall, and his wife, Viola, survived the remainder of the Great Depression and subsequent years of World War II, proved up these lands, increased them in value, and on April 19, 1946, sold them to fellow Holt County resident Tim Britton for \$19,400.00. This example demonstrated that successful speculators, such as Besse and E. C. Foote, knew when to sell lands and attain greater prosperity for themselves but that in doing so, their dealings could have a positive long term economic impact for local residents as well, even if they intended them to or not.

Many of those that could be termed speculators came from within the boundaries of the Sandhills themselves. Some made deals just within one county while others made deals in many counties. An individual in the former category was Harry Wells of Logan County. Wells purchased lands in Logan County during the waning years of the Depression and held onto them for a significant profit. In August 1938, Wells purchased 480 acres of Sections Thirteen and Eighteen, Township Eighteen, Ranges Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight in Logan County from Ray, Frank, and Orville Moran and Orpha Moran Whittaker for \$1,168.00.³⁷⁴ In April 1940 he conducted another deal with Frank Moran for 640 acres in lands in Sections Eleven and Fourteen, Township Eighteen, Range Twenty-Eight in Logan County, purchasing them for \$2,850.00.³⁷⁵ In 1943, Wells sold the latter 640 acres in Sections Eleven and Fourteen to Robert and Thelma Baskin for \$4,800.00, thus, yielding a significant profit on the land.³⁷⁶ By the 1940s, Wells was still holding onto the lands from the first sale undoubtedly waiting to sell them at a later date when they had been proved up on. Wells's example is interesting as he purchased lands directly from the land owners.

³⁷³ *Garfield County Deed Record No. 21*, Burwell, Nebraska, 302

³⁷⁴ *Logan County Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 433-434

³⁷⁵ *Logan County, Deed Book 12*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 712

³⁷⁶ *Logan County Deed Book 13*, Stapleton, Nebraska, 217

They were not foreclosed on. He may have been an agriculturalist himself with his own debts, thus gaining insight into the environmental and economic quagmire of the period. Nonetheless, by holding onto the first transaction and “flipping” the other one in a short time, Wells demonstrated an interest for quick profit and thus a penchant for speculation. This was not necessarily good or bad, but was a common aspect of everyday life during this era. Other individuals emerged who had additional means at their disposal to profit as speculators. Two such men were Festus Corrothers and Theodore Folk.

Individuals who had the greatest success at land speculating during the Great Depression were those who earned income from additional funds, thus supplementing expenses from their land purchases and sales. Those who had the best opportunity to succeed at such ventures in the Sandhills were large scale ranchers, prudent businessmen, and/or a combination of both. One such latter individual was Festus Corrothers of Grant County. Corrothers came to the region during the region’s earliest Euro-American settlement period and turned his once meager holdings into a successful large ranching operation by the dawn of the twentieth century. Historian Nellie Snyder Yost wrote of Corrothers: “Festus Corrothers...A direct descendant of Edgar Allen Poe, he built a homestead into a ranch of 30,000 deeded acres. A shrewd business man (though he looked more like a hard-up farmer than any hard-up farmer ever did), he served as Grant county commissioner for sixteen years and was a member of the state constitutional convention in 1919.”³⁷⁷ Corrothers’s influence was also felt in nearby Cherry County. Marianne Beel noted that in the 1920s: “Festus Corrothers of Grant County petitioned to attach portions of the county to three counties on

³⁷⁷ Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 202

the south.”³⁷⁸ While this effort proved unsuccessful, Corrothers influence in Grant, Hooker, and southern Cherry Counties was still felt during the 1930s.

During the 1930s, as his health declined, Corrothers sold lands in Grant County communities that proved more beneficial for others than just himself. Due to this factor, his speculation was not always highly profitable; however, Corrothers was able to afford such losses due to his vast wealth. In October 1932, he sold lands to the local Episcopal Church to assist with their expanding congregation. This transaction was recorded in Grant County, Nebraska, Deed Record No. 6, page 499:

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS: That Festus Corrothers (widower) of the County of Grant and State of Nebraska for and in consideration of the sum of One Dollar and No/100 Dollars, and other valuable considerations in hand paid do hereby grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto The Rt. Rev. George Allen Beecher D. D. as Bishop in trust for the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Missionary District of Western Nebraska and his successors in office of the County of and State of Nebraska the following described real estate situated in in (sic) Grant County, and State of Nebraska, to-wit: A parcel of land described by meets and bounds starting at a point where Chamberlain Avenue intersects Number Two Highway on southeast side, thence due south (214 ft) Two Hundred Fourteen feet, thence due east (214 ft) Two Hundred Fourteen feet, thence due north to the south side of Number Two Highway, thence due west (214 ft) Two Hundred Fourteen feet to the point of beginning.³⁷⁹

While Corrothers did not profit from what amounted to a donation, such a gracious act was not unnoticed by others in the county. Thus, a transaction like this was beneficial for Grant County’s spiritual community as they acquired lands for a new church. For individuals such as Corrothers, land deals were not always about profit, but also about conserving and promoting Sandhills communities and their way of life. If these communities did not exist how could speculators continue to profit? In this regard, Sandhills speculators practiced and benefitted from capitalistic conservation, which could also be considered a type of socially pragmatic capitalism, on the northern plains instead of exploitation which historians such as

³⁷⁸ Marianne Brinda Beel, *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Henderson, Nebraska: Service Press, 1986), 257

³⁷⁹ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 499

Donald Worster argued were common, intrinsic traits to the agrarian capitalists and “suit-case” wheat farmers on the southern plains during the drought of the 1930s. Capitalistic conservation did not destroy the land. Agriculturalists in the Sandhills worked the lands they owned instead of appearing rarely to harvest what they had planted utilizing mechanized farming. The methods utilized on the southern plains were more exploitative as concern for soil erosion and grassland conservation was of little consequence early in the Great Depression. This was not the case amongst Nebraska Sandhills agriculturalists or land speculators.

Corrothers continued land sales at bargain prices for rest of the decade. Many occurred in Whitman, a small town in eastern Grant County that had an addition of the town named after Corrothers. On December 17, 1935, Corrothers sold part of Lot Five in Block Four of the original town of Whitman, Nebraska, that lay south of and adjoining to Highway 2 to Tina Mathews of Grant County for \$10.00.³⁸⁰ Undoubtedly, declining property values in the hamlet of Whitman caused by the Great Depression were part of this fee; however, Corrothers, a man with an apparent tendency for philanthropy, may have shown lenience to Mathews out of a sense of personal responsibility or concern during a period of economic downfall. In June of 1938, Corrothers also sold Lot Number Nine, Block Three of the Corrothers Addition in Whitman to Dallas and Ruth Gray for \$150.00.³⁸¹ Corrothers’s example was significant for demonstrating that not all speculators showed great profits from their dealings but yet still had a great impact on others in a positive way through their transactions. Not all transactions required foreclosures and sheriff sales for personal profit. Corrothers was an individual who could afford such losses. Such benevolence, combined

³⁸⁰ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 582-D

³⁸¹ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 639

with a crafty business acumen, led to his prominent status within the Grant County community.

Upon Corrothers's death his prominent wealth was highly coveted by competing ranchers. Shady deals were conducted in order to obtain it. This battle over his estate led to great interest amongst the general Sandhills public as they followed the scandal in the weekly issues of their newspapers. Following Corrothers's death in the late-1930s, Attorney Elmer Gudmundsen worked both sides in a dispute over his lands, eventually convincing his eleven heirs to take less money from Corrothers's old competitor, Grant County rancher George Manning and banker Charles Finnegan, in the amount of \$57,000 in total.³⁸² The two also assumed Corrothers's \$60,000 mortgage.³⁸³ When the fraud was uncovered by the Grant County District Court, they ruled in favor of the plaintiffs (heirs). The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* in its August 6, 1941, issue noted the actual value of his lands: "...the Corrothers estate consisted of personal property or real estate having a fair value of approximately \$360,000, against which there were debts of only \$65,000.00. Personal property consisted of cash, horses, a great amount of hay, real estate mortgages and other effects to the values of about \$80,000.00. The real estate consisted of the Corrothers ranch containing more than 28,000 acres of land in Grant county with a value of about \$280,000.³⁸⁴ While the stories of most Sandhills ranchers/speculators did not end with such fanfare, Carrothers was nonetheless significant for shaping his community through a combination of sharp business dealings and philanthropic benevolence.

³⁸² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, August 6, 1941, 1

³⁸³ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, August 6, 1941, 1

³⁸⁴ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, August 6, 1941, 1

As the Depression came to an end with the United States entry into World War II, Garden County rancher S. P. Delatour was considered similarly kind. Delatour deeded much of the profits from the sale of his ranch holdings to various charities within Nebraska prior to his death as he wanted his excess funds to be used by organizations and in places where they would do the most good.³⁸⁵ The *Garden County News* reported of his generosity in early-1942: “S. P. Delatour, pioneer Garden county rancher has deeded his 22,750 acre ranch to charities. Mr. Delatour executed a trust deed to his son, B. C. Delatour, who is instructed thereby to sell the property within ten years and distribute the proceeds to the following institutions: Father Flanagan’s Boys Home, 25 per cent; Omaha Masonic Home for Boys, 25 per cent; Nebraska Children’s Home society, 12 ½ per cent; Hattie B. Munroe home, 12 ½ per cent; Salvation Army Booth Memorial Hospital, 12 ½ per cent; and 12 ½ per cent to be distributed among charities chosen by the son. In thus providing for disposal of his fine ranch, Mr. Delatour said, ‘I am 93 years old and don’t need it any more. I have some for myself...’ Through all these years he has been regarded as one of the Panhandle’s leading citizens.”³⁸⁶ Delatour, while not engaged in heavy land speculation, once again demonstrated that through various types of deals, some personal land transactions served a public good instead of a personal one during the Depression era based upon the individuals conducting them. Corrothers and Delatour were rare examples of prominent individuals in positions of power who showed overt generosity during a time when fiscal conservation was viewed as more practical. Other Sandhills speculators followed a more practiced line of pragmatic capitalism that sought opportunities in the Sandhills from the staple of the sheriff sale. One such speculator was Theodore Folk.

³⁸⁵ *Garden County News*, January 8, 1942, 1

³⁸⁶ *Garden County News*, January 8, 1942, 1

Theodore Folk was a small rancher and businessman in Cherry and Hooker Counties who came to the Sandhills in 1906. Folk, born in Czechoslovakia in 1879, was a Spanish-American War Veteran who served with Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders and later participated in the Oklahoma land run when lands were opened to Euro-American settlement.³⁸⁷ After living a brief time in Tabor, South Dakota, Folk moved his family to the Sandhills following the 1906 Kinkaid Act, bought a small ranch in Cherry County, rented the land, and operated the Farmer's Elevator Company in Mullen.³⁸⁸ Folk successfully survived these past difficult events and for him the tumultuous economic period of the 1930s was just another challenge to be conquered. When the Farmer's Elevator Company was established April 4th, 1929, he undoubtedly had no idea that just six months later the United States economy would be crippled by the greatest economic crash of the twentieth century.³⁸⁹ Due to this he displayed a fair degree of fortitude in establishing and maintaining his business during the depths of the depression. However, like Carrothers, he became involved in land speculation before, during and after the Great Depression. Through profits from his business, he was able to make many land deals by purchasing foreclosed lands at sheriff sales and reselling them. Article III of the Farmer's Elevator Company's Articles of Incorporation noted the "General Nature of Business:"

The Genereal (sic) nature of the business of the corporation is to deal in grain and other agriculture products and in Coal, Lumber, Building Material, and other merchandise and thereby to buy, sell store, ship and otherwise deal in cereals and grains of all kinds and their products and by- products for itself and other persons on commission, and to conduct a merchandising business at retail, in lumber and building material, coal and other merchandise and to that end to operate at Mullen, Nebraska, and elsewhere, grainelevators (sic) bins, cribs, storage houses, lumber yards, and coal yards and for that purpose to purchase, own and hold real estate and erect buildings to own and sell personal property of all kinds and to borrow money and execute mortgages in security thereof.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ *The Sandhill News*, September 15, 1955

³⁸⁸ Hooker County Historical Society, *Hooker County, Nebraska: The First 115 Years 1889-2004*, 179

³⁸⁹ Farmer's Elevator Company, Mullen, Nebraska, Articles of Incorporation, 3

³⁹⁰ Farmer's Elevator Company, Mullen, Nebraska, Articles of Incorporation, 2

Thus, Folk sold small farmers tractors, grains, and tools, or loaned them money to do so, and when they got behind in their payments, he sued them. While Article III of the Farmer's Elevator Company states that the corporation may lend money, all of the law suits and land purchases were conducted in Folk's name, and/or his wife, Anna, not the corporation's. Folk bore responsibility for the sales and suits as he sued people and/or purchased their lands at a sheriff sale, resold them in order to recoup his losses, and generally made a profit in the bargain.

Folk held various lands and/or participated in land suits in several counties throughout the Sandhills during the Great Depression including: Hooker, Grant, Blaine, Cherry, Logan, McPherson, and Arthur. He attended sheriff sales in all these counties or bought lands directly from agricultural residents in them who wanted to sell before they could be foreclosed on during the drought. On September 18th, 1933, Folk participated in three consecutive sheriff sales conducted by Hooker County Sheriff H. R. Ridenour at the east entrance of the Hooker County Courthouse in which he was the plaintiff.³⁹¹ The Hooker County District Court ruled that Folk was owed money from J. H. Eaton in the sum of \$336.52; however, Folk acquired his 640 acres of lands in Sections Fourteen and Twenty-three, Township Twenty-two, Range Thirty-two instead for \$435.43.³⁹² He also acquired 619.07 acres from Adolphine Hoelzel on lands from Section Twenty, Twenty-one, and Twenty-eight, Township Twenty-two, Range Thirty-one for \$232.04 and 639.04 acres from Harvey McKeag for \$405.78 on Section Thirteen, Township Twenty-two Range Thirty-two in Hooker County. Folk resold the former McKeag property as part of a larger sale to the

³⁹¹ *Hooker County Deed Record No. 6*, Mullen, Nebraska, 500-502

³⁹² *Hooker County Deed Record No. 6*, Mullen, Nebraska, 500

Lake family in the 1940s for \$28, 212.93.³⁹³ On December 5th, 1938, Folk won a foreclosure suit against M. J. Hester, et al, in Cherry County in which he was awarded 1/8 of an acre in Section 30, Township 27 North, Range 28 West in Brownlee, Nebraska, by the Cherry County District Court as he held the mortgage to this property.³⁹⁴ Thus, in the long run he benefitted from the failings of small farmers during the Depression. In most instances Folk made sure their pockets were empty. He got them “coming and going”. Folk sold them goods or gave them loans and when they could not pay he received their lands, one way or another.

Many ranchers benefitted from Folk’s reselling of foreclosed lands. Rancher Wallace Farrar of Grant and Hooker counties was one of these individuals. On June 10th, 1935, Folk sold Farrar the Southeast Quarter of Section Twenty, Township Twenty-two, Range Thirty-two, totaling 160 acres for \$320.00.³⁹⁵ He had originally purchased the land at a sheriff’s sale on October 2nd, 1933, for \$128.04.³⁹⁶ Thus, Folk held onto many of the lands he purchased for a short time, paid taxes on them, and then resold them for a modest profit. Folk continued to make similar transactions throughout the Great Depression. In McPherson County, on February 10, 1941, Folk purchased lands totaling 320 acres on Sections Eight, Ten, and Eleven, Township Twenty, Range Thirty from Jacob and Zenia Stofer, Ben and Mary Stofer, Rose and E. L. Jennings, Ethyle and Martin Dahl, and Mary White, a widow, all from or near Republic County, Kansas.³⁹⁷ From this example, it is apparent that Folk did not just rely on sheriff sales to build up his financial standing, he also made direct purchases with

³⁹³ *Hooker County Deed Record No. 8*, Mullen, Nebraska, 515

³⁹⁴ *Theodore Folk v. M. J. Hester, et al*, District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 6108, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

³⁹⁵ *Hooker County Deed Record No. 6*, Mullen, Nebraska, 639

³⁹⁶ *Hooker County Deed Record No. 6*, Mullen, Nebraska, 499

³⁹⁷ *McPherson County Deed Record No. 7*, Tryon, Nebraska, 615

individuals who had not been foreclosed upon, but that may have been in danger of becoming so. Such a practice took hours of meticulous research and dedication in order to become successful at, as well as a dedicated and loyal attorney. Folk had the latter in Hooker and Blaine County Attorney Carl Humphrey. Humphrey was able to provide sound advice as his offices were located in prime lands for speculation. Having Humphrey's knowledge of the area's available real estate undoubtedly aided in Folk's success. In this regard, Folk demonstrated a tenacious perseverance in his drive to succeed which could be considered somewhat admirable during such a tragic period in American history. It was unfortunate that so much of his success was due largely to the economic demise of so many others.

Folk participated in multiple sales and civil suits throughout the Sandhills during his time as a land speculator, most of which he was victorious in. Still others did not turn out the way he hoped they would and when this happened he seemed somewhat petty in how he handled these defeats. Two incidents of the latter occurred in Arthur and Logan Counties. On May 8, 1933, Folk won a civil suit against Bills and Cline, Incorporated, brought before the Arthur County District Court. The corporation had owned title to lands in Arthur County in which the agricultural tenants on Section Twenty-Eight, Township Nineteen, Range Thirty-Eight had failed to pay land taxes for many years.³⁹⁸ Folk paid the unpaid land taxes on the property from 1927 to 1929 and sued to recover the money and interest that was due to him.³⁹⁹ The court decreed that a sheriff sale should be initiated to recoup his money but none occurred when Gertrude McDonald appeared to pay the \$423.14 to him.⁴⁰⁰ Undoubtedly,

³⁹⁸ *Theodore Folk v. Bills & Cline, Incorporated, a corporation, and John Doe*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 371, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

³⁹⁹ *Theodore Folk v. Bills & Cline, Incorporated, a corporation, and John Doe*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 371, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁰⁰ *Theodore Folk v. Bills & Cline, Incorporated, a corporation, and John Doe*, District Court of Arthur

Folk would have preferred that the sale would have taken place so that he could have sold the lands for a greater profit at a later date. Nonetheless, in cases such as this the land speculator still held the upper hand as Folk was able to recoup the money he paid for the land taxes plus interest.

In Logan County, he was involved in another similar civil suit in July of 1941 with a different result. In this case, which appeared before the Logan County District Court, Folk once again sued over money owed him for the payment of delinquent taxes on lands he did not own but sought to for resale. From 1937 to 1940, Folk paid land taxes on 639.81 acres of lands partially located on Sections Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Township Twenty, Range Twenty-nine, in Logan County, that had been abandoned by the family of Samuel O. Christian, following his death on May 27, 1924.⁴⁰¹ The court ruled on October 6, 1941, that the defendants were delinquent and decreed a sheriff sale be held, once again, to cover Folk's losses.⁴⁰² A sale was held after the events at Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into World War II on December 29, 1941, but Theodore Folk was unable to attend due to weather.⁴⁰³ Logan County District Court Case No. 68 noted his consternation under a document entitled "Objections To Confirmation Of Sale:"

Comes now the plaintiff, Theodore Folk and objects to the confirmation of the sale herein held on the 29th day of December 29, 1941 for the reason that the subsequent sale of the real estate herein involved will bring a greater amount; that he will bid at least 10c an acre more on the real estate if the same is resold; that on December 29, 1941, the day of the sale the roads and highways to Stapleton, Nebraska were filled with snow and nearly impassable; that on that date he arrived at Stapleton, Nebraska after the sale had been closed and he was unable to bid competitively on said land which he intended to do, and that his late arrival was due to the condition of the roads and not to his own negligence.

County, Nebraska, Case No. 371, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁰¹ *Theodore Folk v. Samuel O. Christian, heirs, et.al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No.68, Docket 6, Page 68, Stapleton, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁰² *Theodore Folk v. Samuel O. Christian, heirs, et.al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No.68, Docket 6, Page 68, Stapleton, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁰³ *Theodore Folk v. Samuel O. Christian, heirs, et.al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No.68, Docket 6, Page 68, Stapleton, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

Wherefore this plaintiff objects to the confirmation of sale, prays that said sale be set aside and a new sale ordered.⁴⁰⁴

Following Folk's frustration, the court did agree to a new sale; however, ironically in the end he was not the benefactor of the process. On October 4, 1943, the Logan County District Court confirmed the sale of the 639.81 acres to J. H. Lutes for \$1,599.52.⁴⁰⁵ Despite these two setbacks, Folk's success rate in profiting from land "flipping" was extremely high and, as evidenced by the Lake example, he was able to build up a small fortune over time by demonstrating pragmatic and consistent policies during the economically depressed 1930s. His methods could be considered by some as callous and cruel in that he profited from the demise and failures of others brought about by drought, hail, dust storms, and fire; nonetheless, such practices were necessary to economically survive during a time when so many others were not. Folk was an ardent capitalist. Nonetheless, he was still different from Worster's capitalistic profiteers from the Southern Plains. He did not wear a "white or black hat" that stereotypically represented the good or evil characters in the typical Western films of the 1930s which depicted the frontier days of the American West. Folk instead consistently operated in between, in the middling muddled zone of the Great Depression's sense of morality. Neither good nor bad, he was a gray character, a necessary element in the Sandhills economy. By purchasing lands of failing small farmers throughout the late-1920s and into the 1940s, Folk actually acted to conserve the Sandhills prairie. There does not appear to be evidence that he leased these lands to farmers or ranchers who in turn may have over plowed or over grazed them. During this time, he kept these lands native grass until he resold them. In this regard, during the Great Depression in the Nebraska Sandhills capitalism

⁴⁰⁴ *Theodore Folk v. Samuel O. Christian, heirs, et.al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No.68, Docket 6, Page 68, Stapleton, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁰⁵ *Theodore Folk v. Samuel O. Christian, heirs, et.al.*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No.68, Docket 6, Page 68, Stapleton, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

served to preserve the region from over plowing instead of encouraging the opposite as on the southern plains. Thus, whether intentionally or not, Folk was a pragmatist for his region's conservation as much as he was in his own capitalistic ventures. Folk did what he had to do to survive. Another such group that took advantage of the farmers' demise but intentionally conserved the hills environment for their own use and benefit were ranchers.

Ranchers Ascendent?: The Entrenchment and Challenges of the Sandhills Predominant Agricultural Class

Renowned Great Plains historian Walter Prescott Webb wrote of ranching's relation to the western environment in his 1931 study, *The Great Plains*: "Since the destruction of the Plains Indians and the buffalo civilization, the cattle kingdom is the most logical thing that has happened in the Great Plains, where, in spite of science and invention, the spirit of the Great American Desert still is manifest."⁴⁰⁶ While it is debatable as whether or not western agriculturalists and western people in the 1930s would have appreciated being associated with the stereotype of the "Great American Desert" from the 19th century, it is a certainty that the pastoral lands of the Nebraska Sandhills were suited for ranchers and cattlemen to raise significant cattle herds on no matter what the era and thus attempt to establish their own "cattle kingdoms." As in the earliest days of the region's Euro-American settlement in the 1890s, this concept was no different in the 1930s. Many became very successful in establishing their operations. Debra Donahue wrote of one of the key methods to ranching success in any era: "...livestock graziers and certain range specialists often claim that 'livestock grazing is merely substituting a nonnative animal for native ones that have been

⁴⁰⁶ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981 reprint), 206

removed from the system.”⁴⁰⁷ With the disappearance of the buffalo, Sandhills ranchers had no native competition for pasture. This did not mean that all Sandhills ranchers over grazed the region with reckless abandon. Most utilized conservation practices, if for no other reason than to insure their own continued profitability. With the demise of the small Sandhills farmer, such success seemed all but assured.

Sandhills ranchers reasserted their agricultural presence as hundreds of small farmers collapsed and failed. One Sandhills rancher that benefitted from the decline of small agriculturalists was Hooker, Grant, and Cherry County rancher Earl Monahan. Monahan’s father, Jim, came to the Sandhills during the region’s early Euro-American settlement period. Marianne Beel wrote of the Monahan family’s origin in the hills: “Jim Monahan worked for his grandfather, took his wages in cattle, married Cora McCawley and had one child, Earl. Jim’s homestead was located at the present headquarters of the Circle Dot Monahan Cattle Company, where Earl and his wife, Marie Coppersmith, raised four children.”⁴⁰⁸ In February of 1918, James Monahan began expanding his holdings in the Sandhills by acquiring land in the town of Hyannis. On February 9, 1918, Monahan purchased lots twenty-one and half of lot twenty in the second addition of Hyannis for \$620.00 from the Meyers Land and Cattle Co.⁴⁰⁹ By 1924, Jim’s son, Earl, began expanding his own agricultural and livestock holdings. On June 19th, 1924, Monahan filed for chattel mortgage no. 6488 in Grant County for \$6,900.00 for 160 cows, 126 steers and heifers, and 68 heifers.⁴¹⁰ Monahan paid off his

⁴⁰⁷ Debra L. Donahue, *The Western Range Revisited: Removing Livestock From Public Lands To Conserve Native Biodiversity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 133-134

⁴⁰⁸ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century*, 22

⁴⁰⁹ *Grant County Deed Record No. 5*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 149

⁴¹⁰ *Grant County Chattel Mortgage Index #2*, Hyannis, Nebraska

debt and the mortgage was cancelled on November 14th, 1924.⁴¹¹ Beyond cattle purchases, Monahan began acquiring his own lands. On February 8th, 1927, Earl Monahan purchased 924.94 acres of lands in Section Six, Township Twenty-Four, Range Thirty-six and Sections Thirty-one and Thirty-two, Township Twenty-five, Range Thirty-six in Grant County from ranching titan, Festus Corrothers, for \$11,000.00⁴¹²

In November of 1932, Earl added to his own holdings by purchasing some of his father's. On November 1, 1932, Earl purchased multiple lots in Section One, Township Twenty-four, and Range Thirty-seven, Section Six, Township Twenty-four, Range Thirty-six, and Section Two, Township Twenty-four, Range Thirty-seven containing 1,763.54 acres from James for \$1.00.⁴¹³ Earl was successful enough with these lands and the others he acquired, that on October 1st, 1935, he acquired an additional 1,906.19 acres from James in Grant County for \$19,061.00.⁴¹⁴ Monahan was not the only rancher of his generation that built his own ranch on the foundation of his parents. In Arthur County, Walter and Harry Haythorn purchased lands in the thousands of acres, across multiple Sections, Townships, and Ranges of the county for \$1.00 "and other valuable consideration" on June 25th, 1929, from their mother, Emma Haythorn.⁴¹⁵ The Haythorns of Arthur County also followed this practice into the 1930s. On August 3rd, 1936, Harry and Walter Haythorn purchased lands in Section One, Township Eighteen North, Range Thirty-nine and Sections Six, Township

⁴¹¹ *Grant County Chattel Mortgage Index #2*, Hyannis, Nebraska

⁴¹² *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 263

⁴¹³ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 504

⁴¹⁴ *Grant County Deed Record No. 6*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 579

⁴¹⁵ *Arthur County Deed Record No. 2*, Arthur, Nebraska, 530

Eighteen North, Range Thirty- eight in Arthur County for \$3,000.00 from Mabel C. Scriven of Russell County, Kansas.⁴¹⁶

While Monahan did acquire a large amount of acreage to form his own ranch from his father, he solidified the majority of his holdings in the 1930s by purchasing lands sitting idle from failed small farmers and ranchers, absentee landholders, and/or local ranchers that were managing the depression by having to reallocate some of their lands. On September 13th, 1935, Monahan purchased 2,183.90 acres of lands in Sections One, Two, Eleven, and Twelve, Township Twenty-four North, Range Thirty-three and Sections Six and Seven, Township Twenty-four North, Range Thirty-two in Hooker County and Section Thirty-two, Township Twenty-five North, Range Thirty-two in Cherry County from Nora K. Trede Jacks and A. R. Jacks of Los Angeles, California.⁴¹⁷ Over a year later on December 12, 1936, Monahan added to his holdings in both counties again by purchasing 297.38 acres in Section Three, Township Twenty-four North, Range Thirty-three in Hooker County and 40 acres in Section Thirty-five, Township Twenty-five North, Range Thirty-three in Cherry County from Nels and Marguerite Simonson.⁴¹⁸ In 1937, Monahan completed four transactions that added more land yet to his expanding ranch. On August 2, 1937, he bought lands in Sections Fourteen, Fifteen, Twenty-one, and Twenty-two, Township Twenty-five North, Range Thirty-three in Cherry County from Edward and Anna Cline of Lancaster County, Nebraska, consisting of 1,280 acres for \$1.00 as well as other considerations.⁴¹⁹ In October, Monahan purchased 1,079.56 acres in Cherry County from widow Jennie Catron of Cherry County for

⁴¹⁶ *Arthur County Deed Record No. 3*, Arthur, Nebraska, 518

⁴¹⁷ *Cherry County Deed Book 48*, Valentine, Nebraska, 360

⁴¹⁸ *Cherry County Deed Book 48*, Valentine, Nebraska, 681

⁴¹⁹ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 225

\$8,000.00.⁴²⁰ On November 2nd, he acquired 160 acres in Section Twenty-one, Twenty-two, and Twenty-Seven, Township Twenty-five, Range Thirty-three in Cherry County for \$500.00 from Frank and Daisy Wilson of Holt County.⁴²¹ At the end of the month, on November 30th, Monahan purchased 880 acres of Cherry County lands in Section Thirty-two, Township Twenty-six North, Range Thirty-four and Sections Four, Five, Eight, and Nine, Township Twenty-five North, Range Thirty-four for \$3,680.00 from Cherry County residents Lawrence and Elizabeth Eddie.⁴²² Along with this purchase Monahan acquired an added complication of a \$1,500.00 Federal Land Bank mortgage and the relinquishment of all claim to the title and land by Elizabeth Edie due to her marital situation.⁴²³ With his increasing wealth, the added mortgage was not a problem for Monahan, nor, in the end, was the Edie's divorce.

As the Great Depression era came to a close and the United States was gingerly walking the tight rope over the precipice between neutrality and world war, Earl Monahan was still busy solidifying his ranch land in Cherry County. On July 11, 1941, Monahan bought lands in Sections Three and Six, Township Twenty-five North, Range Thirty-four of Cherry County from Mary Lowe, John and Eva Lowe, and Louis and Lillian Lowe for \$1.00.⁴²⁴ Thus, Monahan completed his transactions in Cherry County by a combination of direct purchases and purchases of foreclosed lands. The larger amounts paid to some land owners represented that even during the depths of the Great Depression, Cherry County lands still held value and those who controlled them knew their worth. If someone who had the

⁴²⁰ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 293

⁴²¹ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 306

⁴²² *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 332

⁴²³ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 332

⁴²⁴ *Cherry County Deed Book 47*, Valentine, Nebraska, 651

funds that Monahan had they sold at a premium, if the lands were in danger of foreclosure he willingly took the burden from them. Such combinations represent his ability to know when to spend and know when he could be more frugal to acquire lands.

Monahan also made land purchases solely in Hooker County that expanded his holdings. On December 22nd, 1937, Monahan acquired title for lands in Sections Thirteen and Twenty-four, Township Twenty-four, Range Thirty-four West, containing 960 acres from Harry and Kate Hoyt for \$2,400.00.⁴²⁵ Less than three months later, Monahan purchased lands in Hooker County from Blanche and Fred Prewitt, former Sandhillers, of Goshen County, Wyoming, on March 17th, 1938, totaling 2,631.5 acres for \$1.00 and the responsibility for paying the back taxes on the property. During the late-1930s, when many Sandhills' agriculturalists were leaving the hills, Monahan took advantage of the opportunity to purchase lands from those who left or had been absentee landowners for years prior to the Depression. The people Monahan purchased Sandhills land from lived far and wide as the decade ended. Monahan wrote of the people he purchased land from and where they lived in 1938: "...1938 transactions included land bought from Andrew K. Johnson; George W. Johnson of Los Angeles, California; Emilia Johnson, also of Los Angeles; James P. Brown of Kimball; Jewel E. West of Macomb County, Michigan; Clarence Revere and O. J. King (the Canida land). The Brown land joins the railroad track west of Hecla."⁴²⁶ Monahan conducted many such transactions in person which forced him to travel far from the hills. One of these trips took him to the streets of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Monahan wrote of his Oklahoma trip and the business conducted there: "During the summer of 1937, I made a

⁴²⁵ *Hooker County Deed Record No. 7*, Mullen, Nebraska, 154

⁴²⁶ Earl H. Monahan and Robert M. Howard, *Sandhill Horizons: A Story of the Monahan Ranch and Other History of the Area* (Alliance, Nebraska: Rader's Place, 1987), 96

train trip to Tulsa, Oklahoma. I laid over a day in Lincoln. It was very hot, 110 degrees. Early the next morning I caught a train out for Tulsa, via Kansas City. The ride to Kansas City was good, but it was necessary to change trains for the trip on to Tulsa... The next morning, I called on Mr. Haggard. He wished to sell his section, but there was 480 acres that was tied up in an estate in which six heirs had an interest. They lived in Minnesota, District of Columbia, Indiana and Oklahoma. At that time the heirs did not have a court order to sell the estate land. Mr. Haggard said if the heirs would sell their interest when it was so they could, he would sell. This transaction was completed on January 31, 1938.”⁴²⁷ Despite his prominence in Grant and Hooker County, Monahan did not always get along with his neighbors and when there was an opportunity to buy them out he took it. While Monahan did have some disagreements with neighbors, there does not appear to be any evidence that he attempted to use “strong arm” tactics and force them to sell.

Like the large ranchers a generation before him, Monahan flourished at a time others were struggling due to frugal land purchasing tactics and tightly financing his money and lands that he acquired before the Great Depression. Due to this success, Monahan was named one of five “master farmers” (an award given to any agriculturalist whether rancher or farmer) by the organization’s committee in January of 1937.⁴²⁸ His cattle even won national prizes for their quality during the late-1930s when a few years earlier Sandhills cattle had been suffering. The *Grant County Tribune* reported on this honor in early- December 1938: “It has been learned here that two carloads of cattle raised by the Monahan Cattle Co. won first and second prizes in the feeder class at the International Live Stock Show in Chicago

⁴²⁷ Monahan, *Sandhill Horizons*, 95

⁴²⁸ *Garden County News*, January 7, 1937, 1

last week.”⁴²⁹ Success such as this led to Monahan’s rise as a spokesman for Sandhills cattlemen and the region during the period. He even was heard on the radio. The *Tribune* reported on this event in the spring of 1940: “Ranching in the Sandhills will be given consideration on the ‘Farm Facts and Fun’ state wide broadcast Saturday, May 25. Earl Monahan, prominent rancher near Hyannis, will take part in the interview on the air from 1:00 until 1:30 P. M. People living outside the Sandhills have learned to appreciate this great cattle producing area in view of the fact that it has been the green spot of the white spot during all the drouth years.”⁴³⁰ Due to his ranching practices and well-timed purchases during the 1930s and 1940s, Monahan’s Circle Dot Brand still existed in the hills some forty years later. His numerous accolades attested to that. By the time of his death in early-1991, Monahan had been inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners in the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1990; named the Stockman of the Century in 1973, and inducted into the International Northern Livestock Hall of Fame in 1969.⁴³¹ His prominent stature as a Grant County cattleman was well-earned. Beel wrote of how large his holdings became by the 1970s: “Nineteen seventy court house records list about 58,000 acres in Cherry County alone.”⁴³² Besides Monahan, there were other ranchers and ranching outfits that prospered in the north central Sandhills during the Great Depression.

In the 1930s, the Hanna family increased their lands in Cherry County, by buying up foreclosed lands or paying individuals large sums directly when they could afford to, just as Monahan did. They also utilized the court system when they had to. On May 3, 1932, the Hanna Land and Cattle Company won a suit against Charles Martin, et.al., in which the

⁴²⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, December 7, 1938, 1

⁴³⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, May 22, 1940, 1

⁴³¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, January 24, 1991

⁴³² Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century*, 22

Cherry County District Court found that Martin and his associates owed the Hanna Land and Cattle Company \$4,400.00 with interest at 7% annually.⁴³³ A sheriff sale was held by Cherry County Sheriff W. B. Hammon at the east entrance to the Cherry County Courthouse on April 5th, 1933, and the lands in Section Five and Eight, Township Twenty-nine North, Range Twenty-nine were purchased by the Hanna Land and Cattle Company for \$4,773.00.⁴³⁴ The corporation received title on May 19, 1933.⁴³⁵ The suit and subsequent purchase netted the corporation 480 additional acres in Cherry County.⁴³⁶ Individual members of the Hanna family also acquired lands during the 1930s. For instance, Don Hanna purchased 440 acres of Sections Thirteen and Twenty-four, Township Thirty-one North, Range Twenty-five in Cherry County and 267.01 acres in Section Nineteen, Township Thirty-one, Range Twenty-four in Brown County, totaling 707.01 acres from O.W. and Ena L. Wolcott on April 21st, 1939, for \$2,121.00.⁴³⁷ Thus, individual families could become very affluent by becoming an incorporated entity, remaining an individual, or both. Some Cherry County residents who were not part of a large corporation or had the benefit of Monahan's fortune also were able to build up sufficient ranch lands to survive, and later thrive, in the region during this time through hard work and careful management of personal finances. One such individual was Merle Yaryan.

Merle Yaryan lived and worked most of his life in southern Cherry and northern Hooker Counties as a foreman and ranch manager. In the early twentieth century, the Yaryan family had a small ranching operation in southern Cherry County. During the Great

⁴³³ *Cherry County Deed Book 48*, Valentine, Nebraska, 192

⁴³⁴ *Cherry County Deed Book 48*, Valentine, Nebraska, 192

⁴³⁵ *Cherry County Deed Book 48*, Valentine, Nebraska, 192

⁴³⁶ *Cherry County Numerical Index*, Section 8, Township 29, Range 29, Valentine, Nebraska

⁴³⁷ *Cherry County Deed Book 50*, Valentine, Nebraska, 91

Depression, Yaryan and his brother, Earl, provided help to nearby ranches during the days of locust plagues, prairie fires, and dust storms in the form of labor or managerial skills. Two such operations were the Carver and Big Creek ranches. Merle Yaryan wrote of his experiences in the hills of southern Cherry County in the mid-1930s in *A Sandhill Century*:

At the time Dan DeNaeyer was foreman at the Carver and Walter Kerr was foreman at Big Creek. Andy Rock was hired as manager for the ranches which apparently was not satisfactory because I was hired April 16, 1936, as foreman of the west division and went to live at the Carver. That fall Kerr left the ranch in ill health. They had watched my work for six months and Mr. Lowe of Hyannis knew my brother Earl Yaryan from past years. So they hired Earl as foreman at Big Creek and made me manager of the entire operation. Similar to other ranches during the early 1930s, the ranch went into debt...a half million dollars worth...and it fell upon me to get the debts paid off. There were about 250 horses and 9,000 cattle on the ranch when I took over. Cattle weren't high, but neither were expenses. With careful management the debt was paid in seven years and 14,000 acres of land had been added, bringing the total to 85,000 acres of deeded land and 15,000 acres of school land and other that was leased.⁴³⁸

Yaryan's managerial success for others equated to success in his personal agricultural endeavors as he was able to use the limited funds he made working for Big Creek to purchase his own ranch lands in southern Cherry County. On July 25, 1938, he purchased 960 acres of Sections Twenty-seven, Thirty-four, and Thirty-five, Township Twenty-nine North, Range Thirty-four from Fred Stone of Cherry County for \$3,840.00.⁴³⁹ He also assumed responsibility for a \$1,731.00 mortgage owed to the Federal Land Bank by Stone upon taking possession of the land.⁴⁴⁰ Nearly a month later, Yaryan purchased 160 acres in Sections Thirty-two and Thirty-three, Township Twenty-nine North, Range Thirty-four from widow Lizzie Ladely of Hooker County for \$640.00.⁴⁴¹ Nearly a year before the events at Pearl Harbor, Yaryan conducted a significant transaction in which he increased his holdings by nearly three-fold. On December 23, 1940, Yaryan purchased 2,200 acres of Sections

⁴³⁸ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century*, 52

⁴³⁹ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 546

⁴⁴⁰ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 546

⁴⁴¹ *Cherry County Deed Book 49*, Valentine, Nebraska, 573

Twenty-one, Twenty-two, Twenty-three, Twenty-six, and Twenty-seven, Township Twenty-nine North, Range Thirty-four west from members of the Prey and Harvey families for \$1.00 and other valuable considerations.⁴⁴² With this purchase, Yaryan consolidated his Cherry County ranch.

During World War II, Merle and Earl Yaryan had built up enough land to quit their work at neighboring ranches and focus more on their own. After the end of the war, Merle improved on his ranch and then sold his holdings, thus attaining the agricultural profit from the region that so many of his peers had failed to do during the environmentally harsh years of the 1930s. Yaryan wrote of his family's experiences in the 1940s: "Earl left Big Creek in the fall of 1942 and Floyd Carr was hired as foreman. In 1944 I turned in my resignation, moved my mother from Big Creek to Mullen and I moved back to our ranches about 15 miles east of the Carver. In 1947 and 1949 mother and I sold our ranches."⁴⁴³ Yaryan never had the holdings that the larger ranchers, such as Monahan and Don Hanna, did, nonetheless, he was significant for demonstrating that if individuals with smaller holdings simultaneously worked at other occupations, did not wholly farm their lands but kept most if not all of them pastoral, then over time one could break into the category of large agriculturalist by owning 1,000 acres or more. Yaryan exhibited a fortitude that many of his contemporaries did not as they left the hills when their farming ventures failed.

In other areas of the Sandhills, ranchers successfully and pragmatically purchased available lands in order to increase their pastures in the hopes of staving off environmental and economic disaster. George McGinley, Sr., owned properties throughout the hills in the

⁴⁴² *Cherry County Deed Book 47*, Valentine, Nebraska, 448

⁴⁴³ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century*, 52

latter years of the Depression. Willard Simms and Harry Green, Jr., wrote of his purchasing methods and who he bought out: “In 1937 he added the old Jim Carson ranch near Gordon, Nebraska, to his holdings, this time stepping far northward into Cherry county bordering on South Dakota. In 1940, he bought the old Red Deer ranch near Valentine, making another land coup. Always, he sought the best. This place he purchased with the revenue paid for a large section of his Keystone ranch that had to go under the Kingsley dam. That is how and why he has ranches today, strategically located on the four sides of the Sandhills- the fountain head for each operation, the basic factor in all range cattle operations of Nebraska. This is not unusual in Sandhills cattle operations, the ownership of large ranches on the outskirts of the hills.”⁴⁴⁴ Another prominent rancher who added to his holdings in the eastern Sandhills was Garfield County rancher C. J. Malmsten. Malmsten maintained significant wealth throughout the Great Depression as evidenced by the exorbitant prices he paid for some of his land purchases. On August 18, 1936, Malmsten purchased numerous foreclosed lands held by the Federal Land Bank of Omaha in Sections Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Seventeen, and Eighteen, Township Twenty-three North, Range Fourteen West, of Garfield County for \$17,000.00.⁴⁴⁵ A year and a half later, in January 1938, Malmsten continued buying lands, acquiring the West Half of the West Half and the Southwest Quarter of the Southwest Quarter of Section Fifteen, Township Twenty-three, Range Fourteen, from Mary Robertson of Woodbury County, Iowa, for \$300.00.⁴⁴⁶ In late-April 1940, Malmsten won a civil suit brought against the remaining officers of the Citizens State Bank of McCook as he had been paying taxes on all of Section Twenty-nine, Township Twenty-three North, Range

⁴⁴⁴ Willard Simms and Harry Green, Jr., “The Gamble of the Sandhills,” *The Westerner* (May 1947): 73, N279-sh, Nebraska Sandhills Subject File, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

⁴⁴⁵ *Garfield County Deed Book 21*, Burwell, Nebraska, 19

⁴⁴⁶ *Garfield County Deed Book 20*, Burwell, Nebraska, 211

Fourteen West in Garfield County, Nebraska, that the bank had neglected since the early-1940s.⁴⁴⁷ Following his legal victory, Malmsten acquired the land he had been paying taxes on for \$250.00 on July 15th, 1940, in order to expand his ranch holdings.⁴⁴⁸ Such tactics were not that dissimilar from land speculators such as Theodore Folk. In May of 1941, Malmsten bought lands from Garfield County residents George and Estella Lange for \$1,500.00 in Section Nineteen, Township Twenty-three North, Range Fourteen West.⁴⁴⁹ Malmsten was so successful in his land purchases that much of his acreage was consolidated into the Malmsten Ranch Company in the 1940s. In 1944, this company continued to expand its agricultural dominance in Garfield County. On February 16th, 1944, the Malmsten Ranch Company purchased land in Sections Ten, Eleven, and Fourteen, Township Twenty-three North, Range Fourteen West from Kentucky Home Mutual Life Insurance Company of Louisville, Kentucky.⁴⁵⁰ The warranty deed that chronicled the transaction noted that the Malmsten Ranch Company acquired these lands for “a consideration which is valuable, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged,” suggesting that a possible land trade was conducted as a mortgage responsibility did not accompany the property.⁴⁵¹ Beyond noting the expansion of the Malmsten Ranch Company, this example is important for noting that mortgage and insurance companies were not just local or regional in the forms of the Federal Land Bank of Omaha or the Lincoln Joint Stock Bank, but that such loan and mortgage companies invested in the Sandhills from all around the United States, including places as remote from the region as Kentucky. As with Monahan, Haythorn, Hanna, and Yaryan, Malmsten made pragmatic,

⁴⁴⁷ *C. J. Malmsten v. Van E. Petersen, et al.*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1673, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁴⁸ *C. J. Malmsten v. Van E. Petersen, et al.*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1673, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

⁴⁴⁹ *Garfield County Deed Book 20*, Burwell, Nebraska, 377

⁴⁵⁰ *Garfield County Deed Book 22*, Burwell, Nebraska, 83

⁴⁵¹ *Garfield County Deed Book 22*, Burwell, Nebraska, 83

well-timed purchases that coupled with sound financial management led to success during the environmentally vitriolic 1930s. While their stories of enormous land purchases and thousands of dollars spent may make it seem like life was easy for Sandhills ranchers during the Great Depression and that they were some Great Plains version of the Rockefellers, they were not. Most were very fortunate to be in the positions they were in by the end of the Great Depression. Several were unlucky and failed. There were many pitfalls that led to ranching demise during the drought. A significant one was the price of cattle.



(Cattle by water tank near Nenzel in Cherry County. Note the sparse grasslands due to drought. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG4288, photo 8.)

Large scale ranchers survived the drought and environmental hardships of the Great Depression better than small farmers and ranchers; however, this did not mean that they did not encounter difficulties nor were they impervious to failure. Ranchers on the southern plains faced similar difficulties as their Sandhills brethren. Worster wrote of the challenges ranchers faced in the Oklahoma panhandle: “All over Cimarron in the thirties decade there was a livestock market squeeze, and it was followed by an even greater crisis of getting feed for starving animals. The feed supply problem was most frequently linked to drought. In the terribly dry year of 1936 William Baker pointed out that on the 800,000 acres of pastureland in the county, the grass stand was only 30 to 40 per cent of normal.”⁴⁵² Nebraska Sandhills’ ranchers were not immune to such conditions. As the drought persisted in the mid-1930s and President Roosevelt’s New Deal policies were implemented, ranchers began to be concerned about how they were going to care for their cattle and also if the government’s solution to purchase them was the best solution. In the summer of 1933, shortly after Roosevelt took office, many individuals at first were not concerned with cattle but with other livestock. This was the case in Sheridan County. The *Sheridan County Star* took note of the county’s declining hog population in its June 29, 1933, issue:

With Sheridan County one of the strongest hog producing sections in the state of Nebraska just a few years ago it develops from the records of the County Assessor’s office this enviable pork position may be lost if the hog raisers of this territory do not watch their step. Hog production has fallen off nearly fifty percent within the county during the past five years is the story the records tell. From more than twenty-six thousand head in 1928, the figures show but fifteen thousand head this spring. Range cattle and sheep show an increase in production over the same five year period with farm flock up double. The speculation that there are more horses on the farms of this county at this time than there has been for many years is not borne out by the records which show horses and mules down some three thousand head this year over 1928.⁴⁵³

A year later conditions regarding Sandhills cattle and their owners had changed, especially in the eastern hills of Blaine County. Ranchers read the prerequisites, rates, and practices

⁴⁵² Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 111

⁴⁵³ *Sheridan County Star*, June 29, 1933, 1

associated with government cattle purchases on the front page of the June 14, 1934, issue of the *Blaine County Booster*:

...At the present time only those already on relief or who will be shortly on relief are eligible for help. However, the work includes other phases such as the buying of cattle in distressed areas and that is expected to be the biggest part of the program in this county. Some of the larger cattle owners have been able to find pasture in the sand hills for their herds, but many of the small farmers are still holding their cattle on their farms, and as conditions get worse, will have to sell or dispose of them in some manner. Definite payment price schedules have been set up by the government for buying various classes of cattle. In addition to the payment price, each farmer will receive a contract or agreement payment. This agreement payment will be made for the production adjustment involved in the surplus cattle removal and for agreement to participate in future administration programs, and will not be in payment for the cattle. At this time, it is not known whether or not the government will buy cattle and permit the farmer not to sign the adjustment program if one is put on. The proposed sales price schedules for the initial buying are: Cattle over two years \$6.00 per head; one to two years \$5.00 per head; under one year \$3.00 per head. This means that if advantage is taken of both figures, that the farmer would receive \$4 to \$8 for cattle under 1 year; \$10 to \$15 for yearlings; and \$12 to \$20 for cattle over 2 years. The cattle will be inspected and purchased on the farms so that the farmer will have to stand freight commission charges, etc. However he will probably be asked to deliver those fit for human food to the railroad. Those not fit for human food will be killed on the farm.⁴⁵⁴

Later in the summer of 1934, as the drought intensified, Sandhills ranchers, whether large or small, became all too familiar with government cattle purchases. The livestock demographic was seemingly changing overnight. The September 12, 1934, issue of the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* noted under the heading, "15 Cars Cattle Leave Over Burlington Route:"

Tuesday Uncle Sam purchased 493 head of cattle at Thedford and started them the same day over the Burlington railroad to Sioux City, Iowa. Here they will be turned over or divided among the packers. The cattle were mostly from Cherry county. Hundred (sic) of cattle are going out of our county weekly. There have been several shipments to eastern markets, due to feed shortage the hill country will have to be drained of its thousands of head of livestock before cold weather sets in. W. W. Derrick, the state man was here overseeing the cattle shipment, Tuesday. Twelve were condemned. Upwards of 300,000 head of cattle have been purchased by the government in the state of Nebraska. This figure gives some idea of the drouth loss the state has suffered in one branch of the agricultural industry alone. This amount of cattle have been sold at low prices to the government or to speculators, which next year, according to present indications, may be worth a great deal more, possibly two or three time the price paid by the government.⁴⁵⁵

For many ranchers, the last sentence of this article was the one that had them the most concerned. They did not want to be "saddled" with such a loss if there was any chance that their cows could produce a greater profit. Some were able to find a way around this

⁴⁵⁴ *Blaine County Booster*, June 14, 1934, 1

⁴⁵⁵ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 12, 1934, 1

conundrum using ingenuity and good networking skills. Ranchers would ship their cattle to other ranges out of state in the winter if they knew a railroad official who would cooperate with waving shipping costs until the following spring when they could pay. For many, though, during the drought years of the 1930s, bringing their cattle back to the Sandhills for the summer would not be an option as pastures were decimated and cattle had to continue to be sold.



(Herding cattle on the Adamson ranch, near Nenzel, in Cherry County during the Depression. Note the overgrazed pasture. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, RG4288, photo 12.)

Notices in the region's newspapers of cattle and other livestock auctions became as common as exclamations for sheriff sales. The *Grant County Tribune* notified its readers in its June 18th, 1930, issue that Col. A. W. Thompson, Auctioneer, was conducting an auction

at the Lewis Lowe ranch on June 26th, at 10:00 A. M. fifteen miles north of Mullen, in which 1,256 Hereford cattle, 38 horses, 5 mules, and 17 hogs were to be sold.⁴⁵⁶ The ranch, which was comprised of 13,000 acres, was also to be made available for sub-leasing.⁴⁵⁷ In mid-August 1935, 158 cattle and 11 horses were to be sold at public auction by G. W. Patchin, C. E. McKinley, and C. H. Clarence at the C. E. McKinley ranch near Seneca in Thomas County.⁴⁵⁸ Due to the reality of the region's harsh environmental and financial conditions, McKinley also placed his 501 acre ranch up for sale as well as the six-room main ranch house, shed, and 10 x 12 grain bin.⁴⁵⁹ Cattle sales continued in the hills the following year as four-hundred Hereford cattle and two-hundred hogs were sold in mid-November 1936 at the Oshkosh Pavilion in Garden County.⁴⁶⁰ Cattle prices were so abysmal in the Sandhills during the mid-1930s that some newspaper editors suggested alternative means of agricultural production. *The Burwell Tribune* argued in its July 26th, 1934, issue: "There are 2181 dogs in Custer county. The average value of the herd is ten dollars a head. That county also has 117408 head of cattle the average value of which is within a few cents of the average value of the dog crop. Why not quit raising cattle and go into the dog raising business?"⁴⁶¹ Marianne Beel wrote further of the difficulties faced by Cherry County ranchers in the summer of 1934: "By late September 15,752 cattle had been purchased from Cherry County owners when numbers began to dwindle. Operators hoped to wean their calves in October to sell privately and offer the cows to the government...By August 1934 the first corn-hog checks arrived that amounted to \$18,000 for the county. Of the 137 applicants all but three

⁴⁵⁶ *Grant County Tribune*, June 18, 1930, 8

⁴⁵⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, June 18, 1930, 8

⁴⁵⁸ *Blaine County Booster*, August 8, 1935, 1

⁴⁵⁹ *Blaine County Booster*, August 8, 1935, 1

⁴⁶⁰ *Garden County News*, November 12, 1936, 7

⁴⁶¹ *The Burwell Tribune*, July 26, 1934, 1

were for farmers in the southern part of the county. Those first checks were for one half the corn money and \$2 per head on the hogs which would not be raised.”⁴⁶² Whereas some southern Cherry County hog farmers were able to recoup some of their losses from the government, not all ranchers were able to. The declining cattle prices were also a steep financial mountain that many could not traverse. Even some of the bigger ranches sold out. One such rancher was Ralph Price.

Price was a neighbor to Don Hanna in Cherry County. Hanna, already a large rancher, took advantage of Price selling out in March 1937 by acquiring and adding to his lands. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* noted the transaction in its March 17, 1937, issue:

A large ranch transaction took place in Cherry county last week when Don E. Hanna of the Brownlee country purchased the Ralph Price, Sr. ranch in the Lewanna territory, southeast of Brownlee. This ranch is considered one of the best of its kind in that territory and comprises eight sections...or 5,200 acres. The ranch on good years cuts around 800 tons of river hay...Mr. Price has not definitely decided on his future location, but as he is a partner with Edgar Thompson in the Thedford Sales Commission Co. it will at least give him more time to devote to this well-organized firm...The Hannas' are most favorably known all over this part of the state and the recently acquired ranch holdings will all the more permanently place them among the largest ranchers of the territory.⁴⁶³

Price, undoubtedly after experiencing more “bad” years than “good” years, coupled with a Thedford Sales Commission Company job on the side that was less financially uncertain and dependent on the environment, decided to sell out to Hanna and end his agricultural career. Price’s ranch was not the only one to sell.

Like Price, many ranchers, who had seemingly been impervious to the failures and property sales that their farming contemporaries had already become accustomed to, sold their holdings during and following the harsh drought of 1936. The *Grant County Tribune*

⁴⁶² Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century*, 183

⁴⁶³ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, March 17, 1937, 1

advertised in its September 30th, 1936, issue under the heading, “A Few Ranches for Sale:” “Seventeen thousand acres, plenty of hay. Twenty thousand acres of range land all in one body, or in any part. 5,880 acres of range land, running water. 1,240 acres, cuts 150 tons of hay. A few properties in Hyannis and Whitman. Also money to loan on good balanced ranches. G. A. Bump, Whitman, Nebr.”⁴⁶⁴ Thus, even pastoralists in the ranching paradise of Grant County were not immune from the difficult decision of selling out or holding on. Some Sandhills ranchers had the rare opportunity to sell to well-known corporations. The *Rock County Leader* reported one such transaction in December 1936: “According to the Burwell Tribune the DeLashmett ranch in northern Loup county, was bid in by the Chrysler Motor Corpn., of Detroit, Mich., last week for \$13,000. The ranch property was part of the assets of the Farmers Bank and had been bid in at \$10,500 some time ago.”⁴⁶⁵ While the acquisition of Sandhills land by large national corporations was rare, the purchase of bank assets undoubtedly influenced the Chrysler Company’s interest. Such an example nonetheless demonstrates that the sale of Sandhills ranch lands attracted a wide variety of potential purchasers and for various reasons.

Other Sandhills ranch holdings continued to be sold for the rest of the decade and into the 1940s. In early-May 1938, W. G. and Frank O’Kief purchased the remaining holdings of the McNare ranch in Cherry County which encompassed 8,700 acres.⁴⁶⁶ Later in the same month the Ben Roberts 8,520 acre ranch near Merriman sold for \$5.50 an acre to the Stockyards National Bank of Omaha.⁴⁶⁷ It was speculated by Valentine newspapermen that

⁴⁶⁴ *Grant County Tribune*, September 30, 1936, 4

⁴⁶⁵ *Rock County Leader*, December 10, 1936, 1

⁴⁶⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, May 6, 1938, 1

⁴⁶⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, May 20, 1938, 1

the bank planned to resell the land in separate tracts for a significant profit.⁴⁶⁸ Some Sandhills ranch properties continued to be sold as environmental conditions fluctuated for the rest of the Great Depression. On rare occasion, some ranchers were fortunate enough to be able to lease their lands. This was the case with Bert Smith of Garden County. Smith leased his ranch in Garden County, held a public auction of various farm equipment, thirty-one hogs, eight horses, and four cattle, and moved to Oregon.⁴⁶⁹ While it is debatable if Smith was actually more of a farmer than a rancher (he claimed he was a rancher), in any regard ranchers normally disposed of their lands permanently if they left the country. Even larger ranching empires than Price's, Roberts', and Smith's changed hands. One such large scale-cattle operation was the Albert Modisett ranch.

Albert Modisett was one of the Sandhills' most prominent ranchers, building his holdings in Sheridan County in the late-19th century at the same time ranching giants such as Bartlett Richards and the North Brothers ruled the Sandhills' pastures. The demise of Modisett's empire began with his untimely death in a car accident on June 3rd, 1935, while on a trip to the eastern United States.⁴⁷⁰ Nearly five years later, on April 11th, 1940, Modisett's holdings were sold off. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of Modisett's sale and his legacy:

Probably the largest single unit land sale to be made in Western Nebraska during the past quarter of a century or more was consummated (sic) here last Thursday when the Modisett ranch, consisting of some 32,000 acres was sold to Stanable and Engel of Hyannis. Possession to be given May 15. No official announcement of the sale price has been made but it is reported the land brought more than \$5.00 per acre...In 1885 the late Albert Modisett filed on a 160 acre homestead on Deer Creek, 22 miles southeast of Rushville, and this started the present ranch holdings. Later his brother Marl also filed a homestead. Starting with this half section and \$500 in cash the Modisett brothers built one of the greatest ranch properties in the middle west. On June 3, 1935, who some thirty years before had

⁴⁶⁸ *The Valentine Republican*, May 20, 1938, 1

⁴⁶⁹ *Garden County News*, February 16, 1939, 1

⁴⁷⁰ *Sheridan County Star*, April 18, 1940, 1

purchased the interests of his brother in the ranch, was killed in a train-car accident near Eaton, Ohio. Since that time Marl has operated the ranch.⁴⁷¹

While the ranch had been prosperous and fared well in the early-1930s under Albert, it could not survive his death. Marl had done an acceptable job managing it after Albert's tragic death, but his age, coupled with the daily environmental challenges Sandhillers faced in this period, led Marl to sell the ranch instead of carry on. Modisett was a remarkable individual as he built his ranch holdings from a 160 acre homestead to a 32,000 acre large ranching enterprise by focusing on pastoralism instead of farming. Modisett's example was also significant for showing that the Great Depression alone did not always sink ranchers but personal and unexpected tragedies in conjunction with this event could. While it is uncertain what Modisett would have done with his ranch if he had not been prematurely killed, it is likely that he would not have easily parted with it.

⁴⁷¹ *Sheridan County Star*, April 18, 1940, 1



(Cattle herd on the A. F. Bates ranch near Broken Bow in the southeastern Sandhills. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, RG4288, photo 13.)

During the latter years of the Great Depression, many of Modisett's contemporaries met in concern over the future of their own ranches, as well as the future of the industry in the state. Sandhills cattlemen banded together to promote their product in an effort to put aside worries over the Agricultural Adjustment Act's impact on cattle prices and encourage future growth in the industry with, of course, Sandhills cattle leading the way. This Sandhills cattlemen association was led by many of the region's prominent men. The *Rock County Leader* reported on this group's first gathering at Valentine on April 16th, 1938:

An organization to promote the advertising of sandhill cattle was formed at Valentine Saturday when 150 cattlemen of the area between Holt county and the Wyoming line met in response to an invitation of the Valentine Chamber of Commerce...Chairman McKelvie...named an organization committee, composed of the following men: Tom Arnold, Nenzel; George Christopher, Valentine; Jas. Krecyik, Wood Lake; H. G. Thorley, Springview; Roy Ross, Gordon; Earl Monahan, Hyannis; Harold Harms, Wood Lake; Jay Cole, Merriman; Albert Salzman, Ainsworth; Earl Peterson, Newport; and Fay Hill, Gordon. This committee will hold its first meeting at Valentine on May 7. During the general discussion Saturday much interest was shown by both large and small cattlemen and it was evident the ranchers of the area fully realize the value of giving full publicity to the fact that sandhills cattle feed better and make more profit for the corn belt feeders. Those present represented the commercial herds of the territory and a census taken showed that the number of cattle owned by those assembled totaled 35,000 head...All cattlemen of the area will soon receive an invitation to be present at the general meeting of May 21.⁴⁷²

By forming a powerful lobby/interest group, large Nebraska Sandhills ranchers ensured that their voices were heard on the state and local political scene in order to reinforce their preeminence in Nebraska agricultural issues. Small agriculturalists did not form such a lobby, most instead relied on New Deal programs for survival. By the end of the decade, agriculturalists large and small utilized an economic and agricultural practice that, when practically implemented, assured a route to solvency: diversification.

Diligent Diversification: The Key to Surviving Drought and Despair during the Depression

Everett Satterfield, of Loup County, was a large rancher who survived the Great Depression by using many of the same methods as men like Monahan; however, he also utilized diverse methods in conjunction with well-timed cattle and feed purchases conducted with the help of his wife, and through local political connections. Satterfield built up his holdings in the county prior to the Great Depression and like so many other individuals faced the challenge of how to hold onto them during environmental disaster and economic calamity. Like Monahan, Hanna, and the others, Satterfield purchased the foreclosed lands of small agriculturalists at sheriff sales or directly from banks or lenders that took title of the lands. He also contacted absentee landholders to bid on their Sandhills' real estate. An

⁴⁷² *Rock County Leader*, April 21, 1938, 1

example of the former occurred in October of 1933 when Satterfield purchased 640 acres of land in Sections Five, Six, Seven and Eight, Township Twenty-four North Range Nineteen West of Garfield County from the Custer County Bank of Custer, South Dakota, for \$1.00 and a property exchange.⁴⁷³ Besides enlightening one to how Satterfield kept adding to his ranch during the 1930s, this warranty deed provides insight into the precarious situation facing banks on the northern Great Plains during the period, as evidenced by the Custer County Bank's cheap disposal of the lands. Satterfield conducted several such transactions during the 1930s to keep up his ranch holdings. He was generally able to acquire 640 acre sections at a time within one transaction or a combination of them. On December 30, 1938, Satterfield increased his holdings by over 1,600 acres through seven separate transactions that occurred in 1934, 1935, 1936, and 1938.⁴⁷⁴ However, these transactions were not filed for record with the Loup County Clerk's Office, which also doubled as the Register of Deeds Office, until December 30, 1938.⁴⁷⁵ One of these transactions occurred on April 10th, 1934, when Satterfield purchased 640 acres of land in Sections One and Two, Township Twenty-four North, Range Twenty West from Xanthe I. Rumbaugh for \$1.00 and other consideration.⁴⁷⁶ One wonders why these seven transactions were not filed with the Loup County Clerk immediately. Generally after a land deal, the deeds are filed for record with the Clerk's office so the County Treasurer's Office is aware they can be taxed annually or semi-annually. Coincidentally, Satterfield had an "inside connection" with the Clerk's Office. Everett Satterfield served as the Loup County Clerk during the Great Depression

⁴⁷³ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 364

⁴⁷⁴ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 358- 363

⁴⁷⁵ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 358- 363

⁴⁷⁶ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 359

until 1939 when H. A. Lyon assumed the office.⁴⁷⁷ Satterfield even attended conferences in this official capacity. *The Taylor Clarion* wrote of one such occasion: “Everett Satterfield spent several days last week in Lincoln, in attendance at the Assessor’s State Convention. He reports a very profitable session.”⁴⁷⁸ As Loup County Clerk, Satterfield perhaps had better knowledge of certain available land deals than the average rancher even though they were public record, as he had inside knowledge of who owned what, what lands were being foreclosed on, and if any of these were good agricultural lands. Thus, he could possibly react quicker than the average rancher as he might have known what lands were available or what they were reasonably worth slightly before they were made known to the public. Another advantage Satterfield had in building his extensive holdings was his wife, Katherine.

Everett Satterfield alone did not build up his holdings, many land deals were also conducted in the name of his wife, Katherine. By utilizing their marriage, the Satterfields hoped to show there was no conflict of interest between Satterfield’s position as County Clerk and the land purchases he could make. A land deal that Katherine participated in occurred on September 10th, 1935. On this date, she purchased lands in Section Twenty, Township Twenty-two, Range Nineteen and Section Seventeen, Township Twenty-two, Range Nineteen of Loup County for \$1.00 and “other valuable considerations” from absentee land holders and former members of the Adams family, sisters Elanor Adams Phillips and Grace Adams Warren and their husbands.⁴⁷⁹ By 1935, these individuals were not living in Nebraska, but instead called the area around New Haven, Connecticut home.⁴⁸⁰ Like the previously mentioned land deals, the Satterfields did not file this transaction until years later

⁴⁷⁷ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

⁴⁷⁸ *The Taylor Clarion*, March 14, 1935, 3

⁴⁷⁹ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 365

⁴⁸⁰ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 365

on January 7, 1939, when H. A. Lyon had taken over as Loup County Clerk.⁴⁸¹ Thus, just as many of Everett's deals, Katherine's did not always immediately become public record.

Beyond land deals, Katherine's presence in the maintenance of the Satterfield's large ranching operations was most apparent in their many cattle transactions. Cattle prices plummeted during the Depression, thus, making life difficult for ranchers who relied on profits from their cattle sales. The Satterfields managed this problem by taking out multiple mortgages on cattle, generally two a year, during the peak of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The AAA was initiated during President Roosevelt's earliest days in office as a means to stabilize agricultural markets and save the nation's failing agriculturalists. Historian Ronald Edsforth described the purpose of the establishment of the Agricultural Adjustment Act: "Through Title I, usually called the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Congress gave the President and his Department of Agriculture power to intervene in commodity markets, leaving the details of interventions in particular markets up to the administration."⁴⁸² The Agricultural Adjustment Act in the Sandhills during the Great Depression will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four. While Everett was Loup County Clerk, Katherine was the sole mortgagee on these loans. For instance, she took out chattel mortgage #1798, for \$5,000.00 from the Farmers State Bank on April 2, 1934, which was filed on April 5, 1934, for 423 cattle.⁴⁸³ Their mortgage was cancelled on October 12, 1934, and attested to by Everett in his official capacity as Loup County Clerk.⁴⁸⁴ Following the payment of this loan, Katherine immediately took out another \$3,000.00 chattel mortgage from the Farmers State

⁴⁸¹ *Loup County Deed Record No. 12*, Taylor, Nebraska, 365

⁴⁸² Ronald Edsforth, *The New Deal: America's Response to the Great Depression* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2000), 173

⁴⁸³ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁸⁴ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

Bank in October 1934 for 365 cattle.⁴⁸⁵ This mortgage was eventually cancelled (i.e. paid off) on March 5, 1936.⁴⁸⁶ Undoubtedly the impact of the drought coupled with the previously discussed low prices of \$5.00 to \$20.00 per head that the Federal Government was willing to pay for cattle as well as other expenses led to this delay in final payment compared to the previous mortgage. Nonetheless the Satterfields did pay off this debt.

The Satterfields maintained their ranch by continuing this practice of maintaining a system of chattel mortgage loans throughout the dirtiest days of the 1930s drought. They generally had more than two chattel mortgages out at once. For instance, on September 4, 1935, Katherine took out \$1,000.00 chattel mortgage, #2445, from the Farmers State Bank on 365 head of cattle and 200 calves and on November 23, 1935, she signed a \$10,700.00 loan, chattel mortgage #2570, for “526 cattle and feed.”⁴⁸⁷ The former mortgage was paid off on January 16, 1936, and the latter, larger loan was paid off almost immediately on December 9, 1935.⁴⁸⁸ The Satterfields continued their pattern of buying cattle and feed through the administration of well-timed chattel mortgages for the rest of the Great Depression. On February 29, 1936, Katherine received a \$12,000.00 chattel mortgage, #2662, from the Packers National Bank on “cattle, hay, alfalfa, grass” that was finally cancelled on December 11, 1937.⁴⁸⁹ And so the practice continued. The Satterfields continued to sign chattel mortgages that were not above their means. They paid off their loans by continually buying cattle and, when necessary, feed, to stay solvent during the worst years of the drought. When cattle prices increased in the latter years of the Depression so did

⁴⁸⁵ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁸⁶ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁸⁷ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁸⁸ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁸⁹ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

the amount of the Satterfields chattel mortgages and the number of cattle they bought. Satterfield also bought and sold lands during this period. Through these diverse methods of operation he was able to avoid foreclosure. On November 26, 1936, Katherine received a \$15,000.00 chattel mortgage, #3070, from the Packers National Bank for 665 head of cattle that was cancelled on December 11, 1937.⁴⁹⁰ On this date, chattel mortgage #3444, for \$14,000.00 on 784 cattle from a loan taken out, once again, from the Packers National Bank earlier in 1937 was also cancelled.⁴⁹¹ Obviously, 1937 proved highly profitable for the Satterfields. Following the end of his term as Loup County Clerk, Everett's name began appearing with Katherine's in the chattel mortgage index. On February 1, 1939, Everett and Katherine Satterfield received a \$20,000.00 chattel mortgage, #5204, from the Packers National Bank for 1,167 head of cattle, feed, and hay.⁴⁹² This mortgage was cancelled on May 21, 1941.⁴⁹³ On February 10, 1942, Katherine took out chattel mortgage #5977 for \$11,800.00 to be used for purchasing "445 cattle and grain," which the Satterfields paid off on March 25, 1942.⁴⁹⁴ In the late-February 1942, the Satterfields conducted a cattle sale which was highly lucrative. *The Burwell Tribune* reported of the Satterfields' success: "Notwithstanding bad weather there was a fair sized crowd at the auction yards Monday to purchase the Satterfield herd of Herefords. Several out of town bidders were presnt (sic) and the offering consisting of some two hundred head was disposed of readily at what is said to be fair prices. A little better than one hundred dollars a head was realized by the owners of the stock."⁴⁹⁵ Thus, the Satterfields successfully survived the drought and depression.

⁴⁹⁰ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁹¹ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁹² *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁹³ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁹⁴ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska, Section S

⁴⁹⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, February 26, 1942, 1

Through a combination of land deals, public office, and shrewd cattle deals during the lowest cattle prices, Everett Satterfield preserved his ranching operation during the days of fire and dust. The Satterfields' profited from these business maneuvers when the Depression had ended. Thus, diverse methods led to successful outcomes.

The best way to survive the environmental and, in turn, economic difficulties of the Great Depression was through agricultural diversification. All three agricultural groups, small, medium, and large participated in this practice; however, those having 5,000 acres or less were more likely to do this. One such individual who diversified his holdings during the 1930s was Arthur County agriculturalist Alva Simpson. Simpson arrived in the Sandhills prior to World War I and through land patents and purchases during the late-teens and 1920s, built up his operation to over 1,000 acres. On September 30, 1919, he secured a homestead patent in Arthur County which was recorded as:

The United States of America, To All to whom these presents shall come, Greeting: Whereas, a Certificate of the Register of the Land Office at North Platte, Nebraska, has been deposited in the General Land Office, whereby it appears that, pursuant to the Act of Congress of May 20, 1862, "To Secure Homesteads to Actual Settlers on the Public Domain," and the acts supplemental thereto, the claim of Alva N. Simpson has been established and duly consummated, in conformity to law, for the Section two in Township seventeen north of Range thirty-seven west of Sixth Principal Meridian, Nebraska, containing six hundred forty-eight and forty-eight hundredths acres, according to the Official Plat of the Survey of the said Land, returned to the General Land Office by the Surveyor-General;...⁴⁹⁶

During the 1920s, Simpson kept improving his homestead by purchasing additional land. Simpson's daughter, Opal Bridwell, wrote of her father's agricultural expansion during this time that: "As time passed he bought the section of the Kinchlows, Oswalds, and Fruits."⁴⁹⁷

The transaction with the Oswalds occurred in 1929 after they had left the hills for Colorado.

According to *Arthur County Deed Record No. 3*, page 365:

⁴⁹⁶ *Arthur County Patent Record No. 1*, Arthur, Nebraska, 409

⁴⁹⁷ Arthur County Historical Society, *Arthur County's Homesteaders & Homemakers: 75 Years of History*, 1988, 478

Know All Men by These Presents: That Joe C. Oswald and Ina N. Oswald, husband and wife, of the County of Morgan and State of Colorado for and in the consideration of the sum of Seventy-five Hundred & No/100 in hand paid, do hereby grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto Alva N. Simpson of the County of Arthur and State of Nebraska the following described real estate situated in Arthur County and State of Nebraska to wit: All of Section four (4), in township seventeen (17), north, range thirty-seven (37) west 6th P. M., containing 649.72 acres, more or less. Subject to mortgages as of record, and the taxes for the year 1929 payable in 1930.⁴⁹⁸

Simpson primarily farmed his lands even though by the agricultural classifications of 1935 he was a large operator owning over 1,000 acres. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he survived the Great Depression through diversification. Like Satterfield in Loup County, Simpson took out successive chattel mortgages to get by. On October 7, 1932, Simpson received chattel mortgage #2-892 from R. H. Barber for \$2,350.00 for 173 head of cattle as well as corn and hay.⁴⁹⁹ This mortgage was cancelled on April 6, 1933.⁵⁰⁰ More such mortgages followed. On March 31, 1934, Simpson received chattel mortgage #2-1800 from the Fort Kearney State Bank for \$3,000.00 for 174 cattle, 1,500 bushels of corn, and 30 tons of alfalfa, which he subsequently paid off on February 23, 1935.⁵⁰¹ In 1934, he also took out chattel mortgage #2-2144 for \$2,000.00 from the Bank of Keystone on the purchase of 168 cattle, wheat, grain and feed.⁵⁰² He repaid this debt in October 1935.⁵⁰³ Simpson's use of chattel mortgages continued into the 1940s. On January 2, 1940, Simpson received chattel mortgage #2-5517 from the Bank of Keystone for \$2,500.00 for the purchase of 146 cattle and feed, which he repaid exactly one year later on January 2, 1941.⁵⁰⁴ By turning away from farming and more towards cattle and ranching in the mid to late- 1930s, at least on a small scale, Simpson was able to make modest profits and pay off his debts on time thus allowing him to hold onto his lands.

⁴⁹⁸ *Arthur County Deed Record No. 3*, Arthur, Nebraska, 365

⁴⁹⁹ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section S

⁵⁰⁰ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section S

⁵⁰¹ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section S

⁵⁰² *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section S

⁵⁰³ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section S

⁵⁰⁴ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section S

Beyond raising cattle, Simpson also raised other animals and produce that allowed him and his family to get by during the depression. Daughter Opal Bidwell wrote of Simpson's life in the Sandhills and how her family survived the 1930s in *Arthur County's Homesteaders & Homemakers*:

My father, Alva Newton Simpson, arrived in Arthur County with team and wagon in 1913 to prove his claim to land drawn in the Homestead Act...My mother, Pearl Robinson, at the age of fifteen arrived with her parents, her sisters, Jesse and Ella, and her brother, Lester, to homestead the section next to my father's. Her family came from the Oberlin, Kansas area bringing all their worldly goods in a covered wagon, followed by some cows which the children herded...Alva and Pearl were married on November 23, 1916, on her birthday. They had six children, Vera, Opal, Lila, Vera, Robert and Oran Dean...Papa was always resourceful, inventive, and progressive. While we lived in the soddy he provided running water to the house at least in the summer by piping it from a barrel at the well. It entered the soddy just high enough to fill a bucket on the floor...He brought a combine to the Sandhills about 1932. Before ever putting it in a field, he added wide wheels to both tractor and combine. I helped him do our harvest and some to our neighbors. One day during the depression years, a piano salesman came to the ranch hoping to make a sale. Papa said that we could have it only if we raised turkeys to pay for it- thus began several years of raising Naragansett turkeys for market. We hunted the hidden nests for eggs, herded them on alfalfa fields, and dressed them for market. We raised five or more acres of potatoes each year. Papa invented a planter on which Mom rode and fed cuttings onto a spacer belt...He always practiced diversified farming...raising hogs and poultry, wheat, alfalfa, potatoes, cattle...and hogs...Alva Simpson died in December 1967 and Pearl...September, 1985.⁵⁰⁵

Simpson was not alone in his diversification efforts in Arthur County in the late-1930s. M. E. and Helen Herman also raised turkeys and cattle. On January 21, 1939, M. E. and Helen Herman received chattel mortgage #2-4938 from the Bank of Brule for \$35.00 for turkeys and chickens.⁵⁰⁶ The loan was cancelled on June 30, 1939.⁵⁰⁷ During 1939, the Herman's also took out chattel mortgage #2-4963 from the Bank of Brule for \$250.00 for 30 cows, 6 horses, and 4 sows, which they cancelled on September 14th.⁵⁰⁸ By diversifying their agricultural production, agriculturalists who preferred farming survived the drought, hail storms, and relentless wind that overwhelmed the Sandhills during the 1930s. People like Simpson and Herman survived this agricultural nightmare by doing so when their

⁵⁰⁵ Arthur County Historical Society, *Arthur County's Homesteaders and Homemakers*, 477-478

⁵⁰⁶ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section H

⁵⁰⁷ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section H

⁵⁰⁸ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index No. 2*, Arthur County, Nebraska, Section H

contemporaries who did not diversify. These individuals from Arthur County were not alone. Medium to barely large agriculturalists at the opposite end of the Sandhills in the northeastern hills of Rock County did also. Two such individuals were Forrest and Maud Saar.

In Rock County, Sandhills ranchers passed through the tough times of the 1930s by diversifying their livestock. Many began herding sheep instead of, or along with, cattle. Two such ranchers were Forrest and Maud Saar. Like many of their ranching contemporaries during this time, the Saars purchased land to add to their ranch holdings. Rock County Deed Record Z records their April 9th, 1938, purchase from C.W. Cook, R. H. Cook, and Anna and Charles Johnson:

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS: That C. W. Cook, Single, R. H. Cook, Single, and Anna and Chas. E. Johnson, wife and husband, in consideration of Two Hundred and No/100 (\$200.00) Dollars in hand paid, do hereby GRANT, BARGAIN, SELL, CONVEY and CONFIRM unto F. J. Saar and Maude Saar, husband and wife, the following described Real Estate, situated in the County of Rock and State of Nebraska, to wit: The South Half of the Northwest Quarter, the Southwest Quarter of the Northeast Quarter, and the Northwest Quarter of the Southeast Quarter of Section Ten (10), Township Twenty-six (26) North, Range Twenty (20), West of the 6th P. M.,...⁵⁰⁹

Six days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Saars were continuing to make land purchases. On December 1st, 1941, the Forrest and Maud Saar purchased parts of Section Twenty-three and Twenty-four, Township Twenty-six North, Range Twenty West in Rock County from the Security Mutual Life Insurance Company from Lincoln, Nebraska, for \$6,500.00.⁵¹⁰ The Security Mutual Life Insurance Company had originally obtained these lands in a sheriff sale conducted by Rock County Sheriff J. R. Leonard in October 1924.⁵¹¹ Foreclosures such as this did not just occur in the 1930s but also during the 1920s as much of

⁵⁰⁹ *Rock County Deed Record Z*, Bassett, Nebraska, 395

⁵¹⁰ *Rock County Deed Record Y*, Bassett, Nebraska, 565

⁵¹¹ *Rock County Deed Record Y*, Bassett, Nebraska, 565

the American West faced a regional depression. Rock County residents were not immune to these larger trends.

Besides land purchases, the Saars maintained an economically stable operation by diversifying their production. When cattle prices plummeted in the 1930s they bought sheep along with cattle to maintain a consistent income from livestock. Like Katherine Satterfield, it was Maud's name that appeared in the chattel index mortgage not Forrest's. On January 20, 1933, Maude Saar received an \$800.00 chattel mortgage from the Regional Agricultural Credit Corporation.⁵¹² The Saars paid for their 61 cattle, 138 sheep, and feed when they cancelled chattel mortgage #32316 on September 26, 1934.⁵¹³ On January 20, 1934, they received an additional chattel mortgage, #33439, from the Regional Agricultural Credit Corporation for \$300.00 to be used on seventy head of cattle as well as feed and grain.⁵¹⁴ The Saars also repaid this mortgage on September 26, 1934.⁵¹⁵ A year prior to their land purchase from the Security Mutual Life Insurance Company, the Saars were still buying cattle. On November 4th, 1940, chattel mortgage #6971 was recorded in their name and \$2,400.00 was borrowed from the Commercial Bank for 142 head of cows.⁵¹⁶ This loan was repaid on May 6, 1941.⁵¹⁷ Thus, purchases of this type required more land.

The Saars were not alone in Rock County in practicing diversified agriculture. One other individual was Ira Smith. Like the Saars, Smith utilized both cattle as well as sheep in his operations and took out chattel mortgages to purchase livestock during the period. On January 26, 1933, Smith accepted chattel mortgage #32329 from the Commercial Bank for

⁵¹² *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵¹³ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵¹⁴ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵¹⁵ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵¹⁶ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵¹⁷ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

\$354.70 for 195 sheep.⁵¹⁸ Smith paid off this debt on August 10, 1933.⁵¹⁹ To add to his livestock holdings, Smith received chattel mortgage #33713 from the Commercial Bank on July 25, 1934, for 57 cattle for \$500.00.⁵²⁰ With this transaction one deduces that the Federal Government was then paying an average of \$10.00 per head for cows. This mortgage was cancelled August 30, 1934.⁵²¹ Thus, during a time of scarcity when a similar loan could buy one double his amount in sheep compared to cattle, many northeastern Sandhillers accepted such frugal deals, even in the heart of cattle country. Opening oneself to diversity instead of relying solely on one agricultural type as small farmers across the Great Plains, including the Sandhills, had done provided Sandhills agriculturalists a means to maintaining an agricultural promised land in the Sandhills. If they did not, the agricultural exodus out of the region to “Canaan” in the west and other places awaited them.

Conclusion

The persistent drought when coupled with environmental events such as severe storms, wind, dust storms, fires, and pestilential plagues led many small Sandhills agriculturalists to abandon their Sandhills lands or sell out to larger agriculturalists. Large ranchers profited from their demise by purchasing their lands and no longer having to face their agricultural competition. However, many ranchers faced financial difficulties caused by falling cattle prices that, when coupled with deteriorated environmental conditions, made their situation nearly as equally precarious. This in turn led some to sell also. Nonetheless, most fared better during the 1930s as they had more land at their disposal to either use for

⁵¹⁸ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵¹⁹ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵²⁰ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

⁵²¹ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*, Bassett, Nebraska, Section S

grazing or sell if they had to in order to keep their operations solvent. Those who were able to financially sustain themselves and maintain their herds during the driest years of the 1930s were rewarded as the decade came to a close and cattle prices rebounded. One such individual was Bruce Cochran of Garden County. The *Garden County News* reported on his good fortune in late-June 1939: “Bruce Cochran, well known Garden county stockman, again topped the Chicago market last week with a car load of steers from his feedlot near Lewellen. There were nineteen head in the consignment and they averaged 1478 pounds. They brought \$10.75 per hundred, which was the extreme top on the day they were sold.”⁵²² Cattle prices remained significantly higher into the autumn of 1939 and Sandhills ranchers who still held onto large enough cattle herds took advantage of this opportunity to profit. In mid-October 1939, one-hundred twenty-two train car loads of cattle were shipped from Garden County.⁵²³ Prominent local rancher S. P. Delatour , who was wealthy enough to have traveled around the world in late December 1935 visiting places as far away as Honolulu, Hong Kong, and Bombay, was alone responsible for fifty-seven car loads of cattle whereas the next closest rancher only filled sixteen carloads.⁵²⁴ During the first week of November, successful Garden County ranchers continued to profitably sell their cattle. The *News* reported on the good fortune of W. W. Smith in its November 2nd, 1939, issue: “W. W. Smith, who is one of the prominent ranch owners in the north part of the county, sold a nice bunch of Angus calves to an Illinois feeder during the past weeks, which showed him a nice profit. There were 101 head of these young cattle involved in the deal, 62 steers and 39 heifers. The agreed price on the steers was \$11.50 per hundred and that on the heifers \$10.50. The name of the buyer was C. H. Bergman, who was well pleased with his opportunity to purchase

⁵²² *Garden County News*, June 22, 1939, 1

⁵²³ *Garden County News*, October 19, 1939, 1

⁵²⁴ *Garden County News*, December 19, 1935, 1; *Garden County News*, October 19, 1939, 1

these good sandhill calves for his eastern feed lot...It is said that a majority of cattle shipped out of the hills this season went to eastern corn belt buyers.”⁵²⁵

In comparison to the 1930s, cattle prices remained high for Sandhills ranchers in late 1941 prior to and following the United States entry into World War II, at least higher than they were in the mid-1930s, which led to further prosperity for many ranchers. In late-October, 1,380 cattle were sold at a sale in Garden County for \$9.35 for heifers and \$12.80 for steers whereas in late-December it was calculated that 931 train carloads containing 32,500 cattle had been shipped from Grant County during the entirety of 1941.⁵²⁶ These cattle were considered to be worth \$2,234,400.00 and that the average value of every train car that left Grant County with this commodity within its frame was worth \$2,400.00⁵²⁷ For those who did not sell cattle, the nearly weekly sheriff sales of foreclosed lands throughout the 1930s led many non-agriculturalists, such as Theodore Folke, to become prosperous when they purchased these lands for their own land speculation deals. Their pragmatic capitalism, like that of their large ranching contemporaries, such as individuals like Earl Monahan, inadvertently worked to conserve the Sandhills grasslands instead of promoting the plowing and crop cultivation of the Sandhills fragile ecosystem in a quest for greater profits like so many local and absentee farmers on the southern plains did in the early-1930s. To deter participation in such practices, many Sandhills agriculturalists discovered that the best way to keep their lands from ending up in an advertisement in the local newspaper was to diversify their holdings. Individuals, such as Alva Simpson and Forrest and Maud Sarr, who practiced diversification succeeded in “weathering” the drought better than their

⁵²⁵ *Garden County News*, November 2, 1939, 1

⁵²⁶ *Garden County News*, October 23, 1941; *Grant County Tribune*, December 24, 1941, 1

⁵²⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, December 24, 1941, 1

contemporaries who did not. Each Sandhillers' experience during the Great Depression was difficult, but some were more difficult than others as small farmers experienced conditions similar to those in the frontier era. In the early-1930s, many Sandhills individuals struggled economically and needed assistance to survive. Many prominent political figures supported voluntarism; however, the extremes of the environmental drought impacted nearly all Sandhillers' wallets in one way or another making such an argument impractical, if not impossible.

Chapter Three

Hoover and the Hills: A Legacy of Hobos, Handouts, and Failed Voluntarism, 1929-1932

During the Great Depression, Sandhills residents struggled to cope with difficult environmental conditions such as dust storms, fire, and various animal plagues, which in turn led to changes in agricultural patterns as the region's remaining small farmers no longer prospered from the arid, sandy soils and either sold or abandoned their lands. Medium to large scale ranching operations consolidated their holdings due to this final decline of Sandhills' small farming; however, due to low cattle prices and drought decimated pastures, agricultural and economic prosperity for ranchers was also tenuous and uncertain. Domestic livestock and wild animals also suffered from the effects of a near decade long drought as erratic weather conditions affected available water sources and led to a decline in the numbers of both animal groups. This multitude of factors influenced land sales, migration, and financial success for Sandhills residents whether they were agriculturalists, merchants, or land speculators alike. As with the rest of the Great Plains and the United States as a whole, the Nebraska Sandhills was also impacted by bank closures, unemployment, and economic instability following the Wall Street market crash of October 24, 1929. Land foreclosures on some Sandhills agriculturalists had occurred in the 1920s, just as they had in many neighboring Great Plains states following World War I; however, such conditions were exacerbated in the Sandhills

following the 1929 onset of the national depression and the emergence of intensified environmental and natural calamities. Nonetheless, for many Sandhills counties, the effects of the Great Depression were not readily apparent in the waning days of 1929.

This changed throughout the course of 1930. As with their fellow countrymen, Sandhills residents sought relief from the depression through humanitarian means and economic revitalization. With an absence of large-scale Federal assistance during the Hoover administration, relief was carried out on a local level throughout much of the region and local government attempted to implement structural improvements, such as road paving, as a means of providing some employment to the region's downtrodden. Such limited efforts sought to improve the Sandhills' transportation system on a basic level as in parts of the region it remained very much a frontier system. As the Great Depression wore on into 1931 and 1932, and Sandhills environmental conditions declined, Sandhills residents became as equally dissatisfied as other Americans by the seeming remoteness and detachment of the Hoover administration from their plight as their relief funds declined and construction programs did not work. This indifference led to a shift in regional politics as Sandhills voters supported Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal in droves during the presidential election of 1932. This chapter will examine how the onset of the Great Depression affected or did not affect the daily lives of Sandhills residents, the banking and unemployment crisis in the hills, local and Federal relief efforts, and the rise of Roosevelt and the Democrats. As the Depression dawned, Sandhillers were as regionally isolated from it as a lone cactus in a dry Sandhills pasture.

The Sandhills at the Dawn of the Depression

In the final days of October 1929, the United States became encompassed by the worst economic crisis in its one-hundred fifty-three year history. Citizens from Maine to Arizona were not immune from the hardships and difficulties that occurred during the next twelve years. Following the stock market crash on “Black Thursday,” October 24, 1929, stock brokers leaped from windows as stocks plummeted, eastern factory workers became unemployed as plants closed, and thousands of Americans routinely took to standing in long soup lines to get something to eat. Historian John Kenneth Galbraith wrote of the chaos on “Black Thursday”: “That day 12,894,650 shares changed hands, many of them at prices which shattered the dreams and hopes of those who owned them... The panic did not last all day. It was a phenomenon of the morning hours...By eleven o’clock the market had degenerated into a wild, mad scramble to sell...By eleven-thirty the market had surrendered to blind, relentless fear. This, indeed, was panic.”⁵²⁸ In other parts of the country, economic decline was already a part of the daily routine. The events of October 24, 1929, simply became the final realization of this problem for the rest of the country. Richard White wrote of the economic conditions faced by the Pacific Northwest in the 1920s and after the stock market crash: “In the Pacific Northwest the lumber industry, which accounted for half the wages earned in Washington and Oregon by the 1920s, suffered first from declining prices after 1923 and then from a slowing of the construction industry after 1927 that anticipated the Depression. With the Depression itself came a rapid decline in production between 1929 and 1933.”⁵²⁹ In comparison to the nation’s more populated and metropolitan areas, the

⁵²⁸ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash 1929* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2009 edition), 99

⁵²⁹ Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own.*” *A New History of the American West*,

rural Nebraska Sandhills were not immediately hampered by economic distress in the last two months of 1929. Sandhillers focused on the local happenings in their own lives and communities as Sandhills society remained unchanged at the outset of the Depression.

Stock market issues were of little concern in McPherson County when compared to news regarding the conviction of a local killer. On November 7, 1929, residents of Tryon read about the conviction of North Platte murderer, George St. Clair, in their local paper. The paper noted: “George St. Clair, confessed slayer of his eighteen year old wife, was sentenced by Judge Tewell in district Court Saturday morning to life imprisonment in the state penitentiary. The verdict of the jury had been guilty of murder and a recommendation for life imprisonment, after the members had been asked whether they could recommend that no pardon nor parole be granted...the jury of well-known farmers, considered the issue and based their decision on the lack of definitive motive for the crime to save him from the death penalty. Sheriff Salisbury will leave with St. Clair for Lincoln tomorrow.”⁵³⁰ Three weeks later, Tryon citizens remained largely unaware of events transpiring in the rest of the country as the local paper instead focused on an upcoming three act play put on by the Ladies Club titled “He’s My Pal,” in which six of the male roles were filled instead by women cast members, and Chester Smith, a convicted robber from North Platte, breaking his parole for robbing a gas station cash register in Dawson County.⁵³¹ In late-November, Blaine County Sandhillers were likewise not highly knowledgeable about the collapsing stock market, but instead were informed and focused on where to sell their cream and where or where not to hunt. In the November 21, 1929, issue of the *Blaine County Booster* subscribers read of the

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 464

⁵³⁰ *Lincoln County Tribune* in *The Tryon Graphic*, November 7, 1929, 1

⁵³¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 28, 1929, 1

Falls City Creamery Company's solicitation to purchase cream for \$0.35 from producers if it was shipped directly to them in Falls City, Nebraska, and the prevention of hunting or trespassing on lands owned by Carl Bramer.⁵³² Thus, local economic issues and the locations where wild game meat was to be procured for the winter took precedence over larger national issues.

Southwestern Sandhills residents also focused on local autumn school events during this time. The *Garden County News* wrote of the local Farmer's Fair at the High School in Oshkosh in the latter days of November: "Next Wednesday night at the high school the Vocational Agriculture boys will stage a fair. This fair is not staged for any gain but for a good time for everyone. Prizes will be offered for the following crop displays: First and second for best twelve ears of corn. First and second for best twenty potatoes. First and second for three best sugar beets. First and second for best coop, two hens, and one rooster. First and second for best crop display. All displays must be entered before noon Tuesday, November 19th. The boys will have a number of games arranged at which they are of the opinion that they can beat their fathers."⁵³³ As November turned into December most Sandhills' news stories remained focused on local matters. On December 5th, residents of Garfield County enjoyed learning of the conclusion of Burwell High School's successful 1929 gridiron campaign, a season in which the football team only lost two games, with an 18-0 snow plagued victory over Arcadia.⁵³⁴ On this same day the people of Dunning learned that, just as with Carl Bramer's land, no hunting or trespassing was allowed on Zutavern Ranch property and that five yearling steers had strayed and \$10.00 rewards for their return

⁵³² *Blaine County Booster*, November 21, 1929, 1

⁵³³ *Garden County News*, November 21, 1929, 1

⁵³⁴ *The Burwell Tribune*, December 5, 1929, 1

were being offered by the Larsen Brothers of Hazard, Nebraska, and A. F. Bates of nearby Halsey.⁵³⁵ Three weeks later, the burning and total destruction of Lay Conrad's restaurant in Dunning was significant news as was the arrest of Floyd Peterson and Roy Steinhagen in neighboring Custer County for the possession of six cases of beer and a liquor still.⁵³⁶ On December 12th, the people of Oshkosh focused on local sports matters as the local high school hosted the Arthur High School basketball team later that evening in hopes of avenging an earlier loss in an exhibition game.⁵³⁷ Likewise, on December 12th, Tryon citizens were enthralled by a low scoring affair between Logan and McPherson County High Schools in which they witnessed their boys lose 16-8.⁵³⁸

Beyond attending and following high school sporting events, many Tryon residents were engaged in Christmas shopping in mid-December. The opening of a Montgomery Ward Store in nearby North Platte received wide attention in McPherson County as it attracted many locals who sought to purchase their Christmas gifts. *The Tryon Graphic* noted the effects of its opening in its December 19th, 1929, issue, stating: "Many McPherson County folks drove to North Platte last Saturday to visit the new Montgomery Ward Retail Store opened there on that day. Folks who arrived early enough to have the opportunity to see the fine stock before the great crowd came say that the store is very fine and that it carries a very complete line of goods. Some however say that the crowds in the store made it almost impossible to inspect the merchandise. The coming of the Montgomery Ward store to North Platte is looked to with favor from folks in this community. It will no longer be necessary to order goods by mail and guess what you are going to get. At the store in North Platte you are

⁵³⁵ *Blaine County Booster*, December 5, 1929, 1

⁵³⁶ *Blaine County Booster*, December 26, 1929, 1

⁵³⁷ *Garden County News*, December 12, 1929, 1

⁵³⁸ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 19, 1929, 1

able to see the goods you buy and be able to compare the goods sold there with those sold at other stores at home or in that city.”⁵³⁹ Beyond noting the shopping habits of McPherson County shoppers, this example is significant for demonstrating that Sandhillers still had and used disposable income in December 1929 when other Americans were beginning to face financial hardship. Businesses, whether national or local, were expanding in the area while those in other parts of the country were shutting their doors for good. Thus, for Sandhills citizens national economic problems seemed remote, if non-existent, as in their part of the United States the economic situation had not yet become perilous in late-1929.

Despite this appearance of economic prosperity, the December 19th, 1929, issue of *The Tryon Graphic* also heralded a possible change in economic fortunes if one read through to its back pages. Amongst no hunting notices on the lands of John Musser and Sons and Ed Huffman and Sons and various advertisements such as one placed by the S. A. Foster Lumber Company of Stapleton soliciting coal orders, Tryon subscribers also read a Sheriff sale notice for 640 acres on lands in Section Twenty-eight, Township Nineteen North, Range Thirty-three as well as one for similarly available lands on Sections Thirty-three and Twenty-eight, Township Eighteen North, Range Thirty-five.⁵⁴⁰ While such sales and foreclosures were not uncommon in the Sandhills during the 1920s, they became a seemingly routine occurrence during the 1930s and early-1940s. Despite this portent of things to come, Sandhills residents remained primarily inwardly focused as 1929 came to a close.

In mid-December Oshkosh residents equally enjoyed attending the grade school’s performance of the small operetta, “The Trial,” and participating in a turkey shoot which

⁵³⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 19, 1929, 1

⁵⁴⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 19, 1929, 6

matched gun men of similar skill at nearby Lisco.⁵⁴¹ To the north, in the western hills of Box Butte and Sheridan counties attentiveness to larger national economic problems was similarly seemingly remiss. Box Butte County historian Hugh Bunnell wrote of this social and economic disconnectedness: “While there had been a stock market crash in New York City, and an economic depression was beginning, it was not a big deal in Alliance as the 1920s faded into the sunset. There were many new homes in Alliance, including some mansions. Much of the city now was paved, with 10th extended by a ‘parkway’ divided street to 14th, and streets on either side of Box Butte, and for several blocks to the west, paved.”⁵⁴²

Historians Anna Phillips and Vilma Ball, who lived through the Great Depression, corroborated this early western Sandhills belief in unending economic stability, writing: “The New York Stock Market Crash of October, 1929, ushered in the downward toboggan of commodity prices. In Box Butte county high production continued for some time... There was still an atmosphere of plenty in the land and continued prosperity was taken for granted.”⁵⁴³ Like other Sandhillers, the people of Box Butte County focused on other things of interest in December 1929.

As elsewhere in the hills, social events and sensational criminal updates were worthy news stories in Alliance. The December 24th, 1929, issue of the *Alliance Times-Herald* described a well-attended religious cantata and its reception in Alliance: “People packed the Fox Imperial theatre at 5 o’clock last Sunday afternoon to attend the spectacular pageant, ‘The Coming of The Christ,’ presented under the auspices of the Alliance Women’s club.

⁵⁴¹ *Garden County News*, December 19, 1929, 1

⁵⁴² Centennial Committee, *City of Alliance and Box Butte County Nebraska* (Curtis Media Corporation, 1988), 22

⁵⁴³ Anna N. Phillips and Vilma D. Ball, *History of Box Butte County: From Dinosaurs to Steamlines* (1939), 107

The stage was attractively decorated for each setting. The singing was beautiful and every number was well put on.”⁵⁴⁴ This same issue informed the people of Alliance about the demise of local criminal, R. Wayne Bourne. “R. Wayne Bourne, a Rushville insurance agent, was denied a rehearing by the supreme court Saturday of a murder case against him and in which he was twice convicted of slaying his friend, Ferris Westervell, whose life he had sought for insurance in his own favor.”⁵⁴⁵ During this period, local cattlemen learned of the success and national recognition awarded some of their brethren. The *Alliance Times-Herald* noted: “Showing for the first time at the international stock show, held recently at Chicago, the Fawn Lake Ranch company was awarded grand championship on a select shipment of highly bred Hereford calves. And by way of special emphasis on merit Judge Walter Briggar, with an experience worldwide said: ‘The grand champions of this year are equal- I won’t go further- are equal to anything I have yet had before me...’ The above ranch in Cherry County...co-operated in the development of a foundation herd that has been in the making for the past 33 years.”⁵⁴⁶ Nonetheless, despite these many examples of a seeming singular interest in only regional stories, Sandhillers in late-1929 were not uninformed by national happenings or affected by them. The national stories they were following were not necessarily about the national economy.

Immediately following the Great Crash, *The Burwell Tribune* ran an article not detailing the country’s economic problems but one instead examining the visit of British leader Ramsay MacDonald, and his daughter Isabel, with President Hoover in Washington,

⁵⁴⁴ *Alliance Times-Herald*, December 24, 1929, 1

⁵⁴⁵ *Alliance Times-Herald*, December 24, 1929, 1

⁵⁴⁶ *Alliance Times-Herald*, December 24, 1929, 1

D. C.⁵⁴⁷ The article, in the form of a letter, was written by national correspondent, Gladyce W. Simmons. Simmons noted of MacDonald's private meeting with Hoover in late-October 1929: "The Week-end, the MacDonalds and Hoovers spent in the President's summer camp in nearby Virginia, where were held in seclusion these important conversations which were the object of the Prime Minister's visit to Washington."⁵⁴⁸ Simmons did not speculate if any of these conversations were related to the nation's burgeoning economic problems; however, the recent stock market crash was undoubtedly a passing topic of conversation between the two leaders. A month and a half later, Simmons' correspondence again informed Sandhills' readers of the situation in Washington, D.C. The December 12th, 1929, issue of *The Tryon Graphic* included a letter from Simmons detailing the opening of the seventy-first United States Congress in early-December.⁵⁴⁹ As with the letter in *The Burwell Tribune*, Simmons did not write of any discussion of the growing economic depression among national leaders, instead noting only that the previous session in September had debated over the Farm and Tariff Bill.⁵⁵⁰ This is significant as it suggests that one reason Sandhills residents were not concerned with the growing economic downturn was that newspaper correspondents and/or national leaders chose not to cover or discuss it in the last two months of 1929, at least to an extent that was to be made known to the public. It was more important to keep up successful appearances than to discuss or write about ways to deal with what was happening to the country. At this point in the financial crisis, national leaders had few solutions which, in turn, did not allow for many press releases on the subject. Thus, if the media sources they

⁵⁴⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 31, 1929, 1

⁵⁴⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 31, 1929, 1

⁵⁴⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 12, 1929, 1

⁵⁵⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 12, 1929, 1

were exposed to did not cover the Depression in its earliest days, Sandhillers did not know about it.

In early-November positive discussions of state agricultural prosperity which appeared in Sandhills newspapers also served as a proverbial smoke screen, blinding Nebraska Sandhills' residents to the seriousness of the expanding national crisis. Ironically, in the November 7, 1929, issue of *The Tryon Graphic* an article appeared detailing the success Nebraska was having in eliminating its farm mortgage debt. *The Graphic* reported that: "A statement from the department of Agriculture at Washington issued a few days ago, contained a piece of information that is cheering to all Nebraskans. The department made an estimate which showed that the mortgage debt on farms in the nation is increasing but at a retarded rate. But there are twelve states that have begun to reduce their farm indebtedness. They are Nebraska, Maine, New Jersey, Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota, Kansas, Wyoming, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and Washington. Nebraska appeared first on the list in the department statement, indicating that it leads in the reduction of its mortgage debt."⁵⁵¹ Thus, the attitude that all was well in Nebraska was reinforced by local media. As discussed in Chapter Two, in the early-1930s, farm mortgage foreclosures and abandonments were a common occurrence in everyday Sandhills agricultural life. The blind optimism regarding upward positive trends in decreasing mortgage debt and its associated issues in late-1929 was to be short lived.

Sandhillers did not remain secluded from the effects of Depression for long. Outsiders who suffered financial difficulties in late-1929 passed through the Sandhills, in turn having an impact on locals, especially banks or businessmen. This was most apparent

⁵⁵¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 7, 1929, 1

early in the financial crisis with the forging or writing of bad checks with insufficient funds. One outsider who committed such a transgression in Alliance was Missourian Clarence Dalton. The *Alliance Times-Herald* wrote of Dalton's extralegal activities: "Clarence Dalton, 17, of Cascade, Mo., was picked up by police early this week on a charge of attempting to pass a bogus check at the First National Bank. The name of Frank Boone is alleged to have been forged to the check...After a talk with all concerned it was decided to drop any action against the youth if he would leave the city. He agreed to do so."⁵⁵² While many Sandhillers were unconcerned about what was happening financially to the rest of the country in the fall and early-winter of 1929, interactions with men such as Dalton served as a warning to Sandhillers as to the impending crisis they would face for the ensuing decade. Unfortunately, such warnings were not loud enough for the average Sandhiller and went unheeded. The Sandhills finally began to feel the onset of the Great Depression in the first few months of 1930 due to problems with one institution key to the prosperity of all Sandhills communities: banks.

Early Banking Closures in the Sandhills

In early-1929, the Sandhills had felt a minor banking scare, but most Sandhillers showed little concern as the region's banks survived with little difficulty. One such bank was the National Bank of Ainsworth. The Brown County Historical Society wrote of this local financial hiccup months prior to the Great Crash and how local banks in the northeast Sandhills were affected in *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska: History of Brown County and*

⁵⁵² *Alliance Times-Herald*, December 20, 1929, 1

its Families: “On February 19, 1929 the Citizen State Bank closed and a week later the National Bank also closed its doors. Hans Rohwer was urged to come back and re-open the National Bank which he did. The bank has remained open except for the Bank Holiday President F. D. Roosevelt ordered on March 6, 1933.”⁵⁵³ This brief banking scare in early-1929 did not prove catastrophic to Sandhills residents or the region’s banks; however, by the end of the year this changed as the First State Bank at Alliance failed in late-December 1929. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* remarked on its closing: “Monday morning marked the collapse of another Nebraska bank when the First State at Alliance failed to open its doors for business. Steady withdrawals for past month which amounted to about \$360,000 is given as the cause for closing.”⁵⁵⁴ The situation worsened as 1930 progressed. Throughout the year the effects of the Great Depression made further inroads into the Sandhills as bank failures and closures occurred throughout the region, even if at first they were not readily apparent to everyone. At the dawn of a new decade, Sandhillers remained oblivious to the impending economic storm as newspaper articles continued to inform them of a rosy economic outlook. One such newspaper was the *Rock County Leader*. In its January 2nd, 1930, issue, the paper republished a United Press article from Gering, Nebraska, which stated: “A state that has its potential wealth built on an ever-productive soil surely must be headed for financial stability, and Nebraskans can look forward to 1930 with renewed confidence in the general banking situation. A. N. Mathers, of Gering, president of the Nebraska Banker’s association, says in an exclusive statement to the United Press, ‘Visionary politicians, unworkable laws, too many banks, drastic deflation, dishonesty and incompetency, as serious and threatening as it may appear at times, can no more destroy the great sound banking and financial structure of

⁵⁵³ The Brown County Historical Society, *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska: History of Brown County and its Families* (Mt. Vernon, IN: Windmill Publications, Inc., 1997), 76

⁵⁵⁴ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, January 2, 1930, 1

the state than periodical hail, drought or frost, can destroy Nebraska's agricultural and industrial progress,' Mather's declared."⁵⁵⁵ Almost immediately after this prognostication was made, the situation with Nebraska's banks, including those in the Sandhills, changed.

On February 1st, 1930, the Bank of Lewellen voluntarily gave up its state charter and changed its name to the First National Bank of Lewellen.⁵⁵⁶ The *Garden County News* wrote of the bank officers' reasons for the change that: "B. C. Delatour, cashier and managing officer of the bank, has not at all been satisfied with the workings of the state banking laws and feels that there can be no protection to depositors with the guaranty law in its present financial condition. He states that by changing to a national institution he gains added strength to an already sound bank which will, he assures us, react to the benefit and satisfaction of the customers of the bank."⁵⁵⁷ The economic panic and uncertainty that had gripped the nation's more populated areas only three months before had finally begun to affect the Sandhills. One of the region's first banking casualties was the Farmers State Bank of Newport in Rock County. The *Leader* wrote of the bank's downfall in early April: "The Farmers State Bank of Newport closed its doors for business Monday morning following the decision of the stockholders that it was no longer profitable to operate the institution. The action was voluntary on the part of the stockholders and is for the sole purpose of liquidating and cleaning up the affairs of the bank."⁵⁵⁸ Mr. Delatour's strategy regarding shifting away from non-protected and financially unstable state banking charters served to be prophetic. The stability of state banks in the Sandhills continued to wane as the year wore on.

⁵⁵⁵ *Rock County Leader*, January 2, 1930, 2

⁵⁵⁶ *Garden County News*, January 30, 1930, 1

⁵⁵⁷ *Garden County News*, January 30, 1930, 1

⁵⁵⁸ *Rock County Leader*, April 10, 1930, 1

To deal with this instability, the Nebraska state government had passed new legislation in March that they hoped would curtail the crisis and prevent further failures. On March 15th, 1930, Governor Weaver's suggestion to eliminate the guaranty law was put into effect. The *Garden County News* wrote of its passing: "The special session of the state legislature adjourned last Saturday, finally passing the governor's banking bill practically as it had been recommended to them. This is supposed to repeal the guaranty law that some of the state papers have credited with the breaking of a lot of the state banks. Whether the new law will have to pass the gauntlet of the supreme court is not yet known. There was some talk of submitting the measure to the referendum route but we learn that this has been dropped as being unnecessary. The new law contained the emergency clause and unless attacked as being unconstitutional, is already in effect."⁵⁵⁹ The law seemed to help temporarily as some state banks were able to right their sinking conditions. One such bank in the central Sandhills was the Citizens State Bank.

Early in 1930, the Citizens State Bank, which served the surrounding area of Hooker and Thomas Counties, closed. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the reason for its closure in its April 2nd, 1930, issue: "Monday morning of this week the Citizens State Bank voluntarily closed for lack of funds. The cause of immediate shut down of the bank was due to several heavy depositors withdrawing their funds. J. M. McMillan, cashier and Miss Eva Noel, assistant cashier are of the opinion the bank will pay out on all deposits in due time, as the notes, collateral, paper, etc. in the bank are considered good."⁵⁶⁰ By May 1st, the bank attempted to reopen under new management. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of this challenge: "It is understood as we go to press the Citizens state Bank will

⁵⁵⁹ *Garden County News*, March 20, 1930, 1

⁵⁶⁰ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 2, 1930, 1

reopen for business around May 1st. Stockholders and committeemen have been raising more capital, checking over negotiable paper, etc. John W. Mann of Seneca will be in charge of the bank. Mr. Mann had had many years experience as a banker, having been in the banking business at one time at Hyannis, also at Seneca and Brownlee.”⁵⁶¹ While Mann’s appointment temporarily solved the banking issues in Thomas County, the stability of banks and the success of their leaders remained issues of great concern in the northwest Sandhills of Sheridan County as the late-Spring days grew longer and warmer.

In May 1930, the citizens of Rushville highly anticipated hosting the yearly meeting of one of the divisions of the Nebraska Bankers Association. The meeting was held on May 23 and was attended by various banking officials from the state, many of which gave addresses. This included J. C. Flannigan, Vice-President of the Citizen’s State Bank of Stuart, Nebraska; the aforementioned A.N. Mathers, President of the Nebraska Bankers Association from Gering; and George W. Woods, Banking Commissioner.⁵⁶² Rushville religious leaders and institutions took part in the gathering, indicating growing concern in the Sandhills over the national banking crisis which was now starting to hit home. They hoped that spiritual and/or religious intervention would help the situation. The Reverend Robert L. Embree, Pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Rushville, gave the invocation for the meeting and that night’s dinner, which included radishes, green onions, fruit cocktail, baked Virginia ham, buttered potatoes with parsley, rolls, and black raspberry pie, was served at the Presbyterian Church.⁵⁶³ Despite the best efforts of banking and religious

⁵⁶¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 23, 1930, 1

⁵⁶² *The Rushville Recorder*, May 22, 1930, 1

⁵⁶³ *The Rushville Recorder*, May 22, 1930, 1

leaders at the Rushville meeting, Sandhills banks continued to close or reorganize throughout 1930 and into 1931.

In October 1930, local banks did everything they could to prevent wider panic and assure their creditors that they were solvent. These efforts included soliciting the aid of newspapers to promote their stability. On October 9, 1930, the *Garden County News* ran an article discussing the banking situation in the state and the effort that the local Nebraska State Bank was putting forth in staying open. The *Garden County News* wrote:

The country banks all over the country, with the records of the past weeks before them, are planning greater and better safeguards for the funds which they hold in trust. This is true in this county, as well as in other sections of the country. The Nebraska State Bank of this city has a message for their friends in this issue of the paper and along with the explanation given there is a lot of good sound sense in their story. The officers of this bank have been exceptionally accommodating, remaining open at unusual hours and opening early, but doing this has been dangerous for themselves as well as the funds and securities. The insurance covers the deposits only during the regular banking hours and the chances that the boys have been taking have been a hazard of their own. Hereafter the bank will adhere closely to the hours and will govern themselves according to the safest rules for all parties concerned. In this they should receive the hearty cooperation of all their customers, and they will no doubt receive this to the fullest extent.⁵⁶⁴

The personal hazards bank workers faced came in the form of bank robberies, which became more and more common in the hills as the Depression worsened. Examples of these incidents will be discussed in the following chapter. Despite the reassurances local Sandhills banks, such as the Nebraska State Bank in Oshkosh, gave their depositors, many still faced difficulties staying open, runs on their banks, or reorganizational issues. Even the banks in booming Alliance were not immune to difficulty early in 1930. Bunnell wrote of the situation there: “While economic woes were still not overwhelming in Alliance, citizens were jarred as 1930 opened with news that First State Bank was closed by order of the state bank examiner. This brought a flurry of depositors meetings, including selecting a committee to

⁵⁶⁴ *The Garden County News*, October 9, 1930, 1

decide whether to reopen, or put the bank in receivership.”⁵⁶⁵ This was a question that many banks, their executive boards, and stockholders wrestled with during these days of uncertainty. An example of a bank that lost this growing struggle was the Seneca State Bank in 1931.

In early-1931, the Seneca State Bank was forced to close and on February 11th, 1931, District Court Judge Ralph E. Horth of the Eleventh Judicial District of Nebraska ordered it sold.⁵⁶⁶ Advertisements were placed two straight weeks in the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* in late-February and early-March promoting the sale of the bank on March 10th, 1931, at the C. H. Welch Building in Seneca.⁵⁶⁷ As with other bank sales throughout the United States during this period, all assets were available for purchase ranging from bills receivable to office supplies. Almost anything not bolted down was available for purchase at the Seneca State Bank sale. Items that were up for bid included one oak bookkeeper’s desk and one light oak fixture with two windows and eleven drawers.⁵⁶⁸ The bank’s twenty safety deposit boxes and Ely-Norris Steel safe were also available for sale along with lands owned by the bank in Thomas and Blaine Counties.⁵⁶⁹ Bank closures and sales such as that in Seneca continued in the hills for the rest of the year as well as President Hoover’s term in office. Most of the banks left vulnerable to closure in the Sandhills were the weak and uninsured state banks. A year later, the State Bank of Bassett and the Farmers State Bank of Newport both had their assets sold in Rock County simultaneously. The *Rock County Leader* reported on the event in late-April 1932: “Remaining assets of the State Bank of Bassett were

⁵⁶⁵ Centennial Committee, *City of Alliance and Box Butte County Nebraska*, 24

⁵⁶⁶ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, February 25, 1931, 5

⁵⁶⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, February 25, 1931, 5; *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, March 4, 1931, 5

⁵⁶⁸ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, February 25, 1931, 5

⁵⁶⁹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, February 25, 1931, 5

sold at public sale Monday. The sale was conducted by representatives of the Department of Trade and Commerce. The total of the sale amounted to less than \$500 and the purchaser was Paul Young of Lincoln. The same representatives conducted a sale of the Farmers State Bank of Newport Tuesday and the sale totaled approximately \$1000. Mr. Young having the highest bid.”⁵⁷⁰ The state bank sales continued unabated throughout the region during Hoover’s remaining years in office. Another such bank that fell by the wayside was the Farmers State Bank of Lewellen.

In early-September 1931, the Farmers State Bank of Lewellen, located in Garden County twelve miles east of the county seat of Oshkosh, suffered the same fate as its counterpart hundreds of miles to the northeast in Newport. The directors of the bank began to liquidate the bank’s assets on September 5, 1931.⁵⁷¹ The *Garden County News* published the following letter in its September 10th, 1931, issue that was distributed to the bank’s depositors in which no solid explanation or responsibility for closure is given:

To Our Depositors: The Farmers State Bank of Lewellen has decided to pay all depositors in full and quit business. To do this in a manner fair to all parties, including our borrowers, we need your cooperation. A detailed plan to accomplish this has been worked out with the approval of the State Banking Department. This plan will be submitted to you at a meeting of all the depositors to be held at Lewellen, Nebr., on September 12, 1931, 1 p. m. Every depositor is urged to attend this meeting. The Farmers State Bank, By Board of Directors.⁵⁷²

Two days later, the bank’s liquidation was approved. The *Garden County News* wrote of the acceptance of the bank ceasing operations: “According to information received at this office, the meeting of the depositors of the Farmers State Bank of Lewellen held in Lewellen last Saturday, was well attended and for the most part was strictly harmonious. We learn that fully 90 percent of the depositors signed up giving their approval to the plan of liquidation as

⁵⁷⁰ *Rock County Leader*, April 21, 1932, 1

⁵⁷¹ *Garden County News*, September 10, 1931, 1

⁵⁷² *Garden County News*, September 10, 1931, 1

proposed by the bank officials and already O. K.'d by the state department heads."⁵⁷³ When faced with a bank that could not insure their funds, Lewellen depositors preferred to place their money somewhere else instead of risk losing it during a financially uncertain time. Many were agriculturalists who also faced difficult agricultural prospects due to drought and severe weather. Banking issues only compounded their worries and frustrations.

The Farmers State Bank of Lewellen was a rare example of depositors getting most of their funds back when they could have lost everything. Despite limited cooperation between depositors and their banks in the Sandhills during the early 1930s, the banking crisis there, as it was throughout the rest of the Great Plains and the United States, was not easily alleviated during the first two years of the Great Depression. By 1932, as President Hoover struggled to fend off New York Governor Franklin Roosevelt in his bid for reelection to the nation's highest office, banks continued to struggle in the Sandhills. One such bank was located in McPherson County. Fortunately, the main bank in the community of Tryon did not close permanently and after some reorganization reopened in the summer of 1932. McPherson County resident John Kramer wrote of this financial episode in *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction*: "The first blow of the depression proved too much for the Tryon Bank and it closed in January of 1932."⁵⁷⁴ Immediately after the bank's closure it was not known if it would ever reopen. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of the bank's tenuous situation: "Every effort possible is being put forward in a hope that the Tryon State Bank can be reorganized and put back in business. Whether or not it will be possible for re-organize the bank depends a great

⁵⁷³ *Garden County News*, September 17, 1931, 1

⁵⁷⁴ Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder, *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction* (Callaway, Nebraska: Loup Valley Queen, 1986), 37

deal on the attitude of the State Banking Commission and the depositors of the bank.”⁵⁷⁵ The situation continued unchanged into the spring, when Tryon residents thought there would be a resolution. *The Tryon Graphic* noted in its April 28, 1932, issue: “Unless something unforeseen should arise or the Department make additional demands, the Tryon State Bank will open under the re-organization early next week. Everything is now ready to turn over to the department at Lincoln and Bart Bliss expects to meet with the head of the Banking Department Friday so that any technical matters that may come up can be taken care of at that time...”⁵⁷⁶ One of these unforeseen and unclear technical matters arose as the bank still remained closed through mid-May. Finally, after several meetings and small setbacks, the bank’s operational status was reinstated. *The Graphic* wrote of its reopening in its June 2nd, 1932, issue:

The Tryon State Bank by order of the Department of Trade and Commerce at Lincoln was opened for business Tuesday afternoon, May 31st. For weeks it was thought that the institution could be opened within a few days, but one delay after another turned up and kept the department from declaring the bank opened...When the bank opened Monday afternoon every depositor was paid one percent of his deposit and all small deposits of under five dollars were paid in full. The bank is now doing regular business and many accounts are being opened which goes to show that the people of the community have faith in the institution and its officers.⁵⁷⁷

Unlike in Lewellen, the Tryon State Bank was able to be saved through the diligence of its officers and depositors. Nonetheless, the Tryon State Bank served as another example of how financially uninsured local state banks were in Nebraska during this time, thus contradicting Mr. Mathers’ statements from only two years before. As the Depression became entrenched throughout the Sandhills, regularly occurring bank failures, closures, and reorganizations were not the only warning sign to Sandhillers that they were no longer

⁵⁷⁵ *The Tryon Graphic*, January 14, 1932, 1

⁵⁷⁶ *The Tryon Graphic*, April 28, 1932, 1

⁵⁷⁷ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 2, 1932, 1

isolated or immune from the nation's larger problems. Another troubling sign was growing unemployment and the side effects that came with it.

Sandhills' Unemployment, 1929-1932

Between 1929 and 1932, the United States unemployment rate grew at an exponential rate as the Great Depression curtailed job growth and uninsured personal funds in failing banks led to great financial losses for individuals. Historian Gerald D. Nash wrote of the unemployment crisis gripping the country during this period: "Many young men and women- perhaps as many as 2 million- became 'tramps,' riding the rails to nowhere in particular, hoping to get a job or a meal at every stop. Numerous others were homeless, sleeping in parks, subways, or abandoned buildings. Thousands gathered on the outskirts of towns or along riverfronts, where they built primitive tar-and-paper shacks. These new communities were called Hoovervilles- monuments to the president who had promised Americans two cars in every garage and two chickens in every pot."⁵⁷⁸ Such new realities were not lost on a society that had more cows than cars. In January 1932, *The Tryon Graphic* reported of the growing unemployment epidemic: "Just a month ago newspapers proclaimed a 'Hunger March' upon Washington. Some fifteen hundred unemployed men and women from all parts of the country came to present their 'demands' to the President and the Congress."⁵⁷⁹ The Nebraska Sandhills was not immune to the nation's growing unemployment. The region's first experience with the downturn in jobs came by observing its effects on passersby. Phillips and Ball wrote of non-Sandhills residents passing through the region looking for work and their impact on Alliance: "Constantly increasing groups of

⁵⁷⁸ Gerald D. Nash, *The Crucial Era: The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1992), 21

⁵⁷⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, January 14, 1932, 1

unemployed men walked down every highway. Railroads recognizing a real need, permitted them to ride, forty or more riding on one freight, a noticeable number of young men among them. Families accompanied husbands. Girls joined the ranks of that great army that traversed the nation. Community wood piles were operated, and other type of work offered transients. Jails opened their doors to wanderers for a night's stay."⁵⁸⁰ Transients remained an issue for much of the Depression.

Sandhillers became personally acquainted with the nation's wandering unemployed and in many instances wished they hadn't. Mary Hallstead Reed, who was raised in Sheridan and Thomas counties during the Depression, spoke of her family's experiences with transients/hobos: "Hobos were frequent and my mother said she had a hobo that offered to cut her wood for his dinner so she said 'alright.' So she made his dinner so first she asked him to cut the wood first and he said he couldn't do it on an empty stomach so she had to feed him and he said he couldn't do it on a full stomach and he left. So they had all kinds of tricks."⁵⁸¹ Besides experiencing first hand chicanery, Sandhillers also unfortunately learned of the experiences of transients through tragedy. One such individual was Henry Hofer. In November 1937, the fifty-one year old Hofer rode the train from Denver to Bridgeport enroute to meet his fifteen year old son in South Dakota.⁵⁸² He didn't make it. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of Hofer's death: "He told officers he had left in a straw stack the night before arriving here. Death was due to exposure, according to Dr. C. Palmer,

⁵⁸⁰ Phillips and Ball, *History of Box Butte County*, 107-108

⁵⁸¹ Taped interview conducted by the author with Mary Hallstead Reed, Mullen, Nebraska, October 5, 2014. Mary Hallstead Reed granted written permission to be utilized as a primary source per IRB regulations of the Oklahoma State University Graduate College. The permission letter is filed with the OSU History Department.

⁵⁸² *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 18, 1937, 1

who attended him.”⁵⁸³ Thus, the presence of transients in the hills throughout the decade served to reiterate the harsh lessons of the Depression.

Just as with the banking crisis, local efforts were undertaken immediately following the Great Crash to dispel fears that Nebraskans might be in jeopardy of losing their jobs and joining the ranks of these lost and dispossessed souls. *The Rushville Recorder* reported in its December 5th, 1929, issue:

Reports gathered over the state by investigators for the federal department of commerce and labor showed that labor, both skilled and unskilled well employed. Industrial plants are in full operation except those influenced by winter conditions. Overtime prevails in flour mills. Road work is being carried on almost in the teeth of winter. Farm labor has been in good demand during the husking season. Much building is reported over the state, giving employment to masons, carpenters, plasterers and common laborers. On the whole the report recites, labor conditions in Nebraska are good. The fine open fall, common in this state, allows a long season for the employment of labor.⁵⁸⁴

The situation took a sudden turn for the worse as the calendar turned from 1929 to 1930.

Unemployment began increasing in the state as the winter progressed. This led to further reports that attempted to alleviate fears about the gravity of the situation and/or argued that it would change quickly. The *Blaine County Booster* reported in late-March 1930:

Employment conditions in Nebraska are expected to show material improvement during the next 30 to 60 days, if weather conditions are favorable, according to the report issued by the United States employment service recently. During February, the report states, a surplus of labor prevailed throughout the state. The situation was particularly acute with reference to building trades. Spring however, should open employment on highway projects, building, municipal labor, in the belief of the department improvements, and general outdoor of labor. Normal employment during February was reported by the meat packing houses, machinery plants, wholesale concerns and other major industries. Seasonal or part time operations were reported by railroad repair shops, flour mills, and canning establishments. There was a fair demand for competent farm help, with a plentiful supply of this class of labor available. National reports, the department of labor states, showed little improvement of employment conditions during February but anticipate improvement with the advance of spring.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸³ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 18, 1937, 1

⁵⁸⁴ *The Rushville Recorder*, December 5, 1929, 1

⁵⁸⁵ *Blaine County Booster*, March 27, 1930, 2

Despite such hopeful forecasts, the nation, including Nebraska and its Sandhills, could not defeat its unemployment problem simply by the return of a warm and cheery spring putting to bed a sad and dreary winter.

The unemployment situation in Nebraska did not halt as the winter of 1929 passed despite everyone's best wishes. On a national level, unemployment continued to increase. Economic historian Amity Shlaes wrote of the drastic situation faced by the country in early-1930: "At the time unemployment data were not collected as they are today, but later analysis suggests that unemployment went from something like 3 percent in the fall of 1929 to 9 percent by the new year."⁵⁸⁶ While national and state government officials, in Nebraska and elsewhere, tried to ignore such numbers, some individuals began to take notice and sought remedies to combat the problem. One such person was not just your average citizen. Biographer Jean Edward Smith notes: "FDR was among the first state governors to recognize the seriousness of the Depression...By March 1930, although the reality of the Depression still was not acknowledged in Washington, Roosevelt established a commission to stabilize employment in New York- the first state commission of its kind in the United States...Shortly thereafter Roosevelt became the first state chief executive to endorse the idea of unemployment insurance- a radical concept that had been kicking around university economics departments for years but had yet to make its debut in the public arena...FDR came flat out for a contributory scheme in which employees, employers, and the government would share the risks of future unemployment."⁵⁸⁷ While Roosevelt became politically proactive in New York and soon thereafter became well-known as a national challenger to

⁵⁸⁶ Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 95-96

⁵⁸⁷ Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 242

the dithering Hoover, Nebraska state government officials had no such aggressive policy and unemployment continued to worsen within the state and the Sandhills region.

By the Fourth of July it was apparent Sandhills employment was not immune to the Depression. At that date in early-July 1930 Custer County tallied 207 unemployed, Greeley County 29, Garfield 19, Wheeler 11, and Loup had the lowest total of 3.⁵⁸⁸ No matter the total numbers eastern Sandhills' employment had begun trending downward less than a year after the Great Crash. As the winter of 1930 arrived, so did more reports about the state's unemployment situation, only this time they did not carry rosy prognostications about easy remedies in the near future. The December 26, 1930, issue of the *Brown County Democrat* reported on the increasing numbers of jobless people, stating:

The Director of the Census announced today the unemployment returns for Nebraska by classes and sex. The unemployment inquiry, which was made last April as a part of the population census, covered all persons usually working at a gainful occupation who were not at work on the day preceding the enumerator's call. These returns are presented in seven classes, based on... worker's status, such as 'out of a job,' 'having a job, but on layoff,' 'unable to work,' etc. The most significant group designated in the tables as Class A is made up of persons out of a job, able to work, and looking for a job. These persons numbered 14,778 forming 1.1 per cent of the total population. The total included 12,322 males, and 2,456 females. The next most important group designated Class B, comprises persons having jobs who are on layoff without pay excluding those sick or voluntarily idle. In this class there were 4,292 persons, 3,664 males, and 628 females. The remaining returns were grouped into five classes, as follows: Class C, persons out of a job and unable to work, 1,210; Class D, persons having jobs but idle on account of sickness or disability, 1,970; Class E, persons out of a job and not looking for work, 785; Class F, persons having jobs but voluntarily idle, without pay, 858; Class G, persons having jobs and drawing pay, though not at work (on vacation, etc.), 1,095.⁵⁸⁹

Such numbers made Nebraskans, even those living in the rural Sandhills, very uneasy. Early in 1931 editorials began appearing in Sandhills' newspapers crying out for jobs and for officials to not forget certain groups when encouraging hiring. Writings such as this even appeared in the conservative ranching mecca of Grant County. In its January 7th, 1931, issue, the *Grant County Tribune* argued that citizens of the county should not forget about a

⁵⁸⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, July 3, 1930, 1

⁵⁸⁹ *Brown County Democrat*, December 26, 1930, 1

woman's right to work and hold a job when considering the plight of the jobless and dispossessed. The *Tribune* contended:

In the panicky attempt to meet at the last minute the unemployment problem, which should have been mitigated by orderly advance planning, some desperate measures are being proposed. One of these is the demand that employers fire women workers and give their jobs to men. The theory is that men are family bread winners, while women are holding jobs to make pin money or for the fun of it. That theory does not fit the facts. For better or for worse, millions of women have been drawn into the industrial system. They work for the same reason that most men work- to live, to eat. Their earnings are not movie money, but often milk money for babies. Their pay envelope has long since become a necessary part of the family budget.⁵⁹⁰

Such assertions seem out of place and out of time, as if they should belong to the most ardent of liberals in the late-20th or early-21st centuries. Such was the Sandhills of the 1930s, a land struggling between a libertarian past and a present that gradually became more liberal, or at least more progressive. Even under the Hoover administration, Sandhillers yearned for a more progressive future.

Only three weeks after its pleas for women to not be forgotten in the job force, the *Grant County Tribune* let its more conservative side have a voice as it argued for Nebraskans to not just rely on Hoover's limited attempt at public works projects for jobs. The *Tribune* stated: "In the next 12 months, it is announced, the government is to undertake public works that will cost a total of approximately 700 million dollars, or about two and one-half times the expenditure of two years ago. The explanation, of course, is the persistent aim of the administration to afford relief for unemployment, pushing forward needed public construction at the same time. That much will be accomplished in this manner cannot be doubted...But these alone will not be sufficient to meet the requirements for work. They help materially, but, of equal importance, they afford an example of what must be done all down the line of business activity. United effort will answer much of the challenge of

⁵⁹⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, January 7, 1931, 4

unemployment.”⁵⁹¹ A month later, the *Tribune* ran an advertisement that would hopefully help in this “united effort.” On February 25th, the McNess Company of Freeport, Illinois, solicited male help in Grant County for someone that would represent the company to Grant County farmers and would pay \$8.00 to \$20.00 daily for such a service.⁵⁹² While it is uncertain if anyone accepted the position, such a salary in the financially depressed 1930s would have dissuaded Sandhillers from relying on Federal Government projects for income. At the same time, other Grant County residents had to find other means to make money. One method was by selling many of their more significant items that they deemed valuable. In late-February 1931, Mrs. C. H. C. Ruffee did just that in order to gain a little extra cash. She offered for sale a seven-tube electric radio that had only been used for a year, a hot blast heater, two burner oil stove, an electric plate, an electric iron, and an Underwood portable typewriter.⁵⁹³ The selling of goods by individuals such as Mrs. Ruffee may have not been a long term solution to the economic strife that continued to spread into the Sandhills in the form of bank closures, unemployment, and environmental issues; however, such methods helped alleviate economic burdens that unemployment caused if only for a short time. These methods were necessary in an economy that continued to decline.

By mid-October 1931, the unemployment situation became doubly frustrating for Loup County residents who sought work. This was due to the fact that a state road project was under construction in the county and labor was required to bring it to completion; however, local individuals were not readily recruited for these positions to their satisfaction. An editorial placed in the *Taylor Clarion* under the title, “Jobs for the Jobless,” argued:

⁵⁹¹ *Grant County Tribune*, January 28, 1931, 4

⁵⁹² *Grant County Tribune*, February 25, 1931, 4

⁵⁹³ *Grant County Tribune*, February 25, 1931, 4

Loup County's unemployed do not seem to be benefitted largely in the construction of the road from the Calamus river to the north Loup county boundry (sic). We have heard of but a few of our local men who have work on the project. Gov. Bryan might stick a finger in this pie and hand out a few plums to local workers to his own and the worker's advantage. It might help if local folk petitioned him for at least a slice of the pie. There are some heads of families within our boundries (sic) who will have a very hard time to exist, in fact they are now, but no attention is being paid to their need. This winter when they have to have aid the same old ory (sic) will go up from those in authority. It would seem the sensible thing to give them some work now when road and street building can be done...Until every man with dependents has a job no one has a right to two jobs.⁵⁹⁴

Such a complaint suggests that those who did work on the road were hired through some form of nepotism which may have granted them an additional job and/or that favoritism was shown to workers by Governor Bryan who did not live in the Sandhills but instead hailed from Nebraska's eastern towns and metropolitan centers. From Bryan's standpoint this was not unacceptable as the employment situation in the state's capitol city was not ideal. If work could be furnished for eastern Nebraskans in the state's western hinterlands, then so be it. By the end of 1931, times were tough in Lincoln. For instance, in a letter from Frank D. Throop, publisher of the Star Publishing Company, to J. E. Lawrence, newspaper editor, Throop discussed how dire the economic situation was for Lincoln's businesses, especially its two major newspapers. Throop wrote on December 21st, 1931:

Owing to poor business conditions in Lincoln, with a very marked falling off in the advertising patronage of the Lincoln Star, I regret very much to inform you that the Board of Directors do not think it wise or expedient to pay any dividend for the last six months of 1931. In common with other cities, the city of Lincoln has been hard hit by the low price of farm products and the general bad business conditions over the country. On September 1st., by a mutual arrangement between The Journal and The Star a combination was effected, which we are very sure will be quite successful, when business begins to approach normal. Since the combination has been put into effect we have been able to put into operation a great many economies, but the savings in expense have not equalled (sic) the loss in business. We also think that it is the part of wisdom to conserve our cash resources, as much as possible, owing to the uncertainty of the future. While I regret this action, I am confident we have an arrangement worked out in Lincoln which in time will be very successful for all the stockholders of The Star Publishing Company, and The Journal Printing Co. Very truly yours, THE STAR PUBLISHING COMPANY Frank D. Throop Publisher.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁴ *Taylor Clarion*, October 15, 1931, 1

⁵⁹⁵ Frank D. Throop to J. E. Lawrence, December 21, 1931, J. E. Lawrence Collection, RG 1675, Box 1, 1931 Correspondence folder, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

Due to these issues in Lincoln, finding any kind of job for its citizens became a priority. However, when unemployment was encroaching into the state's rural areas, diverting eastern Nebraskans to the hills for work now became a problem for locals.

By late-March of 1932, the jobless from Loup County finally heard some positive news from the state government in Lincoln regarding employment on road projects in the county. On March 31st, 1932, a letter from State Engineer, R. L. Cochran to Loup County Commissioner Z. C. Harris was published in the *Taylor Clarion* which read:

Governor Bryan advised me that he had a conversation with you at Broken Bow at which time you requested that local labor be used as much possible in the construction of the gravel surface on the Harrop-North road. It is possible that a small amount of this road might be constructed with teams where the haul is very short; as you no doubt realize, longer hauls become very expensive by teams as compared with trucks. We trust however, that you have some trucks in your county which would be available for this work. You may be assured of our desire to co-operate with you on this. Very Truly Yours, Department of Public Works, R. L. Cochran, State Engineer.⁵⁹⁶

A response from Harris followed Cochran's letter in the *Clarion*: "The above letter was received by me, and speaks for itself. All those seeking work on road, will please inform the Loup County Commissioners of their desires, and also of the nature of equipment they will be able to furnish."⁵⁹⁷ The editor of the *Clarion* also posted support for the deal between Cochran and Harris, which was undoubtedly driven by fear of Bryan losing possible constituents and political support in Loup County, commenting: "If the above plan for securing work for local labor is carried thru by the State Department, Mr. Harris and fellow commissioners, it will be a fine thing for Loup County, and right now is the time to use every effort to bring it to pass."⁵⁹⁸ Such negotiations between state and local officials over the use of labor and equipment (i.e. trucks v. teams) were common in other Great Plains states as

⁵⁹⁶ *Taylor Clarion*, March 31, 1932, 1

⁵⁹⁷ *Taylor Clarion*, March 31, 1932, 1

⁵⁹⁸ *Taylor Clarion*, March 31, 1932, 1

well in the early-1930s. Peter Fearon wrote of a similar incident in Kansas: “Farmers in need of relief were allowed to earn their deficiency budgets on work relief projects, and the money earned helped to combat the impact of drought. Most of the men were employed on state highways, though some were engaged on county roads, and to assist farmers struggling to maintain their workhorses, a decision was made to use teams rather than trucks or tractors. Materials for this work, which represented 30 percent of the total project cost, were provided by a PWA fund dedicated to the drought area.”⁵⁹⁹ Thus, across the Great Plains, local and state government officials maintained open, and at times tense, lines of communication in securing jobs that would best benefit people within the whole state as well as a sub-region.

During the early -1930s, securing support for state or local road projects in the Sandhills proved to be a successful method of providing employment to Sandhills’ residents who needed it and important contracts for local road construction companies. Petitions for improved Nebraska roadways came during the summer of 1930. For Sandhillers, improved roads represented an important step towards further modernization and an end, at least in part, to the region’s frontier qualities that historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner had believed were largely eliminated in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The main issue regarding road construction for Sandhillers was who was going to pay for these improvements. The June 13th, 1930, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune* discussed road improvements in the state and the projects’ financing concern under the heading, “County Bond Plan Urged to Speed Road Program In Nebraska:” Some fifteen to twenty counties have finished the gravel surfacing of the federal aid highways they contain. Most of these counties contain heavy-traffic highways where gravel cannot be properly maintained. They

⁵⁹⁹ Peter Fearon, *Kansas In The Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 182

wish paving and desire to advance funds for that purpose, but do not think they should be required to tax themselves to pay for this paving when they are entitled to a definite apportionment of the gas tax fund.”⁶⁰⁰ In June 1930, funding remained a concern as bidding commenced on Road Project No. 80-D which surfaced a section of Highway 2 between Hecla and Whitman in Hooker and Grant Counties. This project was to be federally funded and thus would not strain the coffers of either Hooker or Grant counties. Nonetheless, state government officials desired to keep local county officials informed of the project’s progress so they did not feel usurped. State of Nebraska Department of Public Works Office Engineer wrote Hooker County Clerk T. L. McCully for just this reason on June 14, 1930, stating: “In view of the fact that it is anticipated that the expenditure of Federal Aid funds will be involved in the payment for this work, it will be unnecessary for the county to be a party to any contract which may be awarded for the proposed work. However, it is the desire of this department that the county be represented at the time these bids are opened and considered.”⁶⁰¹ Thus, funding issues could be as closely tied to local and state politics as issues over practical construction. The concern over viable road construction was a problem shared by all Great Plains states. One road issue that states from Texas to South Dakota shared was the construction of the Great Plains Highway.

The construction of the Great Plains Highway through the Sandhills was highly anticipated and many Sandhillers served as delegates to the Great Plains Highway Association’s annual meeting. The *Tribune* described Hooker County delegates in

⁶⁰⁰ *Hooker County Tribune*, June 13, 1930, 1

⁶⁰¹ R. J. Boyd to T. L. McCully, June 14, 1930, Hooker County Road Contracts Collection, 1918-1930, Box 1, Hooker County Historical Society, Mullen, Nebraska

attendance at the 1930 meeting in Liberal, Kansas, and, ironically, the difficult journey they had in reaching it:

The Mullen delegates in attendance at the sixth annual meeting of the Great Plains Highway Association held at Liberal, Kan., on Thursday of last week were W. H. Wigent, S. Ham, T. L. McCully, J. E. Lowe, and H. M. Matthews. Hard rains and muddy roads encountered both going and returning home tended to mar much of the pleasure the delegates otherwise could have had in making the trip. But it was the most spirited meeting yet held in the history of the association and work toward the early completion of the route is going forward as rapidly as possible, and different stretches are being taken over for state maintenance as fast as they are placed in readiness for acceptance. That part of the road north from Tryon to the Dismal is expected to be taken over by the state within a short time. Arthur Bowring of Merriman was chosen with four other delegates along the route to serve on the budget committee and resolutions committee,... There was an attendance of 127 delegates from the different points on the route extending from South Dakota to southern Texas.⁶⁰²

Eventually Sandhillers' concerns over how their new roads would be paid for were abetted as road projects, such as Road Project No. 80-D, were paid for with either bond measures, state funds, or a combination of both during Hoover's administration. The Nebraska Highway Commission was also sometimes petitioned for funds. In August of 1930, a Thomas County project was paid for with their assistance. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the project's funding and those working on it: "The bid submitted to the Highway Department by Commissioners J. C. Ewing, C. E. Knepper and George McKawley was \$60.00 under all bids for the 5.1 mile project between Halsey and Thedford. The amount was \$18,777.05 for grading between the two gravel stretches. The contract called for work to be begun prior to Oct. 1, 1930...Men and teams near home will be employed on the work if they can be found."⁶⁰³ Highway appropriations continued in the spring of 1931 as 6.9 miles of roadway west of Mullen on State Highway 2 were opened for bid among contractors in late-April.⁶⁰⁴ The fervor for regional road improvement continued into May as newspaper editors began taking up the role of boosters for the movement. One such newspaper whose editor

⁶⁰² *Hooker County Tribune*, June 13, 1930, 1

⁶⁰³ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, August 13, 1930, 1

⁶⁰⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, April 10, 1931, 1

championed the benefits of improved Sandhills road conditions was the *Blaine County Booster*. On May 21st, 1931, an editorial in the newspaper supported the task of the Nebraska Good Road Association: “The people of Nebraska are just as willing to pay for roads, as the people of any other state, the Association further states and continues as follows: ‘...The Nebraska Good Roads Association must look this big job squarely in the face and promote a real system of highways for once and for all. Nothing short of a paved highway connecting Every County Seat and a Gravel Road to every Post Office will satisfy the needs of our modern transportation. Such a program should be completed in five years and can be financed without increasing our property tax. Have you ever stopped to think what a Paved Road to Every County Seat would mean to the citizens of Nebraska?...It can be done and it will be done.’”⁶⁰⁵ While the editorial does not specify how such projects were to be funded, they nevertheless went forward throughout the Sandhills, endeavoring to provide work for the region’s jobless and modernization for the region’s rudimentary road system. Petitions for new roads whether paved or not, remained common in the hills throughout 1931. In Thomas County, electors petitioned for a new road to connect people living in Section 28, Township 24, North Range 26 and E ½ E ½ Section 28 and Section 33, Township 24 North, Range 26 with Road #69 on March 2nd, 1931.⁶⁰⁶ Further west, in July 1931 construction continued on Highway 2 west of Hyannis much to the delight of Grant County locals. The *Grant County Tribune* wrote of the Franke Construction Company’s progress on the highway’s improvement: “At last! The terrible strip of road between Hyannis and Ashby, on Highway No. 2, is being ripped up. R. Franke of Mullen, successful bidder for the grading, started work a week ago and had only gone a few 100 feet when he was held up a

⁶⁰⁵ *Blaine County Booster*, May 21, 1931, 4

⁶⁰⁶ Road Petition No. 72, Thomas County Road Record 1, Thedford, Nebraska, 110

number of days by the surveyors and other causes. At the present time the big drag line is going right along at a rapid pace and the grading will be finished by the middle of August and will then be ready for the oilers.”⁶⁰⁷ Such opportunities for work were a godsend for local companies like Franke’s. The company from Mullen had been in operation since the early-1920s and projects such as this were seen as a means to prosperity during the Depression. *Hooker County, Nebraska: The First 115 Years 1889-2004* noted the longevity of Franke’s operation in the Sandhills despite personal hardships: “R. C. Franke ‘Ole’ established his business in Mullen, Nebraska in 1922...In the 26 years following the beginning of the company he built a business that employed up to 60 men during the construction season, building roads, bridges, railroad grades, dams, drainage ditches and related earth moving jobs. For several years his organization loaded virtually all of the sugar beets in the North Platte Valley, west of North Platte in 1932...The company maintained a high safety record considering the high danger of jobs encountered. An accident did occur at Crawford, Nebraska in 1933 when a leaking dragline fuel tank that was being repaired exploded. This explosion resulted in the disfiguration of Mr. Franke’s face and Fritz Pearson suffered facial burns and an arm injury. Stanley Meidell and Art Piester were less seriously injured.”⁶⁰⁸ Despite the dangers that could occur, the ability to employ large numbers of men made road projects a significant and highly sought after source of income and employment.

Road improvements were also important to many Sandhills residents as roads in the region had never been in the best shape and had continued to deteriorate during the 1920s. Weather could also impact if they were passable. In late-December 1931, Harold Gall of

⁶⁰⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, July 15, 1931, 4

⁶⁰⁸ Cathy Nichols and Nina Clark, Eds., *Hooker County, Nebraska: The First 115 Years 1889-2004* (Hooker County Historical Society, 2004), 38

Eustis, Nebraska, returned home from visiting his girlfriend, Hazel Miller, in Haxtun, Colorado, and on the way home noted bad traffic conditions near Ogallala along the border of the southern hills: “We saw one smash up somewhere’s between Ogallala and Sutherland probably due to a frosted windshield or the fog...If we would have come home much later we probably would have had to put on chains as the roads were beginning to get muddy and this morning they really are muddy as it rained about all night I guess, just a drizzling rain.”⁶⁰⁹ Thus, road improvements in the region were a necessity despite the country’s economic conditions. Many traffic and vehicular accidents were common throughout the region and with new road projects being implemented Sandhillers hoped they could now safely travel. However, some Sandhills residents had to take matters into their own hands to finish such efforts.

At the same time that Franke’s outfit was working on Highway 2 between Hyannis and Ashby, Grant County ranchers north of Hyannis were having their own traveling problems. Many had to work on the only navigable road into town themselves. The *Grant County Tribune* wrote of the road conditions north of Hyannis under the heading, “Want Better Road”: “The following ranchers have cooperated with Cherry county in fixing several miles of road leading into Hyannis from the north (or Survey): Donald Adams, Church Bros., Victor Nelson, Fritz Mittendorf, Mrs. Davis,...and Perett & Sons. The road they are working on is the most direct route to Hyannis and will come in thru the Brenneman ranch. It would not be amiss for others living along this route, the merchants of Hyannis and the commissioners of Grant county to get together on this proposition.”⁶¹⁰ Thus, during the

⁶⁰⁹ Harold Gall to Hazel Miller, December 30, 1931, Gall Family Records, Author’s Personal Collection, Haxtun, Colorado

⁶¹⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, July 15, 1931, 4

Great Depression good roads had the doubly positive effect of providing construction jobs and, when completed, a more efficient route in which agriculturalists could drive to town and spend their money, thus helping local merchants. For businessmen and agriculturalists alike, in the early-1930s Sandhills prosperity became tied to these infrastructure improvements.

Road projects continued throughout the summer of 1931. In July bridges were completed on Highway 2 west of Thedford that were seventy-five feet long and contained twenty-four foot roadways and in late- August crews worked twenty-four hour shifts in McPherson County putting oil on the route to North Platte.⁶¹¹ In August, grading also began on Highway 2 in Blaine County. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of the work completed so far by Roy Seiver in late-August: “Last Saturday, Roy Sevier, who was low bidder on the two-mile project here at Dunning on No. 2 highway with his crew of men, began grading, preparatory for the clay surfacing. The crew consists of...son Paul, Frank Ayle, Joe Brinson, Francis Brinson, and soon two more will be employed. The grading started at the Johnson corner and on south. Mr. Sevier thinks the grading will be finished at least by Nov. 1st, and passibly (sic) a great deal sooner. The traffic will be turned by the Bob Reed place, as many have already noted.”⁶¹² More road projects were completed with state aid the following summer. Improvements on the routes at the Sandhills northern edges allowed Governor Bryan to recuperate his image from the previous year in Loup County. The *Springview Herald* wrote of the near completion of work on the highway near Springview and Bryan’s substantial role in it: “State Engineer D. James Costin, and his crew of men will finish the grading on Highway No. 83 the latter part of this week, providing the weather will permit. They are now working on the last lap at the South Dakota state line...A total of

⁶¹¹ *Blaine County Booster*, July 23, 1931, 1; *The Tryon Graphic*, August 27, 1931, 1

⁶¹² *Blaine County Booster*, August 20, 1931, 1

approximately \$12,000 has been used so far in the building of this road from Springview north to the state line, which has gone a long way in aiding the farmers and others in this drouth stricken and grasshopper area, and Governor Bryan is to be commended, he being responsible for the improvement of the road as well as aiding the people of this county.”⁶¹³

Such positive reviews aided Bryan in his reelection campaign in the fall. Thus, road projects could also carry significant political ramifications throughout the state and region, especially when they portended potential job growth, as with Sevier’s crew.

Bryan rallied more potential supporters as more funds were appropriated in the summer of 1932. The *Rock County Leader* reported in mid-June:

More than 40 miles of Nebraska highways are to be paved this summer according to the announcement of contracts to be let June 30. Governor Bryan has announced that \$1,710,750 will be available...Bids will include 180 miles of oil-gravel paving which will cost \$539,600...Most of the oil-gravel paving will be laid in the northern and western part of the state. In addition to the paving 156.6 miles of road will be graded. Nebraska manufacturers and dealers as well as local labor will be favored in-so-far as possible in the letting of state highway contracts Governor Bryan has announced. Specifications will favor the purchasing of material from Nebraska manufacturers and dealers, the use of hand and team labor in preference to machinery, jobs for local workers with a minimum wage of 30 cents an hour and a limit of 10 working hours a day. The state will not, however, favor home bidders in preference to outsiders if an attempt is made to take advantage of these provisions.⁶¹⁴

President Hoover and the Federal Government also assisted in the summer of 1932 by allocating funds for road projects in Nebraska. The *Grant County Tribune* noted in late-July: “Nebraska’s highway program will be augmented by \$5,000,000 federal funds, it was announced at the governor’s office last Thursday...The state’s share in the \$132,000,000 federal unemployment fund for road construction will be \$2,500,000. This can be used to match federal aid which is a part of Nebraska’s quota but not yet taken up. The total of \$5,000,000 thus made available for highway building must be spent between now and June

⁶¹³ *Springview Herald in Brown County Democrat*, June 10, 1932, 1

⁶¹⁴ *Rock County Leader*, June 16, 1932, 1

30, 1933, the governor's statement said."⁶¹⁵ Such appropriations helped fund projects throughout the remainder of the year. By the time of the 1932 presidential election many Sandhills road projects wound down. One such project completed in November was the rerouting of Highway 20 in Brown and Cherry Counties from Ainsworth through the communities of Johnstown and Wood Lake to Valentine.⁶¹⁶

Between 1930 and 1932, Sandhills' road infrastructure projects were highly successful in the early efforts at modernizing the region's transportation routes, providing employment opportunities, and temporarily boosting local Sandhills communities' economies. However, many roads such as those in the rural areas of Grant County were left for rural agriculturalists to tend to. Thus, there were funding limitations on hiring available road workers. Despite providing some stability for the region's economy, overall profitability for Sandhills' residents remained contingent upon the agricultural viability of their surrounding pastures and farmlands. If drought and dust storms prevailed, wallets in the hills became lighter. While the financial situation was improved for Sandhills residents due to road construction opportunities, other Sandhillers still lost jobs and employment opportunities, especially if they were dependent upon the environment. Farmers on the Sandhills southern edge near the Platte River fit the latter category. *The Tryon Graphic* described the situation: "Farms are changing occupants right and left this March, not only in our own community but in other sections of the state. In talking with a farmer from the Platte bottom the other day he told me that many farms in his community had not been leased yet as they were being held for what seemed too high a cash rent. More than ever before he said farms were being held for cash rather than crop rent. Years ago farms here were leased

⁶¹⁵ *Grant County Tribune*, July 27, 1932, 4

⁶¹⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, November 18, 1932, 1

almost entirely for crop rent, but here too the cash rent proposition is being asked for by the land owners.”⁶¹⁷ Due to the combined problems of unemployment, decreasing funds for infrastructure projects, declining crop prices, and environmental issues, life was similarly difficult for Nebraska Sandhillers just as it was in other parts of the Great Plains and the American West during President Hoover’s first administration. To combat these difficulties, people and communities in the Sandhills came up with their own ways to make these problems somewhat bearable. Help came through a combination of local relief efforts and the interests of nationally known advocacy groups. Two of these groups were the well-known American Red Cross and the American Legion.

Local Relief Efforts in the Sandhills and Implementation, 1929-1933

During the age of Hoover, relief efforts in the Sandhills were carried out at a local level, generally through each individual community’s chapter of the Red Cross or the American Legion. However, Sandhills agencies that petitioned for relief funds did so not only on behalf of the region’s destitute and struggling; they also gathered support for those impacted by weather events, drought, and depression in other parts of Nebraska and the nation. It was believed that through this spirit of volunteerism, as advocated by President Hoover, Sandhillers could play an important role in helping their countrymen as well as themselves. As the Great Depression dawned, Sandhills’ citizens did not immediately require relief, nonetheless this did not mean that the region’s relief agencies and groups were not ready for challenging situations that arose or were not available for use. In the early-1930s, Sandhillers aided fellow agriculturalists impacted by drought. Most of these suffering individuals did not live within the borders of Nebraska’s sandy land but elsewhere.

⁶¹⁷ *The Tryon Graphic*, March 3, 1932, 1

However, by the end of Hoover's first administration, benevolence towards others was suspended as Sandhillers themselves needed assistance. Such was the uncertainty and instability of the growing economic and environmental situation on the Great Plains and in the Nebraska Sandhills. The line between assisting in relief efforts or in turn needing assistance was extremely fine. In late-1929, most Sandhills' residents were oblivious to the possibility of such an invisible line and the consequences it brought with it. Three years later as another presidential election neared, they were all too aware.

In the late 1920s and early-1930s, private charities in the United States were essential for providing assistance to those who needed it. These groups routinely sought new members and donations to meet the growing challenge posed by the Great Depression. Arguably the most prominent of these groups was the Red Cross. The influence of this charity was even felt in the most rural corners of Nebraska's Sandhills. The organization's origins in the hills dated to earlier national emergencies. Historian Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder wrote of the American Red Cross's beginnings in McPherson County: "The American Red Cross was organized in Tryon, September, 1917, when ten persons signed for the first charter. During World War I, many knitted socks, etc. for service men."⁶¹⁸ While the effects of the Great Crash were not immediately felt by Sandhills' residents, many of whom seemed unaware or unaffected by the problems it posed in November and December of 1929, this did not mean that Sandhills' Red Cross chapters were not steeling themselves for a potential downturn in regional prosperity and the accompanying change in the status quo for locals brought by such a downturn. Thus, many Sandhills chapters solicited new members in preparation for future challenges. One such chapter was in Garfield County. In

⁶¹⁸ Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder, Ed., *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction* (Callaway, Nebraska: Loup Valley Queen, 1986), 157

late-November, an article appeared in *The Burwell Tribune* noting the necessity for increased membership in the county's Red Cross chapter:

The drive for membership in the American Red Cross is now on, sartin (sic) with Armistice Day it will end with Thanksgiving Day. The chairman of the local organization tells us that already several from this vicinity have sent in their membership dollar, though no active canvas has as yet been made for membership. Few people realize the importance of this Red Cross membership. At the present time charitable work is being conducted by the local chapter in connection with the county right here in Burwell. Your Red Cross membership will do its share to keep some less fortunate person clothed and fed during the winter season that is now approaching. The committee will probably call on you for your membership dues before Thanksgiving Day. Be ready to make good. Garfield County must make good its quota in this charitable organization.⁶¹⁹

Beyond the Red Cross, local relief initiatives, not Federal ones, were supported in other facets of Sandhills' life. One such facet was agriculture.

As Sandhills' Red Cross chapters hoped to appeal to Sandhillers' senses of personal responsibility and volunteerism, those arguing against Federal government interference in agricultural problems hoped to do likewise. The agriculturalist was to fend off the challenges of the Depression alone. Such attitudes echoed the feelings of President Hoover. Historian Joan Hoff Wilson, writing of Hoover's concerns about Federal intervention in the Depression and its potential impact on American society, noted his opinion: "...Hoover thought Americans in general were acting exactly like Europeans when faced with economic disaster—abandoning their individualism and voluntary associationalism and demanding direct government aid, that is, outright charity or the dreaded dole. In the face of such a display of national weakness he remained true to his principles even if the American people did not. Hoover would not save the American system for them; they must do that for themselves."⁶²⁰ This opinion was encouraged in Sandhills agricultural circles in early-1930. In the March 13th, 1930, issue of the *Rock County Leader*, an article was placed which boasted:

⁶¹⁹ *The Burwell Tribune*, November 21, 1929, 1

⁶²⁰ Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive*, 142

Any farm relief worthy of the name must come from the farmer himself, in the opinion of agricultural authorities, with governmental agencies ranking a poor second best in any real improvement of the farm situation. Experts agree that increased efficiency on the part of the farmer himself will go further towards improving rural conditions. There are certain basic principles which must be followed (sic) if a farmer is to succeed as he should. The first of these is that a great share of the products used by the farm family should be produced at home; second, that the farm land should not be robbed year after year, but should be kept up and improved; third, that the farmer should keep livestock and grow more than one cash crop... This same condition exists in many lines of farming, although the ever increasing faith which farmers are placing in the advice of their agricultural agents and agricultural colleges, is doing much to increase their efficiency.⁶²¹

According to this argument, farm or agricultural relief in the Sandhills was quite simply the individual agriculturalist working harder and, perhaps, smarter, with the implementation of a change in some farming practices. In this fashion, relief was home-grown. While many of these farming practices were also later supported by the Roosevelt administration, the “agricultural authorities” mentioned in this article were seemingly unaware of environmental challenges that could threaten the self-preservation of the individual farmer or rancher. Private aid would also hopefully be a sufficient solution to these problems if they arose. Thus, in the Sandhills, as elsewhere in the country during this time, volunteerism, private donation, and self-reliance in the form of the Red Cross and personal agricultural responsibility were accepted as the only means of combatting the Depression and preventing its spread. In the spring of 1930, these methods were finally put into practice by Sandhills relief groups, only not within the region itself. Sandhillers first relief efforts assisted their contemporaries in need in other areas of Nebraska and the Great Plains.

In early-May of 1930, severe weather ravaged parts of eastern Nebraska. During this outbreak the farming community of Tekamah suffered extensive damage from a tornado strike. Tekamah received help from various individuals, groups, and charitable organizations. Assistance was provided from many western counties, including those in the Sandhills. One such county was Garden. In Oshkosh, the Garden county-seat, the American

⁶²¹ *Rock County Leader*, March 13, 1930, 6

Legion was responsible for organizing aid. An article was placed in the *Garden County News* which specified the required relief items that were viewed as helpful and necessary and where they should be donated. “Arrangements have been made to have everything left at the Smart Shop and anything brought in should be left there at once because of the extreme needs reported from that storm damaged community. All kinds of women’s and men’s clothing are acceptable. Sheets, towels, bedding, pillow cases, blankets, quilts, etc. It is important, however, that anything of this nature be clean, mended, and ready for immediate service for sewing machines and washing machines undamaged are few in the area and many have not even needles and thread left.”⁶²² Sandhillers, such as those in Garden County, were not unaccustomed to severe weather and thus felt a sense of sympathetic and moral duty to assist these fellow Nebraskans as they themselves could likewise fall victim to storms on any sunny, humid summer afternoon. Thus, the idea of neighbor helping neighbor based on shared experiences in similar geographic areas became commonplace, and, for many, necessary for one’s own continued success and, at the very least, survival. Sandhillers also knew of other environmental hardships that at times required significant benevolent aid and were not reluctant to provide help when such difficulties arose. One such hardship was unremitting drought.

In early-1931, life on the southern Great Plains grew more difficult and tenuous by each passing day. The region had slipped into a period of significant drought due to a lack of adequate moisture during the last months of 1930. Farmers in Kansas and Oklahoma called out for assistance from whoever would help them. Agriculturalists in neighboring Arkansas were also struggling. They received little or no help from the Federal government during this

⁶²² *Garden County News*, May 8, 1930, 1

period. This was not unexpected due to the Hoover administration's policies in regards to agriculturalists being the solution to their own problem. Unfortunately, in this instance the problem became cyclical. Farmers on the southern plains could not be their own "relief system" if the environment did not allow them to farm. A lack of Federal aid also led Oklahomans and Kansans to ask for help from American Red Cross chapters all over the country. Nebraska Sandhills' chapters also heard such pleas and were only too anxious to help. One of the first chapters from the Sandhills to request aid for southern Great Plains farmers was from Garden County and the town of Oshkosh. The January 29th, 1931, issue of the *Garden County News* summed up the dismal situation and the request for aid by stating:

Every paper that you read will tell you the story of the destitute conditions of some families in the parts of the country where the crops were total failures the past season. Radio addresses are telling it every day, too, and some of the most famous writers of the country have visited the sections where the food situation has become so serious and have written columns about it. Other towns in this section of the state are doing their share and it is evidently up to this community and county to do theirs. Some have already expressed a willingness to contribute and it is estimated that a car load has already been offered. Dr. G. H. Morris, Rev. Daubenspeck, and Judge Sam Casey are in charge of the matter and are working toward the successful canvass with as little delay as possible. Everyone who is willing to contribute something should report to them and do it right away. The railroads will haul anything in the way of food stuff for human consumption in car load lots free of charge. This means wheat, flour, corn, meal, meat, potatoes, beans, and many other things that this community was abundantly blessed with the past season...It is our turn now and we believe that the people will respond quite generously. Notify either Dr. Morris, Judge Casey or Rev. Daubenspeck and it can be arranged for Lewellen to have a car and Lisco to have one, if desired, and credit given to that community. Let's work together on it and do it quick.⁶²³

Garden County was not alone in answering these early requests for aid, other Sandhills counties quickly helped out. One such county that sought to answer the needs of Arkansas farmers was Hooker. In early-February 1931, the *Hooker County Tribune* noted the county's Red Cross quota and those who sought to contribute aid to Arkansans in need:

Hooker County's quota of funds asked for by the American Red Cross to assist in relieving suffering occasioned by the drouth in Arkansas is set at \$100. John J. Motl is chairman of the local Red Cross Chapter and advises that people of the community who would like to make contributions to the cause may leave same with him at the drug store to be forwarded to the proper officials. Provisions by the car load from different points in Nebraska have been sent to the relief of the unfortunate people in the

⁶²³ *Garden County News*, January 29, 1931, 1

south, the city of Scottsbluff having been a western Nebraska contributor with a car load of provisions last week. York, home of our auctioneering friend, Roy Tucker, is also a late contributor in like quantity. We have received no late word as to the pleasure entertained by the Burlington in regard to transporting without charge provisions to the drouht-stricken region, but the Union Pacific railroad in a number of instances has done so gratis. Albert Eriksen, one of our kind and big-hearted rural friends of south Cherry county, has expressed his willingness to make large contributions of various life-sustaining needs providing a car-load quantity can be arranged for shipment from this community and transportation of same made in accordance with the grateful (sic) plan of assistance rendered by the Union Pacific. It is possible that such a step may be undertaken by this community within the next few days but it is a matter in which delay in doing so should have no part.⁶²⁴

Solicitations were also sought from neighboring Grant County residents. The February 11th, 1931, issue of the *Grant County Tribune* pleaded:

Wm. M. Baxter, Jr., in charge of the American Red Cross relief work reports to the Grant county chapter that during January the number of persons being fed and cared for in the drouth stricken areas in nineteen states had risen by more than a half a million. The first of January 225,000 people were under Red Cross care, while on the 31st of the month the figure reported to the national headquarters was 750,411...The rapid spread of the relief work from the point of view of territory covered is well illustrated by the fact that on January 15th the work was being carried on in 384 counties throughout the states involved, while on January 31st active relief work was being extended by the Red Cross in 708 counties. Every person in Grant county who can should contribute to the extent of their means to this cause and not delay in so doing as help is needed at once. Contributions can be made to Mrs. R. N. Hayward, Hyannis, or to your postmaster.⁶²⁵

American Red Cross chapters in every part of the hills generously gave support.

In the northeastern Sandhills of Brown County, people shipped multiple foodstuffs to Ada, Oklahoma. Local railroads once again helped out by waving shipping costs. The February 20th, 1931, issue of the *Brown County Democrat* described their efforts: “In accordance with instructions the car of foodstuffs donated by the generous people of this vicinity, and loaded out Thursday and Friday, was consigned to Red Cross at Ada, Oklahoma, for distribution. There are some very interesting figures in connection with this shipment. There were 800 separate articles, and 180 persons contributed. The articles sent were even more interesting, and included 347 sacks of flour; 204 sacks of corn meal; 2900 pounds of rye-graham flour; 5200 pounds of potatoes; 400 pounds of beans; 10 cases of eggs;

⁶²⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, February 6, 1931, 1

⁶²⁵ *Grant County Tribune*, February 11, 1931, 1

25 cases of canned goods; 4 cartons of home canned fruit and vegetables; 100 pounds of bacon; one sack sugar; 9 cans of sorghum, a quantity of carrots and many other articles. The car was loaded to the guards, the total weight being 55000 pounds...it must be said that many who would have been glad to donate did not have an opportunity to do so, on account of the shortness of time. The Northwestern Railway company transported the car to Oklahoma, free of charge.”⁶²⁶ In late-March, aid shipments were still being sent south from the Sandhills as ranchers throughout the central Sandhills began donating cattle and hogs. After successfully asking for these donations, American Legion posts in Mullen, Thedford, and Brewster organized the shipment of one train car of cattle and hogs from the shipping points of Whitman, Seneca, Thedford, Mullen, Halsey, Dunning, Brewster, Koshopah, Purdum, Elsmere, and Brownlee.⁶²⁷ Through these examples of volunteerism, Sandhillers demonstrated that their rural, agrarian paradise was not cut off from the rest of their countrymen and that they strongly empathized with the struggle of those on the southern plains. While supporting and exercising Hoover’s volunteerism in this regard, they knew all too well that the idea of agrarian self-reliance alone as one of the means to defeat the depression, as argued by the “agricultural experts” of Hoover’s administration, was insufficient when faced with environmental catastrophe. By helping their southern neighbors, many Sandhillers met moral obligations that they viewed as only right and just, whereas others knew that it was practical to do so in case one might require their reciprocity and benevolence. The latter soon became the case.

As spring turned to summer, many shipments to the southern plains ceased as the drought situation temporarily improved there. Oklahomans and Arkansans were not

⁶²⁶ *Brown County Democrat*, February 20, 1931, 1

⁶²⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, March 25, 1931, 1

ungrateful as many Sandhills communities received letters of thanks and appreciation. *The Rushville Recorder* noted the community's national recognition: "During the Arkansas drought over one half million people were fed by the American Red Cross, and Rushville's donations have been acknowledged in relieving this distress. Director Evans says in a letter to the Sheridan County Chapter, 'It must be gratifying to you to know that your donations played so large a part in bringing Arkansas such a rapid recovery' ...Rushville is on the list of honor chapters for attaining drought relief fund goals."⁶²⁸ Later in the summer of 1931, Brown County Sandhillers also received kind words of appreciation from their Oklahoma contemporaries and their wish to reciprocate, if the need arose. The *Brown County Democrat* reported in its September 4th, 1931, issue:

President Gatten of the Commercial Club received an interesting communication the first of the week from Ada, Oklahoma, and stated they had learned that sections of Nebraska were drouth stricken, and would need aid. In case this section needed it Ada would be glad to respond. It will be remembered that Ainsworth and vicinity shipped a car of food to Ada...The letter further stated that Ada had recovered from the drouth...and excellent crops at this time. President Gatten will write to the Red Cross in the Oklahoma town, thanking them for their kindness, and explaining that help of that nature was not needed here.⁶²⁹

By writing back to the citizens of Ada, Brown County residents made it clear that they were successful and self-sufficient and had no qualms about making donations; however, they themselves did not wish to be the benefactors of charity. In this regard, they clung to the ideals championed by Hoover and the leaders of his administration very tightly. Within a year, they were forced to loosen their grip on this mixed mindset.

As the drought seemed to improve in Oklahoma, it began in earnest in Nebraska in the late-summer of 1931. Nebraska communities that had only months earlier been shipping relief elsewhere now needed help to tend to their own problems. The situation in the state

⁶²⁸ *The Rushville Recorder*, May 7, 1931, 1

⁶²⁹ *Brown County Democrat*, September 4, 1931, 1

capital became dire as unemployment increased; however, it was no better in Nebraska's rural areas as grasshoppers and drought made their presence felt. No one was more aware of the growing problem than Nebraska's Attorney General C. A. Sorensen. In August 1931, Sorensen petitioned local county authorities to help combat the problem. An article in the August 20, 1931, issue of the *Rock County Leader* noted Sorensen's efforts:

State-wide appeal for contributions of food stuffs to be used for the relief of unemployed and destitute families in Nebraska will be sounded by Attorney General C. A. Sorensen, he stated Thursday following a conference with representatives of Lincoln's unemployed. To further insure needy Nebraskans against suffering, the attorney general stated, he will write letters to county boards of commissioners instructing them as to their statutory duties to provide for the destitute in their respective counties...The attorney general pointed out that a serious unemployment situation exists in many Nebraska communities. In addition, he pointed out, many farm families in drought and grasshopper areas will face the winter in dire need of food. He renewed his plea, sounded Wednesday at Nebraska City, that county boards act to extend aid where it is needed.⁶³⁰

By November, many Sandhills communities began to heed Sorensen's plea. In Thomas County, the Thedford Vicinity Club established a Central Committee that was in charge of arranging Thedford's community Thanksgiving dinner, which was free to all who wanted to attend and made reservations.⁶³¹ This type of local gathering, which offered free food along with its fellowship, indirectly helped ease the burden faced by Thomas County's unemployed as well as its struggling agriculturalists.

In Brown County, where only months before citizens were proud of their self-sufficiency and prosperity, community organizations in Ainsworth prepared a month in advance for the upcoming Christmas festivities but also for additional responsibilities to the town's citizenry. The *Brown County Democrat* noted what was to take place in mid-December: "There will be a brief program at the Auditorium, with music by the band, etc., and then will come the annual distribution of candy to the kiddies. This will be made from

⁶³⁰ *Rock County Leader*, August 20, 1931, 2

⁶³¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 11, 1931, 1

the tree at the corner of Main and Third Streets. A new feature this year will be a welfare committee made up from every civic organization of the city. Headquarters will be selected and here serviceable clothing as well as food for the needy will be received. According to those in charge this committee will accept cash, as well as provisions and clothing, and will not operate exclusively for Christmas, but during the most of December, January, and February. These gifts will be passed out to the needy as applied for.”⁶³² Ainsworth was not alone in strengthening its relief services. To the west in Sheridan County, the Rushville Chamber of Commerce established a community chest from private financial donations and accepted clothing and other supplies to be distributed to the poor when needed.⁶³³ Prominent Sheridan County ranchers, such as A. R. Modisett, and individual businesses, such as the J. C. Penney Company and the Cornbelt Lumber Company, each donated \$10.00 to the cause.⁶³⁴ Likewise, in the town of Burwell the Wranglers Club raised funds for charitable organizations and relief in Garfield County during the Christmas season.⁶³⁵ In Garden County, the local Relief Committee received 200 sacks of flour, 96 bushels of potatoes, 1,000 pounds of beans, 32 women’s dresses, 62 men’s coats, 54 women’s coats, 114 pairs of stockings, and 42 pairs of children’s shoes from private donation in the winter of 1931 to 1932, amongst other items.⁶³⁶ The *Garden County News* noted the distribution of the foodstuffs to Sandhills families stating: “This has all been given out to needy families, some who live forty miles northeast of here and others in the southwest corner of the county.”⁶³⁷

⁶³² *Brown County Democrat*, November 20, 1931, 1

⁶³³ *The Rushville Recorder*, December 17, 1931, 1

⁶³⁴ *The Rushville Recorder*, December 17, 1931, 1

⁶³⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, December 24, 1931, 1

⁶³⁶ *Garden County News*, April 14, 1932, 1

⁶³⁷ *Garden County News*, April 14, 1932, 1

As 1931 turned into 1932, relief funds earned during the holidays were soon tested as the drought intensified in the Sandhills.

In January 1932, northeastern Nebraska, which included parts of the extreme northeastern Sandhills, began suffering from intensive drought. Red Cross requests for relief in the hard hit area were eerily similar to those made by southern Great Plains residents only a year before. On the opposite side of the Sandhills, the requests for aid did not fall on deaf ears. As it had done several times in the past year, the *Garden County News* of Oshkosh once again asked for aid from Sandhillers in the southwestern hills. In its January 28, 1932, issue, the *Garden County News* published a letter by Rev. W. W. Hughes, a northeastern Nebraska chairman of the American Red Cross, which described the plight of Nebraskans in this part of the state in vivid detail. Hughes argued:

While some of our political leaders are discussing the situation in our territory the stock is dying by the hundreds. Below zero weather in the next ten days would kill thousands of cattle and horses that are too weak to stand any further hardship. Seeing horses eating thistles and the bark off of the trees is a common occurrence here. Cows are too weak to give birth to their young. The farmers are at their wits end and are losing courage. While our state officials are passing judgment and washing their hands of their responsibility to take definite steps to relieve the situation, seven counties in northern Nebraska are facing one of the worst tragedies in modern times and unless immediate relief is sent will be obliged to quit and remain a burden to the state for years to come. The loss cannot be measured in dollars and cents, but in the loss of homes, the people's morale and broken health. Knox county, possibly the hardest hit by the drought, and the grasshoppers for the last three years, is in a critical condition. We plead for your help, send us grain and hay that the farmers in this section of the state may keep their milk cows and work horses until grass and feed grow here again.⁶³⁸

A week later, the situation remained untenable in the northeastern part of the state as the requests for aid became more strenuous and assertive. Requests for grain and hay for starving farm animals were again posted in the Oshkosh paper.⁶³⁹ However, unlike the previous week, *Garden County News* readers received chastisement by the paper's editor as well as from an anonymous northeastern Nebraskan whose comments were included in the

⁶³⁸ *Garden County News*, January 28, 1932, 1

⁶³⁹ *Garden County News*, February 4, 1932, 1

paper's article requesting more aid for not acting quickly enough to the plight of their fellow Nebraskans. The *News* pointedly exclaimed: "It is expected as soon as the dire need is felt by the people of Western Nebraska that the fund will increase and that Oshkosh and Garden county might be among those who are assisting Nebraskans in their time of need like true Nebraskans should'... 'If you of Western Nebraska were to be stricken with the malady that we are here in Northeastern Nebraska, how would you feel toward a governor who would not call an extra session of the legislature to assist you?' one of the requests from that area asked. 'If the situation were reversed, if you were in need, imagine the feeling of joy and gratitude when contributions from other sections were received,' it continued."⁶⁴⁰ Despite these strong critiques, aid was steadily making its way to northeastern Nebraska and the Sandhills counties of Holt, Brown, and Rock. Individuals there were not unappreciative. The *Rock County Leader* noted the train carloads of food and feed donations and their distribution in early-February: "The donations of food for people and feed for livestock has totaled 202 carloads. These have been sent out to the following counties Knox county 88; Boyd 50; Holt 32; Cedar 21; Brown 4; Rock 3; Keya Paha 2; and Antelope 2. This array of contributions speaks more eloquently than words of the generosity of Nebraska citizens."⁶⁴¹

Even with these donations, times remained difficult in Rock County in early-February. The *Leader* reported that: "The past two weeks or more of severe winter weather has made a big inroad upon available feed for stock in Rock county and in many parts the question of feed for horses and cattle is a serious one. There is no question but what help must cme (sic) from some source before the next two weeks."⁶⁴² Help once again came from

⁶⁴⁰ *Garden County News*, February 4, 1932, 1

⁶⁴¹ *Rock County Leader*, February 4, 1932, 1

⁶⁴² *Rock County Leader*, February 4, 1932, 1

western Nebraska. By mid-February, Mayor E. D. Bannister of Oshkosh received a telegram from a relief committee in northeastern Nebraska asking for a \$700.00 donation.⁶⁴³ He responded that Garden County residents had donated enough funds to be able to ship three-hundred bushels of corn to northeastern Nebraska.⁶⁴⁴ While such donations helped alleviate the suffering of northeastern Sandhills agriculturalists, they did not solve the problem as the drought spread and became more entrenched in the eastern Sandhills.

By mid-February 1932, the need for increased relief became necessary in Loup County as more families could not acquire their own food and clothing. The *Taylor Clarion* reported on the most recent meeting of the Loup County chapter of the American Red Cross stating: "At the local Red Cross chapter session held here on Wednesday, Mr. Williamson a state worker, was present, and a report of what had been done was given and a survey of its probable activities for the three months ahead taken. The Rollcall reported 34 members with \$38.00 collected. To date 9 families have been aided with food and 9 with clothing. A careful survey of the situation brot (sic) out the following: There are probably 25 families who will need to be provided with food until May 15 or later; 20 families who will need to be provided with clothing and 4 with medical aid. The county is assuming the care of chronic cases, as heretofore. The Red Cross is assuming this responsibility in conjunction with other organizations under obligations."⁶⁴⁵ While Loup County did not have long soup lines as other American communities did, the growing number of families unable to feed themselves was a sharp reminder for many Sandhillers that they were as strongly held in the grip of the Great Depression as were individuals in Arkansas or Oklahoma. As in Loup County, the

⁶⁴³ *Garden County News*, February 18, 1932, 1

⁶⁴⁴ *Garden County News*, February 18, 1932, 1

⁶⁴⁵ *Taylor Clarion*, February 18, 1932, 1

McPherson County Red Cross Chapter solicited donations for clothing for the county's needy in 1932. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of their message in their December 22nd, 1932, issue: "The McPherson County Chapter of the American Red Cross have asked that people of the county having old clothing for children, which their own children have outgrown, donate it to the chapter to be given to needy families. There are no doubt many families in the county where the younger children have outgrown their clothing which if turned to the Red Cross would go a long way in clothing many little folks who are now unable to attend school due to lack of warm clothing."⁶⁴⁶ Thus, as Hoover's first term waned, Sandhillers precarious situations increased.

As February became March, aid from western Sandhills counties was still being sent to their eastern contemporaries. Sandhillers used a variety of methods to gather donations to help. One such method was through entertainment. In McPherson County, local high school students attempted to gather funds by making people laugh. *The Tryon Graphic* described their efforts: "Tonight, Thursday, March 3rd, the boys and girls from the McPherson County high school will present their musical comedy, 'College Days,' for the benefit of the North-east Nebraska drouth relief. The boys and girls of the high school and the coaches of the play are doing their bit toward the relief work and every family in the community should plan to attend. The program given this evening will not raise near the cash quota asked for by the Drouth Relief headquarters and other activities will possibly be planned throughout the county to raise the balance of the money. Some kind of an organization will be formed this evening to take charge of further efforts to raise the quota."⁶⁴⁷ The difficulty in obtaining relief funds during this period, even when ingenuity was utilized, demonstrated that

⁶⁴⁶ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 22, 1932, 1

⁶⁴⁷ *The Tryon Graphic*, March 3, 1932, 1

volunteerism had its limits, even among fellow Sandhillers. This was largely due to the ever increasing financial constrictions Sandhills residents themselves felt as the Great Depression intensified.

By April, the difficult situation in the northeastern Sandhills persisted as Red Cross officials debated whether or not to end their relief efforts. The *Rock County Leader* wrote of the results of a Red Cross meeting held at Norfolk in late-March: “Family food supplies will be discontinued after April 10, altho (sic) by that time every family on the list will receive a sufficient amount of relief to do over a 60 day period. The distribution of wheat was also taken up and proper methods to be used in getting this feed to those in need were discussed...Two carloads of wheat have been received at Bassett and two at Newport. These shipments were part of the emergency shipment and the regular allotment for the county will arrive later.”⁶⁴⁸ While Red Cross officials debated how to proceed with their relief work later in the year, they proceeded with relief through wheat. Beyond Rock County, other Sandhills counties, such as Brown County, also benefitted from wheat shipments. The *Brown County Democrat* wrote of the Red Cross relief wheat’s arrival and distribution: “As stated some time ago seven cars of wheat to be distributed by the Red Cross have been assigned to Brown county, two cars are to be distributed from Ainsworth, two from Long Pine, and two from Johnstown...One car reached Long Pine Saturday and another arrived here Sunday. Others are expected soon. The distribution is to be made through Chairman Shrimpton of the Red Cross local chapter and his committee appointed for that purpose. In order to get the wheat for feed for stock the applicant must show that he has exhausted his private resources.”⁶⁴⁹ Such feed was precious to struggling agriculturalists and most accepted it when offered,

⁶⁴⁸ *Rock County Leader*, March 31, 1932, 1

⁶⁴⁹ *Brown County Democrat*, April 1, 1932, 1

especially since there was no guarantee that one could rely on unlimited future shipments as weather conditions and/or shifts in relief policies may curtail them.

By mid-summer of 1932, the situation in the northeastern hills had improved enough that some relief groups began focusing on other projects. On Saturday, July 2nd, the Woman's Relief Corps met in Ainsworth but their main focus was not on gathering clothes for the poor or raising funds for food, but was instead focused on beautifying the community's graves.⁶⁵⁰ Despite this brief respite, the environmental and economic situation in much of the state during 1932 was such that Sandhillers now knew that Hoover's voluntarism was not entirely effective and that relief groups, such as the American Red Cross, were stretched to the limit. The *Taylor Clarion* wrote of the importance of the Red Cross and the impossible task faced with minimal Federal aid: "More than 3,000,000 families throughout the nation were given relief of various types by the American Red Cross in the past winter, to aid them in their distress caused by unemployment, disaster or other misfortunes... While carrying on nation-wide these unemployment and other relief measures, the Red Cross also was engaged in its regular peace-time activities in public health, nursing, service to ex-service men and their families, teaching home hygiene, life saving and first aid. The Junior Red Cross, composed of almost 7,000,000 school children, also rallied to the support of the society's relief efforts, and the children aided others of their age in practical ways, formed sewing and food canning classes, and were of great assistance in chapter relief work... Citizens can aid by joining as members of the local Red Cross chapter during the roll call from Armistice Day to Thanksgiving Day."⁶⁵¹ While the Red Cross would gladly accept new members, it became hard for many Americans to help out when they themselves needed

⁶⁵⁰ *Brown County Democrat*, July 8, 1932, 1

⁶⁵¹ *Taylor Clarion*, October 30, 1932, 1

help. Sandhillers were no exception. However, despite personal difficulty, many Sandhills residents continued to join the Red Cross. For instance, in January 1933 Thomas County alone boasted fifty-three members.⁶⁵² Sandhillers continued their volunteer spirit but after multiple bank foreclosures, growing unemployment, and environmental calamity something had to change. As with many of their contemporaries throughout the Great Plains and the American West, Nebraska Sandhills residents endorsed a significant and sweeping change in the autumn of 1932. They changed their politics. Herbert Hoover's policies of voluntary private relief, limited Federal government intervention, and days as President of the United States were numbered.

The Nebraska Sandhills and the Election of 1932: Democrats All

By the fall of 1932, Herbert Hoover's inability to connect with the plight of the common, average American, whether they were factory workers on the east coast or poor tenant farmers on the Great Plains, ended his political career. Earlier in the summer Hoover had finally softened his position against direct Federal relief for the unemployed. Unfortunately for him, this came at a high political cost as it reinforced to voters that his previous position had been incorrect and that only during an election year had he finally been willing to change policy and provide Federal aid to American voters in need. To many Americans it seemed that Hoover was only concerned with their plight when he needed something in return. Wilson wrote of Hoover's implementation of the Emergency and Relief Construction Act: "The Emergency and Relief Construction Act he signed on July 21, 1932, conformed, Hoover said, to his specifications, but he was only theoretically correct... While the act did call for reproductive public works, its passage was tacit admission that private and

⁶⁵² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 25, 1933, 1

public works programs at the state and local levels had failed, that emergency rather than long-term public works programs had to be started, and that some direct federal relief was necessary.”⁶⁵³ It was too little, too late. There was also no guarantee for skeptical voters that if Hoover was re-elected he would not return to his previous hands-off policy. It was largely believed by the greater American public that even more Federal programs and involvement were necessary to pull the country out of the historic economic slump. Such was the attraction to progressives such as Governor Roosevelt of New York and Senator Norris of Nebraska who championed this cause. For many, Hoover’s change of policy, at best, may have seemed indecisive and, at its worst, in an election year when many votes were required to save his administration, disingenuous. In any event, his sudden shift in thought did not prevent the inevitable. In November 1932, President Hoover was voted out of office in one of the country’s most one-sided presidential elections. Nebraska Sandhills’ voters showed up to election booths in droves and significantly contributed to his defeat.

In the early-twentieth century the northern Great Plains states, including Nebraska and its Sandhills, largely supported the Republican Party in national elections. This had been the case in the election of 1924. Geographers Stephen J. Lavin, Fred M. Shelley, and J. Clark Archer wrote of the region’s political demography during Calvin Coolidge’s, John Davis’, and Robert La Follette’s contest for the Presidency in their 2011 work, *Atlas of the Great Plains*: “The election resulted in a landslide victory for Coolidge, who won 382 electoral votes. Davis won 136, all of which were from the South. La Follette won only his home state of Wisconsin, with 13 electoral votes. Coolidge won 54 percent of the popular vote, with 29 percent for Davis and 16 percent for La Follette. Within the Great Plains,

⁶⁵³ Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1992), 150-151

Davis carried Texas and Oklahoma while Coolidge carried the remaining states. Thus, the traditional split between the northern and southern Plains remained intact in 1924. Indeed, Davis carried no counties in the Plains north of the Oklahoma-Kansas border.”⁶⁵⁴ By 1932, the national economic conditions and drought on the Great Plains, including the Nebraska Sandhills, led to a drastic shift in regional voting demography. Lavin, Shelley, and Archer wrote of Hoover and the Republicans’ crushing defeat: “The Great Plains, which was hit especially hard by the Depression, strongly supported the Democratic landslide. Roosevelt won well over 90 percent of the counties in the Plains. He won every county in usually Republican North Dakota, all but two counties in Wyoming, and all but two in Nebraska. Roosevelt carried every county in normally Democratic Texas and Oklahoma.”⁶⁵⁵ The two Nebraska counties that supported Hoover were not located in the Sandhills. All of the region’s historically Republican counties proudly were carried by the banner of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This was no surprise to locals as for months prior to the election the region was trending Democratic due to the Republicans’s inability to quell the Depression. The most significant indicator was primary election results from earlier in the year when many Sandhills’ voters supported various Democratic candidates on the national, state, and local levels. One such Sandhills county that began the early shift to the Democratic Party was Garden. Reporting the April 12th, 1932, primary election results under the front-page title, “Democrats Sweep County By Big Primary Majority,” the *Garden County News* noted:

For the first time in history Garden County pledged itself to the democratic party in the primary elections held Tuesday throughout the state. Nearly a five to three majority was indicated by as many voters as their choice for party affiliations at this election due to the fact that more than five hundred called for democratic ballots with but slightly more than three hundred requesting republican ballots. The poll throughout the county was light, however, considering the fact that many of the races were

⁶⁵⁴ Stephen J. Lavin, Fred M. Shelley, and J. Clark Archer, *Atlas of the Great Plains* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 204, 213

⁶⁵⁵ Lavin, Shelley, and Archer, *Atlas of the Great Plains*, 213

very hotly contested, but it was believed that due to the excellent weather on election day many farmers took advantage of it and spent the day with spring plowing and planting, waiting for the general election to do their voting. A heavy vote is predicted for the general election, and according to the opinions of several local politicians, it is expected to be one of the biggest of several years. According to the unofficial returns 502 democrats voted for president giving Franklin D. Roosevelt 285 votes, John N. Garner 122 and William H. Murray 95. This was the heaviest vote on the entire ticket. The republican race for president did not receive much attention due to the fact that there was only one name on the ballot, that of Joseph Irwin France, who received 33 votes. Several names were written on these ballots with Herbert Hoover receiving the most of this type. In the race for governor on the democratic ticket, probably the most watched of all, Governor Charles W. Bryan carried the county by a near three to one majority receiving 311 votes against 135 for William Ritchie, Jr., with George Walter Olsen receiving sixteen and James Franklin Christie, six. Dwight Griswold, republican of Gordon, received 168 votes in this county while his nearest opponent, Kenneth S. Wherry got but 46 with Robert G. Ross, versatile candidate, coming a close third with 44 votes. 656

Beyond the opportunity for spring planting, Garden County voters who remained Republican undoubtedly chose not to vote in the primary election as they were already going to cast their vote for Hoover, if they bothered to vote at all.

Hooker County Tribune

FORTY-SECOND YEAR \$2.00 PER YEAR MULLEN, NEBRASKA, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1932 THE BEST ADVERTISING MEDIUM IN THE SAND HILLS

OLED HIGHWAY THRU MULLEN IS BEING FINISHED

Workers including Clarence Pootley are on the job this week completing a thousand foot strip of oiled highway from near the Campbell residence eastward to a point south of the H. M. Hildner residence, some six miles. This is the federal appropriation at the time the seven-mile strip of oiled highway was constructed from Mullen westward last year. First, the government isn't going to pay for something it didn't decide before the highway was completed from the contractors it is necessary that the road be brought up to specifications.

The strip in question has been graded for several months and the present roadbed will serve in a fine way as a base for the gravel-oiled surfacing now being applied. We are told that the main reason for the road not being oiled through town last year was on account of south side residents believing at the probability of oil being tracked into their homes, so the contractors in charge of the surfacing simply passed up that part of the project and job-voids were smoothed out. Completion of the seven mile strip west from Mullen thoroughly demonstrated to the objectors that their theory was all bad, same as most of them now admit and are dead set willing that oil is now being applied, which will serve to check the largest amount of dust heretofore in the air caused by transient motorists who seem to recall much about speed regulations. The work now in charge will probably be completed by the end of this week or forward of next.

CARING FOR THE POOR

Who is to take care of the poor and needy? This is a very important question in the rural counties of western Nebraska. At every meeting of the McPherson county commissioners numerous applications for aid are heard. The board members are to examine it to make the proper decision. Up in Hooker county the county is threatened by the suit being filed by Thomas county for the care of a destitute family which suffered across the line and had to be cared for by Thomas county funds. The Hooker county officials says the Miles township, threatened to call their hand by filing a suit for a greater amount for the probably are not the money that moved to their county from Thomas county. The cost of caring for the needy is fast becoming a big item of county expense in many western Nebraska counties. If applications keep increasing, the counties will have to organize poor farms where the destitute families can be cared for at a minimum cost.

MR. SORESENSEN HAS TWO PROPOSITIONS TO VOTERS

Attorney General Sorensen's program for one hundred constables or patrolmen will not be met with much success when the people realize the meaning of such a move and to know that they are to be paid from the gasoline tax collected. If this means there will be no aid and no limit to the raids that will be made on the gas tax fund. It is just such big money-making schemes as this that has contributed largely to putting the country on the present wretched footing, and the voters are sure to take Mr. Sorensen's pet idea to a good cleaning on the eighth day of November, at which time Attorney General Sorensen might also ask the voters to return him to office. Both of his propositions might get the props jerked out from under them. There probably are not many people familiar with the fact that it took \$9,000 of state money to operate the highway patrolman "troop" in the newspapers of the state the latter part of July. The Troopers' share of that clabby sum was \$18.90 less 15% on the agency that gave us the order. But the order also states: "They

Closing Out Public Sale of the Grand Old Party

As our lease with the U. S. will expire on March 4, 1933 and our titles to political Jack Poo will be transferred to the Boss of Wild Kawawaw, we have decided to hold an auction sale on the White House lawn in Washington, D. C., on Tuesday, November 8, 1932, to sell to the highest bidder all of our political machinery and our entire stock of supplies now on hand, to-wit:

One political machine, 1931 model, badly in need of repairs, can only be recognized by its whistle. One moon grown platform with all its farm plank broken. One large everbearing Melon vine with several small branchy body production, raised as from seeds. One million dollar crime wave made to order, old enough to wear, new by West-head and damaged by everybody. Fourteen million moonshiner stills, all operating to full capacity. Seven hundred rum runners vessels, just learning to swim, but know all the drow. Fifteen million dinner pails all empty. Twenty-one thousand miles of breadlines with out vacant spots. One goat of Boreas.

JUDGE GLASS SUMMONED AT HYANNIS SATURDAY

John W. Glass, county judge of Grand County since 1918 and a resident of Hyannis for the past 22 years, passed to the beyond last Saturday, at the age of 77 years, five months and five days, and his body was entombed to a grave in Hillside cemetery following services conducted by Rev. J. E. Amundson of the Congregational church Thursday afternoon of this week.

Deceased was born at Centerville, Ia. June 19, 1855 and was united in marriage June 28, 1876 with Miss Minnie Kistman, who was summoned to her death September 12, 1919. Eight children were born, one of whom passed away at the age of two years. In December, 1920, he was united in marriage with Mrs. Emma Merrimow who was born here together with three sons and four daughters.

Deceased went to Kansas in the year 1907 and from there transferred supplies for the government in a covered wagon, but knew all the drow. Fifteen million dinner pails all empty. Twenty-one thousand miles of breadlines with out vacant spots. One goat of Boreas.

Mullen Ranchers Indicate Heavy Democratic Vote

The following article under date of Sept. 21, was sent us in the World Herald by a staff correspondent of that publication and some appeared in our issue of Sept. 26th, as follows:

If the members of the Board can get away from their homes of waiting back to the president the voters of the west their disorganized voters, in talking with voters hereabout's.

"If they can save the green name in Nebraska by pointing to slight increase in prices, they are leaning on a broken reed. This must be easily ascertained by talking with voters hereabout's."

"If they can save the green name in order to win our votes, they could have raised prices before they had run in the west their disorganized voters, in talking their attitude."

"Increasing prices a few before election first to benefit us probably means that if they win the election they'll be improved but right after. We've nothing to lose and everything to gain by bringing about a change." is another favorite reply to the argument that the administration is making a mistake in not keeping its long delayed program.

The seasoned political observers regarding the Democratic republican congressional campaign think that there has been in the heart of giving, there is no doubt to believe that Terry Carpenter, the democratic congressional candidate has a chance to win. But doubt is hardly dispelled as our travels in the district and listen to the comments of the voters. Autos and trucks carrying Carpenter banners are numerous on the highways, and everywhere one hears the story that Carpenter is going to win. If certain Nebraska does as well as the democratic ticket as the west continues to be Roosevelt's territory, the state will be something to talk about.

THE OLD RUNAWAY

Say what you will, two auto running together on the street in our country is nothing as a good old fashioned team of horses running away. Where the citizens who cannot recall the day he heard shouts in the street and ran to the door to see a crowd of dust and the far end of the dust cloud a team of horses tearing along in a snake-like path, with a farm wagon behind on two wheels and its contents flying in all directions.

The motor car has given us a lot but it can't provide the thrill that an old fashioned runaway used to afford. The crash of a lot of metal coming together in a collision isn't exciting. The scream of the injured are not pleasant. But when we had a runaway in the good old days it was different. We were in the first place that nobody was out to be hurt, and in the second place we were that the horses would be caught, the wagon unharmed and that everybody would go home to work with some-

EVERYTHING IN READINESS FOR THE ROUND UP

Friday and Saturday, Sept. 29 and 30, will be the days of the Mullen Round up and it is high time for all the cowboys to get ready. There are also days of the annual Fall Fair at Mullen, with Will Meade in a special article sent us in the World Herald.

There is a lot of cattle country where cowboys will find plenty to do, riding for the roundup and other things of the sort. There should be plenty of riding and some rodeo work.

Mullen does not lack anything to do, but the cowboys are not here to do any business.

Being directed by a committee of the members of the Mullen cowboy club, the organization is making a special effort to make the best of the round up. The round up will open the old rodeo track at the hotel and there will be a number of events. By sponsoring the rodeo events on this occasion the management is making a little effort for the cowboys, rather than the ordinary and ordinary western entertainment. In addition to the rodeo work, there will be several amusement shows on a big stage each night.

The range round up is this season has been unusually well staged. That year, the day has not been considerably better than the five year average. Most of the round up has been made to market or to give the cowboys and cowgirls a good time. The range round up has been held for the cowboys of the last few years. The range round up has been held for the cowboys of the last few years. The range round up has been held for the cowboys of the last few years.

THREE HORSES KILLED

Lawrence, Okla. as this week's Hooker Tribune. Harry Wells of the New York, accompanied by Lawrence Moran arrived in Hooker with a truck loaded with 200 large old hawks of various breeds. About half of them being sold before noon Monday when they took their departure for Lawrence and sold the lot to a dealer there. Returning to Hooker, they saw the truck started for Hooker with four horses on the truck accompanied by Eric Meade. At about 11 o'clock on Tuesday morning, when turning the curve in the road to cross the railroad track four miles east of Mullen, the horses started to get into the track which caused it to turn over and the driver and one of the horses were killed and a broken shoulder bone for the M. Webb and Lawrence's wagon were injured.

(*Hooker County Tribune*, September 29th, 1932, p.1. The paper reported on early polling which, indicated that ranchers near Mullen, who had always voted Republican, were going to vote for the Democrats due to Hoover's inadequacies in dealing with the Depression. Copy courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.)

Prior to November, other Sandhills counties also indicated a new loyalty to the Democratic ticket. Under the improbable headline, the like of which never seen before the Depression nor in decades and years since, "Mullen Ranchers Indicate a Heavy Democratic Vote," the September 29th, 1932, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune* reprinted an *Omaha World-Herald* article which exclaimed: "If the managers of the Hoover campaign are resting their hopes of winning back to the president the votes of the farmers and ranchers of western Nebraska by pointing to slight increases in prices, they are leaning on a broken reed. This much is easily ascertained by talking with voters hereabouts. 'If they can raise the prices now in order to win our votes, they could have raised prices before they lost 'em,' is the way these dissatisfied voters explain their attitude. 'Increasing prices a bit before election just to beguile us probably means that if they win the election they'll let prices slip back right after. We've nothing to lose and everything to gain by bringing about a change,' is another favorite reply to the argument that the administration is making a gesture toward keeping its long delayed promises...If eastern Nebraska does as well by the democratic ticket as the west end promises to do, Roosevelt's majority in the state will be something to talk about."⁶⁵⁷ Less than a month later, the *Tribune* continued its anti-Hoover, pro-Democrat campaign as one of its front page sub-titles extolled its readers to "Stick to Bryan and Take On Roosevelt and Carpenter."⁶⁵⁸ In this issue, Hooker County residents were also made aware of Nebraska Senator George Norris's stance against Hoover, reading in the paper that: "Senator George W. Norris told an audience at Des Moines a few nights ago that resident (sic) Hoover has

⁶⁵⁷ *Omaha World-Herald* in *Hooker County Tribune*, September 29, 1932, 1

⁶⁵⁸ *Hooker County Tribune*, October 27, 1932, 1

failed to redeem ‘every pledge he made to the farmers’ and as secretary of commerce ‘blocked genuine legislation. He assailed the president’s record on agriculture in a speech which he said was in reply to President Hoover’s opening campaign address in the same auditorium October 4.’⁶⁵⁹ The *Tribune* further noted Hoover’s inadequacies: “Hoover promised prosperity to the farmer. The answer is the lowest prices the farmer has ever received. In that spectacular campaign Hoover promised to abolish poverty. After about four years of his rule, poverty and starvation run rampant all over the United States.”⁶⁶⁰ Such denunciations and dissatisfaction with Hoover were common elsewhere in the hills. Many prominent community and county leaders voiced similar opinions, some even changed political parties. One such individual was Arthur County Attorney W. I. Tillinghast. The *Hooker County Tribune* reported on a late-October Democratic rally at Arthur and Tillinghast’s role in it:

The assemblage was called to order by S. E. Adkins, county treasurer of Arthur county, and also chairman of the democratic central committee and it was his duty to introduce County Attorney W. I. Tillinghast, for many years a resident at Arthur. It was Mr. Tillinghast’s task to introduce the speaker of the evening, Col. Baskins, but before doing so said that possibly some of the audience would be surprised to see him standing up there and making introductory remarks for a democratic speaker. ‘I have an explanation to make,’ he said, ‘and it is this: The head of my party has deserted the faith and forfeited his right to support, according to my ideas. The democratic candidates and their platform is nearer my ideals of what the national standard should be than is my party. Therefore, you can call me either republican-democrat or democrat-republican, but I am going to vote the national and state democratic ticket at this election.’⁶⁶¹

Due to the arguments put forth by county newspapers and examples of party switching by prominent individuals, such as Tillinghast, coupled with the financial and environmental hardships that Sandhills’ agriculturalists faced, it was no surprise that the Democratic Party swept the Sandhills.

⁶⁵⁹ *Hooker County Tribune*, October 27, 1932, 1

⁶⁶⁰ *Hooker County Tribune*, October 27, 1932, 1

⁶⁶¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, October 27, 1932, 1

On Tuesday, November 8th, 1932, the trend that was so evident in Sandhills' politics finally became a reality. Hoover and the Republicans were voted out of office and swept aside as Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President- Elect. Sandhills' voters overwhelmingly supported such an outcome. The *Brown County Democrat* reported: "Tuesday's election was a landslide for the democrat party, and aside from the election of Roosevelt president, there will be many strange faces in both branches of congress...It was a very exciting election, with the largest poll ever registered in Brown county."⁶⁶² The *Tryon Graphic* wrote of Roosevelt's victory: "In Tuesday's Election in McPherson County the vote went Democratic for the first time in the last twenty-five years."⁶⁶³ The unofficial results of the 1932 election in McPherson County tallied 367 votes for Roosevelt and Garner to 287 votes for Hoover and Curtis and Bryan received 396 votes to Griswold's 250 in the Gubentorial election.⁶⁶⁴ McPherson County even gave eight votes to Thomas, the Socialist candidate for President, and two votes to Paul, the Socialist candidate for Governor of Nebraska.⁶⁶⁵ This support for leftist and progressive candidates significantly demonstrated just how far conservative politics had fallen in Nebraska during the early years of the Great Depression. The *Burwell Tribune* remarked of Garfield County voters' support of Roosevelt: "With the largest majority ever given any candidates Franklin D. Roosevelt and John Nance Garner Democratic nominees for President and Vice-President, were elected at the National election Tuesday...Nation, State and county fell into Roosevelt's column. The state by better than 125,000, while Garfield county ordinarily to be found in the Republican column went

⁶⁶² *Brown County Democrat*, November 11, 1932, 1

⁶⁶³ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁶⁴ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁶⁵ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 10, 1932, 1

over to the Democrat side by a majority of better than one hundred and sixty votes."⁶⁶⁶ The final results revealed that Roosevelt had defeated Hoover with 758 votes to 602 in Garfield County, even though Hoover had held onto the county seat of Burwell with 305 votes to Roosevelt's 300.⁶⁶⁷ In comparison, Garfield County did vote Republican in the governor's race, supporting Dwight Griswold with 755 votes to only 591 for the incumbent Bryan.⁶⁶⁸ In neighboring Loup County, Roosevelt won with 385 votes to Hoover's 285 despite this county also voting for Griswold over Bryan for governor, 351 votes to 328.⁶⁶⁹

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HAIL TO OUR NEW CHIEF

Hooker County Tribune

FORTY-SECOND YEAR \$2.00 PER YEAR MULLEN, NEBRASKA, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1932 THE BEST ADVERTISING MEDIUM IN THE SAND HILLS

People Ask For Roosevelt and New Deal



GOV. CHAS. W. BRYAN
From whom Dwight Griswold of the Gordon Journal tried to take the reins of state government, but was badly beaten



FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
FOR PRESIDENT

JOHN N. GARNER
FOR VICE PRESIDENT



TERRY CARPENTER
Newly elected Congressman from this district who defeated Robt. G. Simmons, and had a large number of votes to spare

Hooker County Casts 509 Votes in Tuesday Presidential Election

In past elections severity of weather has played a part in keeping the voters away from the polls, but the rain of the day Tuesday cut little figures in bringing out the vote in this presidential election. While a lot of talk goes this section, other parts of the state and adjoining states were getting in on the vote.

It seemed that every person eligible to cast a ballot was out hand for that purpose. The polling went on smoothly and with little political discussion. The vote tallies in the Hooker Tribune of

F. T. Morrison Dies Suddenly at Home in Portland, Ore.

A message was received Wednesday evening by Mr. and Mrs. W. W. Grueing announcing the sudden death of Francis T. Morrison at Portland, Ore., at which place the family has resided in late years. No particulars concerning his demise were given in the message, but it goes without saying that news of Mr. Morrison's death comes as a shock to a large circle of friends the family made during the many years they resided in Mullen. We hope to be able to give a more detailed account next week of his sudden demise.

The Mighty Story The Ballot Told

For Chief Justice of Supreme Court		Van.		Abby.		High.		Val.		Total	
Charles A. Goss	Mullen	12	11	15	2	179					192
Harry O. Palmer	Mullen	13	10	14	5	142					
For Judge of Eleventh District		Van.		Abby.		High.		Val.		Total	
Ralph H. North	Mullen	14	21	17	36	7					208
Edwin P. Cloman	Mullen	20	17	19	4	270					
For Regents of State University, 6th Dist.		Van.		Abby.		High.		Val.		Total	
Frank M. Johnson	Mullen	7	11	11	3	118					149
Frank J. Taylor	Mullen	14	11	15	12	3					
For County Judge		Van.		Abby.		High.		Val.		Total	
W. R. Powers	Mullen	10	24	10	18	1					153
W. R. Bover	Mullen	9	11	9	5	124					

Now Have Daily Stock Train Service Between Alliance and Mullen

A new train, No. 78, scheduled to leave Mullen about 2 o'clock p. m. daily, has been put on the Alliance division for better stock train service to eastern markets. This train has been in operation since Thursday of last week.

By leaving Mullen around 3 p. m. daily it is expected to make Omaha delivery the next morning, also connect with Chicago train No. 67 at Lincoln.

In order to make this train time it is necessary that stock going on this train be loaded and ready to go on No. 78's arrival.

Brilliant Display of Meteors Scheduled To Appear Shortly

A real astronomical fireworks display is in prospect for Nebraska amateur stargazers beginning about November 11th, according to O. C. Collins, in charge of the University of Nebraska astronomical observatory. At that time the heavens will be illumined with showers of "Leonids" which are meteors emanating from the constellation Leo, commonly known as "The Lion." Leo occupies the same position in the heavens as the sun.

Although the phenomenon should become evident by the evening of November 11th, the attraction will begin in

⁶⁶⁶ *The Burwell Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 1
⁶⁶⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 5
⁶⁶⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 5
⁶⁶⁹ *Taylor Clarion*, November 10, 1932, 1

(*Hooker County Tribune*, November 10th, 1932, p.1. Mullenites celebrated Roosevelt's Election and the coming of the New Deal. Copy courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.)

In comparison to these counties, counties in the north central Sandhills, long time bulwarks of Republicanism, heavily voted Democratic in all categories. In Thomas County, Roosevelt defeated Hoover 428 to 251, winning the county seat and major towns of Thedford, Seneca, and Halsey, 162 to 127, 145 to 40, and 79 to 52, respectively.⁶⁷⁰ In Hooker County, Roosevelt and Garner defeated Hoover and Curtis in a landslide 333 to 158 and Democratic Governor Bryan also won by a significant margin as he carried 343 votes to Griswold's 146.⁶⁷¹ In the county seat of Mullen alone, Democrats dominated by a nearly 2 to 1 margin as Roosevelt received 200 votes to Hoover's 121 and Bryan also did well in his bid for re-election tallying 217 votes to only 107 for Griswold.⁶⁷² In the county's race for high school regents, Theodore Folk proved he was a better businessman and land speculator than politician as he was defeated by J. E. Lowe 236 votes to 192.⁶⁷³ Hooker County retained some of its libertarian ideals as it voted against an initiative petition for the creation of state police, 256 to 163 for it.⁶⁷⁴

To the north in neighboring Cherry County, the results were very similar. *The Valentine Republican* reported under the heading "Cherry County Joins In Democratic Landslide:" "Cherry county fell in line with the rest of the United States and assisted in the tremendous Democratic landslide by which the country got its depression grouch off of its chest by taking it out on the party in power. Unofficial returns with one precinct missing and about 90 absent and disabled voters' ballots to be counted, show a plurality in this county for

⁶⁷⁰ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 9, 1932, 1

⁶⁷¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁷² *Hooker County Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁷³ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁷⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 1

Roosevelt of 1099. The Democratic state ticket averaged a majority of about 350, Governor Bryan winning over Dwight Griswold by 260.⁶⁷⁵ In the Valentine precinct alone, Roosevelt gathered 680 votes to Hoover's 351 and Bryan earned 640 votes to Griswold's 392.⁶⁷⁶ However, Hoover did retain six of the smaller Cherry County precincts such as Evergreen, in which he received 40 votes to Roosevelt's 10.⁶⁷⁷ Despite a minimal number of Republican loyalists, the shift in political loyalties in the Sandhills due Hoover's inadequacies in dealing with drought and depression was seismic, monumental, and complete.

In the eastern counties, Roosevelt triumphed by large numbers as in Custer County he won by 6,916 votes to 3,914 for Hoover, in Wheeler FDR claimed 648 votes to Hoover's 217, and in Greeley Roosevelt remained ascendant claiming 2,827 votes to the incumbent's 807.⁶⁷⁸ The Democrats also did well in the governor's race in these counties as Bryan defeated Griswold 2,403 to 1,176 in Greeley County and 568 to 281 in Wheeler County.⁶⁷⁹ In Custer County, Bryan did not fare as well with the county's agriculturalists as Griswold won 5,520 to 5,265.⁶⁸⁰ In the southwest Sandhills, Garden County residents voted Democratic in significant numbers. Roosevelt carried a 432 vote majority and Governor Bryan also earned 282 votes for his re-election bid.⁶⁸¹ In strongly Republican Keith County, Roosevelt defeated Hoover by over 1,000 votes winning handedly 1,993 to 934.⁶⁸² Bryan also defeated Griswold there by over 300 votes.⁶⁸³ In neighboring Lincoln County,

⁶⁷⁵ *The Valentine Republican*, November 11, 1932, 1

⁶⁷⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, November 11, 1932, 1

⁶⁷⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, November 11, 1932, 1

⁶⁷⁸ *Custer County Chief*, November 10, 1932, 2; *Wheeler County Independent*, November 10, 1932, 4; *The Greeley Citizen*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁷⁹ *The Greeley Citizen*, November 10, 1932, 1; *Wheeler County Independent*, November 10, 1932, 4

⁶⁸⁰ *Custer County Chief*, November 10, 1932, 2

⁶⁸¹ *Garden County News*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁸² *The Keith County News*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁸³ *The Keith County News*, November 10, 1932, 1

Roosevelt soundly defeated Hoover by over 2,000 votes and Bryan was victorious over Griswold by a margin of 5,214 to 3,919.⁶⁸⁴ The *Garden County News* described the Democrats dominance throughout the hills and state, in general, proclaiming: “More than ninety percent of the state senate will be democrats and a large majority of the lower house of the state legislature will be members of the same political party. This makes the entire control of the state government in practically every branch in the hands of the democrats from the governor down.”⁶⁸⁵ Such one sided political dominance led to a hopeful optimism that the cogs of Nebraska’s state government could run smoothly with little or no opposition in its efforts to revitalize the state’s economic and agricultural condition. The *Garden County News* encouraged such beliefs on the day the Democrats were sworn into power in early-January 1933, stating: “With a democratic legislature and a democratic administration entirely little friction is expected in putting through legislation favorable to both houses of the legislature and the heads of the government.”⁶⁸⁶

Sandhillers had every faith that the Democrats could succeed in their efforts to restore the country’s prosperity. They could at least do no worse than what the Republicans had done during the previous three years. Beyond a few of the smaller precincts and the governor’s race in some of the eastern Sandhills counties, about the only race that Roosevelt and the Democrats lost was Taylor High School’s 12th grade civics class’s mock election in which Hoover and Curtis defeated Roosevelt and Garner 50 votes to 45.⁶⁸⁷ In Arthur County, a county in which Roosevelt defeated Hoover 333 votes to 233 and Bryan defeated Griswold 374 votes to 213, many sympathized with Hoover on a personal level but

⁶⁸⁴ *Lincoln County Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 1

⁶⁸⁵ *Garden County News*, November 17, 1932, 1

⁶⁸⁶ *Garden County News*, January 5, 1933, 1

⁶⁸⁷ *Taylor Clarion*, November 10, 1932, 1

nonetheless were glad his policies had been eliminated.⁶⁸⁸ The editorial of the November 10th, 1932, issue of *The Arthur Enterprise* neatly summed up how residents of the county and the Sandhills, in general, felt about the final election returns:

In fairness to President Hoover it may well be said that there was nothing personal in the vote. Few people doubt his ability, his honesty of purpose and his sincerity. Those who heard one or more of his radio campaign speeches couldn't doubt in that respect. He happened to belong to a political party whose leaders believe on a particular line of thought- conservative, if you please, in the extreme. During his administration prices fell to a very low level. Business was, and is, at a standstill. Financial distress was and is, everywhere at hand. Millions of men and women are unemployed. Mr. Hoover and the administration have stated that this is due to world depression and that the present administration had nothing to do with it. President-elect Roosevelt and the democratic leaders claim there is a great deal that can be done to restore the country to prosperity. All await the proof of this belief by a program of legislation that will reach right down to every American home, no matter how humble. President Hoover made a gallant fight against great odds. His defeat was not entirely through a protest vote, as republican leaders claim. It was brought about through a vote of hope that the democrats might do something to restore prices, put men back to work and bring about a period of prosperity. Anyway, the American people have spoken in no uncertain terms.⁶⁸⁹

Roosevelt and the New Deal had arrived at last and Sandhillers, along with every other American, were anxious to see what he could do as President and how his economic programs would be implemented.

Conclusion

In the earliest days of the nation's financial collapse in the autumn of 1929, Nebraska Sandhills residents were unaffected by what seemed to be happening a world away. Their social impetus remained local as local high school functions and sporting events as well as regional criminals and agricultural issues took precedence over national affairs. This changed as they became exposed to unemployed transients wandering their rails and asking for handouts and as their own banks became vulnerable and exposed to what was happening elsewhere in the nation. Sandhillers willingly assisted in relief efforts for fellow agriculturalists suffering from the ill effects of drought; however, by the end of Hoover's first

⁶⁸⁸ *The Arthur Enterprise*, November 10, 1932, 5

⁶⁸⁹ *The Arthur Enterprise*, November 10, 1932, 5

term in office many Sandhillers themselves needed relief as the Great Plains drought had now affected them and, more importantly, their wallets. Sandhillers willingly voted for Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats in the 1932 election as Hoover and the Republicans had proven ineffectual in defeating the very real specter of economic collapse looming over the region as Roosevelt was inaugurated President in early- March 1933. Roosevelt's New Deal was to soon significantly impact every Sandhills resident for the foreseeable future as it became a bulwark of Sandhills society in the 1930s. It became the cornerstone of the Sandhills' social and political interest with varying levels of support and denunciation exhibited amongst local residents, businessmen, and agriculturalists. As with elsewhere in the country, Roosevelt's first task was to improve the uncertain status of an important Sandhills institution: the region's banks.

Chapter Four

The Legacy of FDR: Sandhills Society and the New Deal

During the Hoover administration, the Great Depression progressively worsened as the nation's factories closed, families were left homeless, and many people survived only through a reliance on soup lines or the good will of others. Sandhillers were not immune to these challenges as they were shaken from their blissful isolation by bank closures and foreclosures precipitated largely by the region's ever expanding drought conditions. By the fall of 1932, Sandhillers welcomed a change in national leadership as they overwhelmingly voted Franklin Roosevelt into the Oval Office and Democrats into seats in the Senate and House of Representatives. Roosevelt's New Deal programs brought new jobs and infrastructure improvements in the form of paved highways and community streets, irrigation systems, schools, courthouses, and dams. Despite this apparent shift to progressivism and the Democratic Party, many Sandhills agriculturalists were troubled with the implementation and effectiveness of some of Roosevelt's New Deal policies, in particular the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Due to these issues, by 1940 the region was once again dominated by the Republican Party and its politics. Despite this concern over the New Deal's effectiveness and its representation of increasing Federal overreach as well as a retrenchment in Republican support, the communities and people of the Sandhills welcomed Federal funding of local projects and the improvements in infrastructure and employment opportunities they portended. Throughout the 1930s,

Sandhillers also sought ways to improve their infrastructure and economic status through projects that were not solely the responsibility of the Federal Government. This chapter will discuss Roosevelt's implementation of the banking holiday in the Sandhills, the significant role that the Civilian Conservation Corps had in revitalizing the region's wildlife refuges and forests, CWA, PWA, and WPA projects and the employment opportunities they brought to Sandhillers, the dissatisfaction and disdain that Sandhills' agriculturalists held for the Agricultural Adjustment Act and the subsequent decline of support for the New Deal in the Sandhills, Sandhillers attempts at profit from rare natural resources, and New Deal programs that held less sway in the region. While some New Deal programs may have not been appreciated in the Sandhills, without Roosevelt's efforts Sandhills society would have continued in a type of temporal isolation as it was neither wholly modern nor frontier. Roosevelt's New Deal forced the region into the twentieth century in so far as its infrastructure was concerned and many of the program's projects are still standing, a tribute to engineering ingenuity and Roosevelt's foresight and leadership. However, during Roosevelt's first days in office in 1933, he had larger concerns on his mind: saving the nation's banks and stabilizing its economy. Sandhillers waited with keen interest along with the rest of the country as to how he would accomplish such a task as they were not immune to banking issues and closures as his administration began.

The New Deal Comes to the Sandhills: Its Early Challenges, Support, and Implementation

In Hoover's last days as president in early-1933, the Depression deepened, presenting a new challenge for the newly elected Democratic administration. Americans were optimistic that President-elect Roosevelt's plan for recovery, his New Deal, would be the path to economic recovery. While it did not accomplish everything it set out to do for a

variety of political and practical reasons, without the New Deal the United States would have fared far worse in those dark days of the early-1930s. Economist Ben Bernanke argued: “Only with the New Deal’s rehabilitation of the financial system in 1933-35 did the economy begin its slow emergence from the Great Depression.”⁶⁹⁰ The credit for the New Deal’s early success goes directly to the man who believed in it the most, fostered, and drove it: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Following his Presidential inauguration on March 4th, 1933, Roosevelt immediately busied himself with correcting the nation’s financial and economic crises as he saw them. Bernanke wrote of the depth of the economic crisis: “The ‘debt crisis’ touched all sectors. For example, about half of all residential properties were mortgaged at the beginning of the Great Depression...Because of the long spell of low food prices, farmers were in more difficulty than homeowners...State and local governments- many of whom tried to provide relief for the unemployed- also had problems paying their debts...”⁶⁹¹ Roosevelt’s first task was to stabilize the country’s rather unsteady banking situation. On March 9th, with the aid of Congress, Roosevelt implemented a mandatory three-day banking holiday which served to weed out the weaker banks and strengthen the stronger, more solvent banks. Jean Edward Smith wrote of the plan’s implementation: “The entire legislative process, from the bill’s introduction in the House to the president’s signature, took less than six hours. After signing the bill into law Roosevelt extended the bank holiday. Originally, he hoped some banks might reopen Friday. But officials at Treasury and the Federal Reserve needed more time to separate the sound banks from those that needed help. Under regulations promulgated by the president, banks wishing to reopen required a license from the secretary of the Treasury. Reviewing assets and liabilities was a time-consuming process, but within a month, eight out

⁶⁹⁰ Ben S. Bernanke, *Essays On The Great Depression* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41

⁶⁹¹ Bernanke, *Essays On The Great Depression*, 46

of every ten banks were open again. By and large this was a bureaucratic process.”⁶⁹²

Sandhills’ banks were not immune from this reform process. Sandhills banks were also closed due to Roosevelt’s holiday.

In order to put Sandhills’ banking patrons at ease, many of the local county papers thoroughly described what the holiday entailed and what it hoped to achieve in order to prevent any chance of a local banking panic. The *Garden County News* wrote of Roosevelt’s Banking Holiday’s objectives:

Eight rules for the transaction of business by banks were laid down by Secretary of Treasury Woodlin and published in daily newspapers Tuesday. They were as follows: 1. Limited reopening to accept new deposits subject to withdrawal without restriction, the accounts to be kept separately in cash or deposited in federal reserve banks or invested in United States obligations. 2. Repayment in full on demand of deposits heretofore received by any banking institution under an agreement or legislative authority for segregation and full withdrawal. 3. Handling of drafts for shipment, transportation and delivery of food stuffs. 4. Free access of customers, to all safety deposit vaults. 5.) Making change, but without paying out either gold or gold certificates. 6.) Cashing checks drawn on the treasury of the United States, but not in gold or gold certificates. 7.) Returning without restriction all cash, checks, etc., received for deposit or collection after the last closing of business hours and not entered on the books. 8.) Accepting in cash or otherwise payments on account of notes or other obligations due the banks.⁶⁹³

While undoubtedly disappointed to be without their banks for three days, Sandhillers understood why they were being closed. Roosevelt’s reasoning and goals were clear and accepted especially when outlined by local media. The *Garden County News* wrote of Garden County citizens’ reactions to the closures: “People are somewhat inconvenienced by lack of banking facilities but everyone is taking it good naturedly and business seems to be going forward as usual. It is hoped that the situation will be remedied soon and we will again have our banks.”⁶⁹⁴ People in Ogallala were more uncertain of how the situation would play out. The *Keith County News* reported in its March 9th, 1933, issue: “With the banks in all of

⁶⁹² Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, 313

⁶⁹³ *Garden County News*, March 9, 1933, 1,6

⁶⁹⁴ *Garden County News*, March 9, 1933, 6

48 states and the District of Columbia closed by presidential edict at least until tomorrow morning, officers and directors of the Citizens bank of Ogallala can offer no statements as to what the future might bring in the way of a national banking policy.”⁶⁹⁵ In Thomas County, Sandhillers were more understanding and knew the program was enacted to prevent a further banking crisis. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the impending situation in Thomas County:

While interviewing Miss Eva Noel, cashier of our local bank (Citizens State Bank) we learn that every courtesy possible is being (sic) extended to its patrons and the public. Miss Noel states she will only be too glad to accommodate people for change and that she will even take a deposit, if they bring in silver or currency, and that checks could be written against their new account. We have not had the opportunity to interview Bankers Cox and Haffner of The Stockmens Bank at Seneca, but no doubt the same general accommodations are being extended their patrons and the Seneca territory. The good feature of the banking holidays, according to high banking officials, is that it is for the betterment of the conditions in the United States as a whole. When you think seriously into this matter, surely you should not be discouraged over having to be without cash accommodations for a few days. In the end their (sic) is bound to be a better banking system. The main reason of bank holidays is to stop the withdrawal of currency in the large banks and to retain the gold standard which had begun to fall at the time President Roosevelt declared the holidays. We venture to say before going to press next week, scrip will be in circulation and that business will be moving along as usual.⁶⁹⁶

Fortunately, the holiday was not long enough that it was necessary to issue scrip to Sandhills residents.

Municipal scrip was already being issued in many towns in the American West. Prior to Roosevelt’s inauguration, the town of Laramie, Wyoming, debated using scrip to relieve the unemployment situation in the university town. Peter Huntoon wrote of the concept’s early support there: “The Boosters’ proposal reached the *Laramie Republican Boomerang* January 19, 1933. They claimed their scrip concept was already in use in 140 other municipalities across the country, and they contemplated a twenty thousand dollar issuance.”⁶⁹⁷ Such an idea was not appealing on a national level to members of the

⁶⁹⁵ *The Keith County News*, March 9, 1933, 1

⁶⁹⁶ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, March 8, 1933, 1

⁶⁹⁷ Peter Huntoon, “Homegrown Laramie, Wyoming, Scrip Helped Relieve Unemployment in 1933,”

Roosevelt administration as scrip made the new leadership's efforts to reform and restructure the United States banking industry seem somewhat inadequate, slip shod, and, at worst, impermanent. Smith wrote of Treasury Secretary Woodlin's decision process regarding scrip issuance: "He rejected the idea of issuing temporary scrip as the government had done during the panic of 1907, and settled on the Federal Reserve's proposal to issue new currency under the Federal Reserve Act. 'It won't look like stage money,' he told Moley Tuesday morning. 'It'll be money that looks like money. And it won't frighten people.' Relying largely on intuition and common sense, Woodlin had cut through a fog of financial advice and adopted the simplest of all possible solutions: the government would simply print new money. It would be backed not by gold or silver but by the assets of the banks in the Federal Reserve system."⁶⁹⁸ With this move, Roosevelt's administration differentiated itself from the likes of Hoover, as the Federal Government was now directly involved in determining the survivability and sustainability of the nation's banks.

Many Sandhills banks met the Federal criteria for reopening and were almost immediately put back into operation, whereas others took longer in reopening. Adam Cohen wrote of the Emergency Banking Act's simplified vetting process for reopening banks: "It also set up a system by which banks would be able to apply to the Treasury Department to reopen. The department would give licenses right away to banks that were financially sound. Banks in worse condition would be put under conservators, who would help restore them to financial health. Banks that could not be saved would be closed permanently."⁶⁹⁹ Banks in the southwestern Sandhills of Garden County fortunately were placed in the former, rather

Annals of Wyoming: The Wyoming History Journal 86, No. 2, (Spring, 2014): 17

⁶⁹⁸ Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 308-309

⁶⁹⁹ Adam Cohen, *Nothing To Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 78

than the latter category. Under the title and sub-title, “State and County Banks Opened Wednesday Morning- Business As Usual, No Restrictions on Deposits Except Withdrawals for Purposes of Hoarding,” the *Garden County News* described the county’s improved banking condition:

After a ten-day moratorium, first through the proclamation of Governor Bryan, of Nebraska, and later through a national bank holiday imposed by President Roosevelt, the banks of Garden county were opened on an unrestricted basis Wednesday morning. The opening of the banks here show the same results as are reported from all over the country. The business at the Nebraska State bank yesterday morning was about the same as it is on a Monday morning, only a slight increase in the number of customers being noted and a substantial increase in the number of customers being noted and a substantial increase in amount deposited over what was withdrawn. A note of confidence is evident at every point. People show by their countenances as well as their comments that they have increased confidence in the financial welfare of the country and their own banks in particular...The people of Garden county are fortunate in that their banks have passed the severest test and are recommended fully by the state and national authorities as safe and dependable financial mediums. We believe that the bank officers will continue to merit and to receive the fullest business confidence of the people.⁷⁰⁰

Beyond noting the solvency of southwestern Sandhills banks, this example is important for demonstrating that many of Roosevelt’s plans were not implemented in a vacuum and would not have succeeded if not for help at the local and/or state level. Democratic governors, such as Nebraska’s Bryan, undoubtedly had some inside knowledge that Roosevelt’s banking holiday was about to be implemented so they started similar legislation on a state level. Other states had to start their own programs prior to Roosevelt’s inauguration as the banking crisis worsened during the last days of Hoover’s administration when Roosevelt still had no authority to act. Besides Nebraska, Nevada was one other western state amongst many throughout the country that formed its own banking moratorium before Roosevelt took charge. Historian Ronald Edsforth wrote of the necessity of action on the state level during late-1932 to early-1933 in the American West and South: “Washington’s inaction forced states to devise their own emergency policies when panic arose among their citizens. As early as December 1932, Nevada’s governor had imposed a 12-day “holiday”- a mandatory

⁷⁰⁰ *Garden County News*, March 16, 1933, 1

closing of all banks- to break a run on the banks in his state. In January, bank failures increased sharply in the Midwest and the South...The next crisis occurred in Louisiana. The collapse of a big insurance company in New Orleans threatened to snowball into a run on one of the city's biggest banks. On February 4th, Louisiana's governor declared a two-day business holiday to allow his political boss, Senator Huey Long, time to arrange in secret an emergency RFC loan to the endangered institution...On the day Louisiana's banks reopened, 12 other state legislatures were considering proposals to allow their governors to regulate or close banks by decree."⁷⁰¹ Roosevelt's Emergency Banking Act was necessitated, once again, by Hoover's inability to act and in some degree followed earlier successful state examples. Thus, local state cooperation and acceptance were necessary for Roosevelt's Banking Act to succeed and should receive some credit for the legislation's accomplishments.

In mid- March 1933, banks on the other side of the hills also received satisfactory reports and were allowed to open. This was the case with many of the banks in the northeastern county of Brown. The *Brown County Democrat* reported in its March 17, 1933, issue, under the heading "Ainsworth Bank Holiday Ended Tuesday Night:"

So far as Ainsworth is concerned the bank holiday ended Tuesday of this week, and on Wednesday morning Ainsworth's three banks opened for business; the Commercial National, the Ainsworth National, and the Citizens State. Early Wednesday morning the banks here were notified that the secretary of the treasury had approved their applications for re-opening Wednesday morning, March 15, and that license embodying the Presidents limitations were being sent by mail, and will probably reach here Thursday morning. Under the new rules the payment of gold currency or hoarding is prohibited. And to this end if customers of banks are suspected of drawing money for hoarding they are required to sign an affidavit. No gold or gold certificates shall be paid out by the banks. The re-opening of the banks of the city was accepted by the people of Ainsworth and vicinity thankfully. There was no excitement, and relations were resumed in an orderly manner just where they left off

⁷⁰¹ Ronald Edsforth, *The New Deal: America's Response to the Great Depression*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), 117

when the holiday was declared. It is indeed a feather in the cap of all three banks of this city that their applications were approved and they were allowed to open with the earliest in the state.⁷⁰²

To the south in Thomas County, the banking situation was somewhat less stable as the Citizens State Bank of Thedford was delayed one month in re-opening. Fortunately for the people of Thomas County, it did finally re-open with little restriction. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the bank's re-opening in April:

Patrons and friends of the Citizens State Bank will be mighty glad to read the 'Open Letter' the bank is carrying in their regular advertising space this week. The letter very distinctly sets forth that the institution is now open 100% or without restriction other than such governmental restrictions as are placed upon all deposits in all unrestricted banks. We think it is generally known, considering its president and officers, that the bank has always been on a 'concrete footing,' and while it did not receive an order from the State Banking Department to open without restrictions as soon as some of the other smaller banks, nevertheless the financial statement recently published very concisely showed there was no occasion to be alarmed. Tom Hamilton would have seen no depositor lose money even though the bank had not already been sound. Thedford people should be proud of such an institution.⁷⁰³

Despite the setbacks that some local banks faced, such as the Citizen's State Bank in Thedford, Sandhills' residents were pleased that the banking situation in their region was being resolved with a modicum of success. This was a welcome positive contrast to the rampant state bank failures that had plagued the region two years earlier. Even though Roosevelt had been in office only a short time, such early successful attempts at fighting the Depression, instead of just accepting it, significantly endeared the new President to Sandhillers and he and the New Deal became highly popular in the region during his first term in office.

In early- 1933, Roosevelt's enthusiastic spirit and infectious desire to lead a robust recovery excited and inspired Americans who had grown sick and disgusted at being mired in the economic malaise and social apathy characteristic of Hoover's administration. For many, the New Deal was already a positive success, even if many of its policies had yet to be

⁷⁰² *Brown County Democrat*, March 17, 1933, 1

⁷⁰³ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 5, 1933, 1

debated and instigated, simply because Roosevelt displayed an initiative that Hoover lacked. Edsforth wrote of the nation's overwhelming support for and belief in the necessity of Roosevelt's New Deal: "Throughout the country, most Americans shared the sentiments of a group of citizens from Brooklyn who wrote Senator Wagner expressing 'sincere appreciation for the unified action of Senate and House...pulling in harmony with our courageous President.' Fear of total economic collapse and social disorder, as well as his own great political skills, had enabled Franklin Roosevelt to bring together an extraordinary coalition of supporters that included most of the press, business community, plantation owners, farm families, and working people."⁷⁰⁴ In 1933, Sandhillers also believed in the potential that the New Deal held for the nation's economic and, possibly, environmental salvation. Due to these feelings many Sandhills communities participated in "New Deal Days" which were organized social events and gatherings held to recognize the prosperity heralded by New Deal ideas. For instance, in mid-June and early-July, the town of Taylor held two such days which encouraged social gathering.⁷⁰⁵ On June 17th, a baseball game was held in honor of the New Deal on the field used by the high school while a fire of ambiguous origin destroyed buildings on the Mrs. O. W. Parker place and on July 1st, once again in honor of "New Deal Day," the Brown & Johnson Hardware & Lumber Company offered a ten percent discount on every China and glass dish customers bought directly from the store.⁷⁰⁶ In other Sandhills counties, people demonstrated their support for the New Deal by signing up for its programs. This was the case in Garden County.

⁷⁰⁴ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 146-147

⁷⁰⁵ *Taylor Clarion*, June 22, 1933, 1

⁷⁰⁶ *Taylor Clarion*, June 22, 1933, 1

By early-September, the National Recovery Administration was being implemented throughout the country. Businessmen in Garden County were enthusiastic to sign up. The *Garden County News* wrote of the county's support for the act:

Apparently there is very nearly a perfect registration for the NRA movement in Garden county and by the time it is working perfectly all will have subscribed to the plan, it is expected here by County Chairman George A. Jackson and others working for it. The business men are all, or nearly all, behind the movement and are ready to work out the various phases as they become advised to the line to follow... We are not able to give the names of those from Lisco and Lewellen who have signed but will do so next week. Those in Oshkosh are: L. Aufdengarten, Garden county Lumber company, Garden County News, West Nebraska Beacon, L. H. Stapleton, William L. Law, R. F. Sinclair, Mrs. Cleo Tabor, C. G. Berguist, The Rogers company, Snow's Cash Hardware, Smith & Peterson, Oshkosh Pharmacy, Oshkosh Implement Company, A. L. Scott, Hensley Motor company, North Central Gas company, Ernest Roloff, Standard Oil company, P. O. McCormac. Bill's Quick Lunch, The Smart Shop, Myrtie Billingsley, Marley Brown, Sanitary Bakery, Lexington Mill & Elevator company, H. G. Davidson, C. G. Blakeslee, C. W. Bryant, Pierce's Camp, Publix Store, Morris Hotel, George W. Polk, Sinclair Refining company, J. G. Yost for Oshkosh Produce, Bertie's Café, Bogg's Barber Shop, Ada F. Rodgers for Rodgers Café, Gretzinger & Co., Inc., I. W. Wright, Nebraska State Bank, Lolo's Beauty Parlor, Super Service Station, R. D. Tutty.⁷⁰⁷

The Oshkosh list included businesses that pledged support ranging from lumber yards to oil companies to beauty parlors. This variety demonstrated the range and scope of Roosevelt and the Democrats's popularity in the Sandhills.

In the northeast hills of Rock County, Roosevelt's NRA was supported as well. In its October 5th, 1933, issue, the *Rock County Leader* interviewed prominent Bassett area businessmen in order to garner their opinions of the National Recovery Administration. Under the headline, "Endorse NRA Movement," the Leader reported:

Mrs. O. M. Jeffrey as Rock County chairman of the woman's division of the NRA called upon a number of Bassett business men this week to secure their opinion regarding the NRA. The opinions secured heartily endorse the movement and are presented herewith. Paul Engler- "It's a good thing." Dr. Burke- "I think it is OK." Glen Litz- "The idea is good but isn't adjusted to the small town." R. R. Menney- "I endorse it. It has put 2,000,000 men to work. I'm a democrat but if I were a republican I should endorse it." O. M. Jeffrey- "I think it a wonderful thing for the manufacturing towns. We will not notice it so much in this part of the country until around the first of the year." F. A. Huston- "Entirely in the experimental stage. None of us can forecast what it will bring forth." H. W. Galleher- "Many of the features about it I like some of the others I do not understand thoroughly but think perhaps they will work out alright, but I am for it and back of it." H. C. Carr- "For it 100%." Roy H.

⁷⁰⁷ *Garden County News*, September 7, 1933, 1

Patitz- "I think the NRA is a good thing. We will perhaps not feel the effects of it before January 1st."
Chas. Riley- "Think it is a good thing only hours not adjusted properly."⁷⁰⁸

While Mrs. Jeffrey did not apparently interview all Bassett businessmen, the cross section she did question did display some trepidation at how the NRA would work out for Rock County. Thus, perhaps the *Leader's* claim that all "heartily endorse the movement" was a bit overzealous. Nonetheless, at this point in his administration, Roosevelt's policies were supported in the Sandhills, ranging from Rock to Garden counties, as evidenced by the election returns of the previous fall, the number of businessmen who signed up for the NRA, and those, in a traditionally Republican region, who spoke out in favor of Roosevelt's efforts. In 1933, beyond the National Recovery Administration, Roosevelt and his administration enacted more programs that had a far more significant impact on Sandhills' residents, agriculture, and environment. One such significant program that affected the region's male youth was the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Sandhills

Throughout the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) served the dual function of providing unemployed young men work, albeit unskilled work, of which a portion of the wages earned from such work could be sent home to support their families, and revitalizing the national spirit through an emphasis on the value of hard work and labor. Conrad Wirth described the basic benefits of the CCC in a report to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, in January 1944: "Working in the open, with nature, brings optimum

⁷⁰⁸ *Rock County Leader*, October 5, 1933, 1

beneficial results to an individual which are almost impossible to obtain otherwise. It builds the body and the mind; it teaches the basic principles of existence; and it creates an understanding of what must be done to protect and properly use natural resources.”⁷⁰⁹ More importantly it symbolically served as evidence that under Roosevelt workers were laboring again and not sitting or standing idle in long soup lines. During his first one hundred days in office, Roosevelt used the CCC as a tool to fight the psychological effects of economic depression on the American psyche by providing Americans a chance to feel useful again. In short, the Corps allowed Americans to again work and be productive, even if it was on a limited scale. Historian Neil M. Maher wrote of Roosevelt’s goals for and uses of the Civilian Conservation Corps: “From the moment Franklin Roosevelt conceived of the Corps, the concept of work was central to the mission and daily operation of the New Deal program. The president stated as much in his congressional message of March 21, 1933, in which he asked legislators to establish the CCC. ‘The overwhelming majority of unemployed Americans, who are now walking the streets and receiving private or public relief,’ Roosevelt wrote, ‘would infinitely prefer to work.’ Those enrolling in the program, he added, would ‘be used in simple work, not interfering with normal employment.’ When Congress passed the bill creating the CCC just ten days later, labor was likewise of primary importance.”⁷¹⁰ The Civilian Conservation Corps also provided other benefits besides the opportunity to work. Reid Holland wrote of some of the benefits CCC members received at the Lincoln Park Camp in Oklahoma City: “In addition to their pay, the enrollees received food, clothing

⁷⁰⁹ Conrad L. Wirth, Civilian Conservation Corps Program of the United States Department of the Interior, March 1933 to June 30, 1943, A Report to Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, January 1944, 5, U. S. Civilian Conservation Corps Collection, RG 1491.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

⁷¹⁰ Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78

and lodging. Also the Lincoln Park camp had a resident surgeon who provided medical care, which included monthly checkups for respiratory and venereal diseases...All camps offered some basic courses in both academic and vocational fields, but the enrollees at Lincoln Park were offered far more than the normal reading, math, English and woodworking classes. They could take such courses as trigonometry, algebra, astronomy, orchestra, architectural decorating and radio which were offered by instructors recruited from nearby urban schools.”⁷¹¹ While the CCC was not a permanent institution that offered long-term tenured salaried positions with a chance at significant advancement, it motivated young American men to find a renewed sense of pride in the capitalistic, American working ethos. It also provided them with educational opportunities, whether learned through academics or personal experience, which would benefit them the rest of their lives. The sons of the Nebraska Sandhills were no strangers to hard work and thus were intrigued by the possibility of enrolling in this new Federal program. Many did just that.

In early-April 1933, implementation of and recruitment for the CCC began throughout the country. Maher wrote of its early recruiting successes: “Beginning the recruitment process on April 5, 1933, the Department of Labor had selected the CCC’s first-year quota of 250,000 young men within two month’s.”⁷¹² In May, many Sandhills counties contributed to this national total by sending recruits to vetting centers in Broken Bow and North Platte. The May 18th, 1933, issue of *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of the CCC’s mobilization process in Sandhills communities:

⁷¹¹ Reid Holland, “The Civilian Conservation Corps in the City: Tulsa and Oklahoma City in the 1930s,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* Vol. LIII, No. 3, (October 1975): 370, U. S. Civilian Conservation Corps Collection, RG 1491.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

⁷¹² Maher, *Nature’s New Deal*, 80

State Tax Commissioner W. H. Smith Tuesday announced assembling points and dates for 1,206 Nebraska men ordered to mobilize (sic) for the conservation corps. The men will assemble for medical examination and if approved will go into camp. The assembling point and date for men from this part of the state are: Thursday morning at Broken Bow: Custer, 50; Garfield, 5; Loup, 3; Blaine, 3; Thomas, 3; Hooker, 2; Total 67. Thursday morning at North Platte: Lincoln, 49; Perkins, 11; Keith, 13; Arthur, 3; McPherson, 3; Logan, 4; Total of 83. The boys from this county will go from North Platte to Ft. Crook at Omaha, after two weeks training there they will either go to work within this state or sent to some area being worked by the boys in the reforestation army. Athletic equipment has been ordered to be used at the camps and will be taken along to provide recreation.⁷¹³

Most county newspapers individually listed the names of the young men who were joining the Corps. In so doing, Sandhills communities took pride in their young men who were going off to fight the Great Depression as if they had enlisted in the military and were venturing off to fight an invading force. Often these notices simply stated who was leaving and where they were going. Adding further detail to *The Tryon Graphic's* notice of the number of young men leaving from Loup County in May of 1933, the *Taylor Clarion* reported: "The boys chosen from Loup County for the reforestation work are now at Fort Crook, being put in condition for the summer work. They are Eldon Roblyer, Carl Clay and Edward Elliott."⁷¹⁴ Roblyer, Clay, and Elliott were but only the first of many Sandhills boys who proudly served in Roosevelt's CCC.

In areas of the western Sandhills, young men who joined the Conservation Corps were sent to Fort Robinson instead of Fort Crook. In mid-May, ten young men from Garden County were among those who arrived at the former. The *Garden County News* wrote of their departure: "Upon short notice the boys from this county made hurried preparations and left early Tuesday morning for Ft. Robinson, near Crawford, where they were to take the required army regulation medical examination before being inducted into the federal reforestation service. Their first notice was to go to North Platte for examination when notified to do so, but this order was changed late Monday. We are informed that the boys

⁷¹³ *The Tryon Graphic*, May 18, 1933, 1

⁷¹⁴ *Taylor Clarion*, May 25, 1933, 1

will receive about two weeks training at Ft. Robinson and then will be taken to some forest section where they will work on timber projects.”⁷¹⁵ In Cherry County, most enrollees were also sent to Fort Robinson for induction. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of the county’s first CCC departures in May 1933: “The Cherry county quota for this first enrollment is twenty-one...It is likely that all Cherry county recruits will go to Ft. Robinson for conditioning before being transferred to the camps. Those selected should prepare themselves to be ready to go between now and the first of June.”⁷¹⁶ The program was a positive and somewhat profitable experience for many of the CCC participants. Due to this, many Sandhills CCC members re-enrolled in October when their original six month enlistments expired. Those who did not supposedly did so because of better alternatives caused by a rebounding economy. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of the reasons for not re-enlisting: “Many of them went to work in the sugar factories in the western part of the state. It is reported that 37,000 boys in the United States returned to their homes to take jobs, which leads to believe that employment conditions are improving.”⁷¹⁷ Such reports led to further support of FDR.

Despite the departures of many young men, there were always others to take their place. For the rest of the Great Depression, Sandhills’ counties had enough young men to fill the quotas required of them. In early-November 1933, the *Rock County Leader* reported: “Howard Bennett, Clarence Whitcomb, Elmer Schubert, and John Stahl left Wednesday for O’Neill to take their examination for entrance into the government conservation camps...This makes a total of five Rock county boys called for conservation work this

⁷¹⁵ *Garden County News*, May 18, 1933, 1

⁷¹⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, May 12, 1933, 1

⁷¹⁷ *Sheridan County Star*, October 12, 1933, 1

fall.”⁷¹⁸ As 1933 turned into 1934 the Federal Government continued to solicit quotas from all Sandhills counties. In January 1934, Sheridan County sent ten young men (Phil Dotson, Perry Nelson, Orlan Harris, Leonard Clements, Jimmie Edmunds, John Huckins, Edward Clausen, Ralph Watson, Floyd Froshman, and Allen Ballard) to the CCC camp at Chadron State Park in the northwestern panhandle.⁷¹⁹ In comparison, two months later, the quota for Arthur County was only two boys while Brown County required five.⁷²⁰ Thus, not all counties’ quotas were entirely similar. Establishing quotas was largely based on how many had applied from a said county. Many of the enlistees who were enrolled were to be sent to camps in Nebraska found in Knox, Garden, Johnson, and Otoe counties as well as at the Nebraska National Forest.⁷²¹ Within two weeks, Cecil Valentine and Verl Smith were sent to Fort Crook to meet Arthur County’s quota.⁷²² As spring turned to summer, the Federal Government was again requesting four more enlistees from Arthur and twelve more from Sheridan, of which Sheridan quickly filled and sent to Fort Robinson.⁷²³

And so it went for the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Nebraska Sandhills during the 1930s. Requests for quotas could come at any time and varied depending on need. In 1935, quotas were increased in several of the larger Sandhills counties. For instance, in early- June of 1935, Garden County Federal Emergency Relief Act Director E. O. Richards requested seventeen more young men for the CCC.⁷²⁴ The *Garden County News* wrote of the tasks they were to complete: “The boys selected will be required to report at Gering on

⁷¹⁸ *Rock County Leader*, November 2, 1933, 1

⁷¹⁹ *Sheridan County Star*, January 11, 1934, 1

⁷²⁰ *The Arthur Enterprise*, March 15, 1934, 3; *Brown County Democrat*, March 30, 1934, 1

⁷²¹ *Brown County Democrat*, March 30, 1934, 1

⁷²² *The Arthur Enterprise*, April 5, 1934, 2

⁷²³ *The Arthur Enterprise*, June 21, 1934, 2; *Sheridan County Star*, July 12, 1934, 1

⁷²⁴ *Garden County News*, June 6, 1935, 1

June 17th between the hours of 8 and 11 a. m. The boys will be sent to the various camps from there and will be used in soil erosion and tree planting work.”⁷²⁵ Two weeks later, fourteen more Sheridan County young men filled the county’s newest quota and went to Fort Robinson where they signed onto the Corps for thirteen months.⁷²⁶ Most of these requests for large quotas were due to the fact that the national necessity for CCC projects and the required subsequent enrollments had reached its zenith. Maher, describing the average CCC workload and the program’s importance in the mid-1930s wrote: “Each year, individual enrollees thus worked 2,080 hours, meaning that between August 1935 and mid-1936, when the New Deal program reached its peak strength of 520,000 enrollees, the CCC supervised more than 1 billion hours of enrollee labor.”⁷²⁷ In its first three years the Nebraska CCC did not waste these working hours as it contributed significant improvements to the state. In that period the organization improved 216,312 acres of land that had eroded or were susceptible to erosion, planted 5,050,000 trees in forests, planted 7,344,000 trees in eroded gullies, and built 207,834 rods of fence.⁷²⁸ While not able to repair all of the environmental damage caused by the drought, the efforts of the CCC went a long way towards uplifting and providing a new sense of societal self-worth for Sandhillers, and Nebraskans in general, through the progressive improvements they were able to successfully implement during this period of economic malaise.

As the 1930s wore on, CCC quotas were still a part of daily life for many Sandhillers; however, the quotas began to lessen in number. By 1938, the required quotas for the

⁷²⁵ *Garden County News*, June 6, 1935, 1

⁷²⁶ *Sheridan County Star*, June 20, 1935, 1

⁷²⁷ Maher, *Nature’s New Deal*, 84

⁷²⁸ Heather M. Wilson, “A Brief History of the Civilian Conservation Corps in Nebraska,” June 10, 1985, U. S. Civilian Conservation Corps Collection, RG 1491.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

Sandhills region and the state of Nebraska, in general, were substantially less than what they had been at the CCC's outset in 1933. In January of 1938, only two young men from Garden County, Ivan Brown and Dan Yotty, enrolled in the CCC and later in September the quota was also only two for Brown County to meet the state's reduced overall quota of six-hundred sixty-two.⁷²⁹ By the summer of 1940, the state wide quota remained low in comparison to what it had been in 1933. By late-June of 1940, the entire quota for the state of Nebraska was only 640 men.⁷³⁰ By 1940, some Sandhills counties had trouble meeting their quotas as, due to the growing war in Europe and the increased militarization of the Japanese Empire in the Pacific, potential enrollees were concerned that the CCC was actually a means for induction into the United States military. Historian R. Douglas Hurt wrote of the shared attitude on the Great Plains regarding the growing specter of another global war: "...the Great Plains had a well-known reputation for supporting isolationism by the time Germany, Italy, and Japan began threatening world peace during the 1930s...the men and women who lived in the northern Great Plains expressed an overwhelming sentiment for isolationism, including the variations of noninterventionism and neutrality...Like most Americans, they favored trade with other nations, but nothing more. Few plains men and women believed that the United States had any obligation to become involved in international affairs, and certainly not foreign wars."⁷³¹ These feelings were apparent in McPherson County as *The Tryon Graphic* had to remind readers that: "It should be emphasized that the Civilian Conservation Corps is not in any respect a military project. The machinery of the United States Army is used to some extent because it provides the most convenient method of

⁷²⁹ *Garden County News*, January 13, 1938, 1; *Brown County Democrat*, September 29, 1938, 1

⁷³⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 27, 1940, 1

⁷³¹ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1,3

administering certain phases of this large program. A man does not enlist in the army when he enrolls. The CCC enrollee remains a civilian throughout his entire term of service.”⁷³²

The CCC’s enrollments continued to decline during the first half of 1941, when only five boys from Garfield County were requested to report to the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey and only three young men from Rock County, Harold Gale, Daile Richards, and Mervin Buoy, were called into CCC service.⁷³³

In 1941, the CCC also changed some of its long standing requirements in order to attract more enrollees. The *Rock County Leader* wrote of these changes in priority:

At the time the CCC was started in 1933 its program was based on three principal objectives- to supply work and relief to those unemployed and in want; to conserve and develop (sic) the natural resources; to train for competence in self-support unemployed and untrained young men who were without other suitable opportunity for work or training. At the present time these three objectives in the order of urgency must be stated in precisely the reverse order; that is to say, the present most urgent objective is the training of untrained and unemployed young men.⁷³⁴

CCC recruits were now encouraged to join not out of a personal obligation to help one’s family but instead for the fact that they could gain practical experience in truck driving, road construction, welding, woodwork, soil conservation, forestry, and vehicle repair.⁷³⁵

Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Civilian Conservation Corps’ priorities changed once again. It was now to aid in the war effort whenever possible. *The Stapleton Enterprise* wrote of recruitment efforts in Logan County in February 1942:

The new Victory Program of the National C. C. C. Camps will be conducted along the lines listed below, according to an announcement by Miss Ruth Peterson, county assistance director. 1. Aid in war work construction. 2. War resource protection, and development of natural resources, which are indispensable (sic) to a nation in time of war. 3. And while engaged in both of these wartime work

⁷³² *The Tryon Graphic*, June 27, 1940, 1

⁷³³ *The Burwell Tribune*, March 27, 1941, 1; *Rock County Leader*, June 5, 1941, 1

⁷³⁴ *Rock County Leader*, June 5, 1941, 1

⁷³⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, March 27, 1941, 1

programs, the young men in the corps being trained and physically conditioned for every emergency.⁷³⁶

In short, the CCC now became the extension of the United States Military that the people of the Great Plains and the Sandhills had feared less than two years earlier. Ironically, the Civilian Conservation Corps was one of the first casualties for the United States following its entry into World War II as young American men were now required to leave to fight fascism instead of economic depression. Maher mused of the CCC's final days: "...representatives in Congress made numerous speeches opposing funding for the continuation of the Corps on the grounds that a dwindling number of young men were signing up for the New Deal program during the early 1940s, that a rising number of enrollees were leaving the CCC for work in the private sector, and most important that the Corps was using up manpower and federal funds that should be employed instead for the war effort."⁷³⁷ By the end of 1942, the requests for enrollees for the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Nebraska Sandhills, as well as elsewhere, had long fallen silent. Nonetheless, this did not mean that this unique Federal program did not have a significant impact on the region during the Depression's peak in the 1930s.

During the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps was instrumental in bringing specific environmental improvements and much needed income to the Sandhills. In its earliest days, one of the Corp's major functions was forestry and conservation. Hurt wrote of the CCC's duties: "Across the Great Plains, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) hired young men to plant trees, built shelters in city parks, and assisted the Soil Conservation Service and local farmers."⁷³⁸ In later years the Corps was also utilized to build dams in the

⁷³⁶ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, February 19, 1942, 1

⁷³⁷ Maher, *Nature's New Deal*, 212

⁷³⁸ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* (Tucson: The University of

western United States. Kenneth Hendrickson, Jr., wrote of the Corp's accomplishments in nearby South Dakota: "One of the most spectacular projects was the Lake of the Pines dam in the Black Hills, which, at 850 feet in length, was the largest construction project ever completed by the Corps."⁷³⁹ In North Dakota, the CCC was heavily utilized in constructing parks. Hendrickson, Jr., wrote of North Dakota's CCC contributions: "Among their most enduring projects were the improvements in the International Peace Garden, Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, Theodore Roosevelt State Park [now Theodore Roosevelt National Park], and municipal parks in Fargo and Grand Forks."⁷⁴⁰ Throughout the Great Plains, the Civilian Conservation Corps completed projects that revitalized the region's infrastructure and reinvigorated people's spirits.

In Nebraska in the spring of 1933, the burgeoning Corps simply sought to provide adequate work. The CCC commonly participated in forestation projects; however, for Sandhills CCC boys this was not a possibility. The *Brown County Democrat* reported in its April 21st, 1933, issue, under the heading "No Reforestation Work in Nebraska:" "State Tax Commissioner Smith, upon his return from Washington, announced that Nebraska projects have been ruled out by the federal government from the reforestation work for unemployment, but that the state's quota of 2,750 men will be assembled probably at federal military forts in the state and will be sent outside the state to work."⁷⁴¹ One such enrollee was Richard Lewis of Holt County. Lewis was one of the first Sandhills enrollees to be sent

Arizona Press, 2011), 98

⁷³⁹ Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "The Civilian Conservation Corps in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* Vol. 11, No. 1, (Winter 1980): 17, U. S. Civilian Conservation Corps Collection, RG 1491.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

⁷⁴⁰ Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "Relief for Youth: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration in North Dakota," *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* Vol. 48, No. 4 (Fall, 1981): 18, U. S. Civilian Conservation Corps Collection, RG 1491.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

⁷⁴¹ *Brown County Democrat*, April 21, 1933, 1

to Oregon in 1933. He wrote a letter to his parents detailing his new arrival: “There is a river about 100 yards east of camp. It is full of trout and salmon. One guy caught five last night... We are twelve miles from the Pacific. I’m going to walk over some Sunday. A ranger told me that there are more black bear and cougar here than any place around.”⁷⁴² By joining the CCC Sandhills boys gained new insights and world experiences that proved just as valuable as any limited stipend they were able to earn for their endeavors.



(Row of CCC tents at Camp Niobrara in Cherry County in the 1930s. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG1491.)

The distance many young Sandhills men had to travel to go to CCC camp changed a few months later when a CCC reforestation camp was established near Chadron, outside of

⁷⁴² *The History Of South Holt County And Chambers Area*, 1967, 33-34

the Sandhills northwestern boundary, on the Pine Ridge. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of the observations of two Blaine County locals who passed through that area in early-August: “While at Chadron last week, Mrs. Salleng and Mrs. Winter had an opportunity to visit the Nebraska Reforestation Camp, located at the State Park, 10 miles south of Chadron, where there were 195 boys stationed. Their work consists of building roads, trimming trees, and building new cabins.”⁷⁴³ By March 1934, the CCC was openly recruiting boys who wanted to help with forest work. The *Hooker County Tribune* proclaimed in its March 8th, 1934, issue: “There has been a number of boys from Hooker county in the service for several months and they are well pleased with everything in connection with it. Boys who would like to enlist as ‘tree planters’ are advised to make themselves known to either T. L. McCully or W. R. Boyer, who with the Tribune editor are members of the local committee.”⁷⁴⁴ These “tree planters” had a significant impact on environmental conservation efforts within the Sandhills in places such as the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey; however, many projects did not all revolve around trees. Some dealt with grassland and game preservation. One Sandhills county that was greatly affected by the agency’s involvement in the latter was Cherry.

⁷⁴³ *Blaine County Booster*, August 10, 1933, 4

⁷⁴⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, March 8, 1934, 1



(Line of CCC workers at Camp Niobrara in Cherry County possibly lining up for food or pay, ca. mid-1930s. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, RG1491.)

Between 1933 and 1936, the CCC labored extensively on conservation projects in Cherry County, primarily the Niobrara Game Preserve. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of the CCC's accomplishments in the county in its April 24th, 1936, issue:

During these three years the CCC have been able to develop the refuge so that it can accomplish that for which it was intended. They have made the Niobrara Preserve a general wildlife refuge, as well as a big game sanctuary. It is safe to say the triple 'C' has advanced the development of this preserve twenty years ahead of anything which might have been possible in the ordinary course of events. Without the Emergency Conservation Program much of the work would not have been possible, and our wildlife resources would have suffered accordingly. Perhaps the most important development accomplished by the CCC over the past three years was the construction of twenty-one dams, well distributed over the preserve. These dams create ponds of from one-fourth acre to five acres in size. Most of them are spring fed and open the year round. These ponds serve as water holes for the buffalo, antelope, elk, and other big game on the area, and for migratory waterfowl use. Sixteen of these ponds have been fenced to keep out big game animals, and to encourage the nesting of upland game birds and waterfowl. Aquatic feeds were planted in these ponds. Other important and invaluable developments include the construction of many miles of big game fence, construction of corrals, . . . Trees and shrubs

were planted in numbers for feed and cover for game birds and as windbreaks...An excellent well-watered nursery was laid out. Fire guards were made and a lookout tower erected. Several auxiliary buildings were erected to facilitate the operation of the preserve. Many miles of truck and horse trails were constructed to make the preserve accessible.⁷⁴⁵

In June of 1936, the CCC camp at the Niobrara Preserve welcomed University of Nebraska students who specialized in soil conservation and botany.⁷⁴⁶ While there, these new CCC recruits collected and studied grasses, weeds, shrubs, examined water wildlife, and made maps of soil types endemic to the northern Sandhills.⁷⁴⁷ Beyond conservation aid and environmental studies, the CCC camp at the Niobrara Preserve was significant for also contributing income to the local businessmen of Valentine. In this regard there was no debate amongst locals over the camp's value and importance. When the entire camp contingent was transferred to Fairbury, in the southeastern corner of Nebraska, in late-1936, the people of Valentine lamented its passing for economic reasons. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of the camp's closure: "Altogether, the camp has distributed considerable money in Valentine, and its passing will be regretted. Whether the camp will be used again for this purpose is a matter for conjecture only."⁷⁴⁸ Fortunately, for Valentine residents they did receive another CCC troop this time located at Hackberry Lake. However, three years later, Valentine citizens were once again disappointed as the CCC camp was transferred to a new location near Bayard in the Nebraska Panhandle.⁷⁴⁹ Once again, Valentine residents were concerned over the impact on their wallets. *The Republican* reminisced in early-October 1939: "Valentine has had one or two camps near the town, with the exception of one summer, for six years, and feels that it has had a lucky break, as the camps left considerable

⁷⁴⁵ *The Valentine Republican*, April 24, 1936, 1

⁷⁴⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, June 19, 1936, 1

⁷⁴⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, June 19, 1936, 1

⁷⁴⁸ *The Valentine Republican*, November 27, 1936, 1

⁷⁴⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, October 6, 1939, 1

money here, altogether.”⁷⁵⁰ From these examples it is apparent that the CCC was useful as a tool for Sandhills’ environmental improvements but also provided a source of economic stability for pragmatic Sandhills’ businessmen.



(Camp Niobrara, Cherry County, Nebraska, ca. mid-1930s. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG1491.)

Beyond making improvements on reserved areas around Valentine, the CCC also played a major role in revitalization efforts at the Nebraska National Forest in Halsey. Around the same time as the CCC group at Valentine was being transferred to Fairbury, the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the recent work the Corps was engaged in at Halsey:

⁷⁵⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, October 6, 1939, 1

Because of the expansion of Bessey Nursery during the past few years, it has become necessary to construct several new buildings at the headquarters site. A modern building for extraction of seed from cones is just being completed as is a new building for storage of freshly gathered seed. The enrollees engaged in construction work will next construct a new garage for housing of the additional motor equipment which is now needed on the Forest. Their next job will be to construct a modern building to house the Forest light plant and the headquarter's (sic) fire fighting equipment. After this the construction crew will build a storage shed in which to keep the additional road equipment now required on the Forest...Additional work is being done in the matter of further beautification of the Bessey Picnic Ground which was enjoyed by visitors from all points in the state last summer. Extensive landscaping is in progress, including the planting of additional trees and shrubs on the area which will serve to make the grounds even more attractive than last year to the host of visitors who are expected on the forest next summer.⁷⁵¹

As at the Niobrara Preserve near Valentine, the CCC boys at the Nebraska National Forest played the more important role of Sandhills environmental conservationist, instead of construction worker or landscaper, and in particular at Halsey, tree planter. Robert Gardner wrote of their important role at the Nebraska National Forest during the Depression: "While planting sometimes offered local ranchers seasonal employment, usually the foresters had a difficult time finding high quality, trained workers...from 1933 to 1942, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided an ideal labor force. Besides planting trees, they built roads, buildings, and a very popular swimming pool."⁷⁵² Thus, most Sandhillers, no matter political affiliation, viewed the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression as an entity that filled an important niche in the region that they alone could not handle: forester in a sea of sand.

⁷⁵¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 25, 1936, 1

⁷⁵² Robert Gardner, "Constructing a Technological Forest: Nature, Culture, and Tree-Planting in the Nebraska Sand Hills," *Environmental History* 14, No. 2 (April 2009): 289-290



(Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge CCC Camp near Mumper, Nebraska, summer 1934. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG1574.)

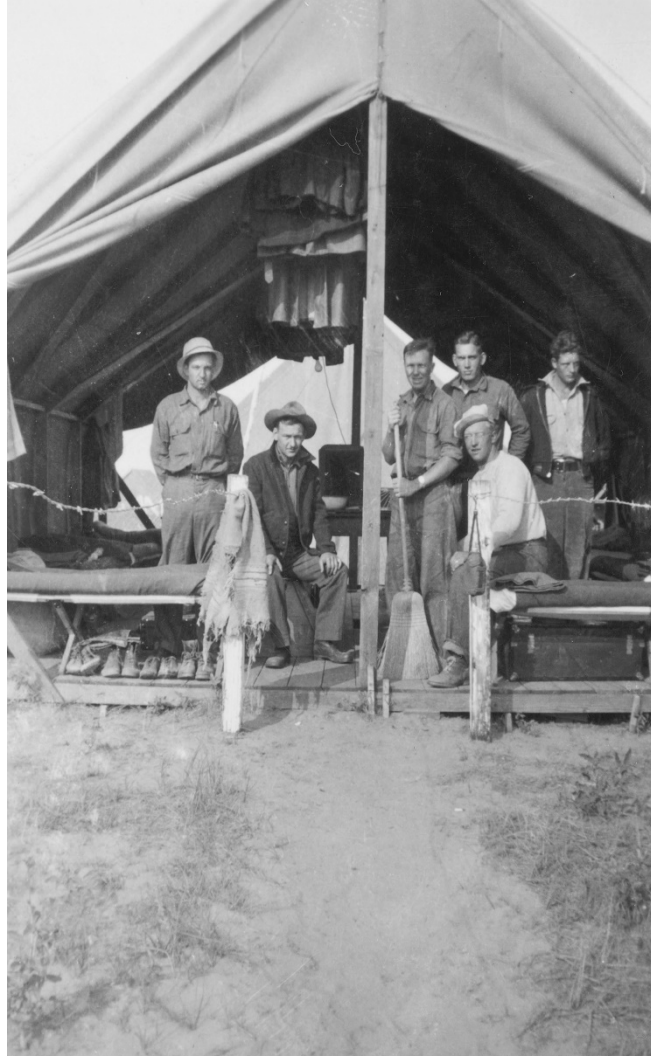
The third major Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the Sandhills was at Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Garden County. The site for a refuge in western Nebraska was chosen in 1930. The *Garden County News* reported of an additional land purchase for the refuge in early-December 1931: “Game Warden Frank B. O’Connell, now in Washington, recently advised Governor Bryan of the purchase of 1600 additional acres by the federal government for the Garden County federal game preserve. Including several lakes, the original purchase of a year ago was approximately 40,000 acres.”⁷⁵³ Two years later, the refuge was fully functioning as a preserve for western Nebraska’s wild birds. The *News* reported of the conditions at the refuge in early-August 1933: “...Bill Krummes, supervisor of the Crescent Lake Game Bird Refuge, was town the latter part of the week. He tells us that there has been an exceptional hatching and maturing of water fowl in the refuge this year and that he believes there are twice the native ducks there this year than there were a

⁷⁵³ *Garden County News*, December 10, 1931, 1

year ago.”⁷⁵⁴ In 1934, CCC Company 762 was stationed at a tent camp set up at the refuge. Charles E. Humberger was a CCC enrollee stationed at the camp that year and wrote of camp life: “With the exception of volleyball and horseshoe pitching, there was little offered for recreation. However, Crescent and nearby Island Lakes provided excellent fishing for crappie, bullheads, perch and bluegills, and there were some grand fish fries in the mess hall...On Saturday evenings enrollees were transported in open cargo trucks to Alliance or Oshkosh where they would attend movies, dances or seek out other forms of entertainment and amusement...Some of us became friends of neighboring ranchers and were privileged to be invited to their homes for a hearty meal.”⁷⁵⁵ Through this interaction, enrollees developed strong bonds with themselves, neighboring Sandhillers, and the land.

⁷⁵⁴ *Garden County News*, August 10, 1933, 1

⁷⁵⁵ Charles E. Humberger, “Memoirs of Company 762,” 9-10, Charles E. Humberger Collection, MS1574, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska



(Charles E. Humberger and fellow CCC enrollees in a tent at the CCC camp at Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, summer 1934. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, RG1574.)

Young men from the Sandhills who enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps received other benefits than that of learning a strong work ethic, an education, or how to tend the region's rare forests and preserves. Unlike contemporaries their own age who joined the United States military, they were allowed to return home to family and friends on a regular basis. Many came home on weekends like the average college student if they were fortunate enough to be assigned to a camp in Nebraska close enough in proximity to where they were from. Several individuals from Garden County did just that in the summer of 1933. In early

June, Fay McGuire, Robert Pelton, Clifford Scott, Royal Conklin, Roy Albee, Eugene Greenlee, William Reische, Frank Riley, and Vernon King made the trip home to Garden County from Fort Robinson to be with family.⁷⁵⁶ Reische, Riley, Scott, Greenlee, Conklin, Albee, and McGuire traveled home again in September to spend additional time with their families over the Labor Day holiday.⁷⁵⁷ CCC boys from the Hyannis area in Grant County made similar journeys in the latter half of 1935. For instance, in early-June of 1935, Buster Fields was stationed at a CCC camp at Albion but was able to come home the first weekend in June to visit his parents, Mr. and Mrs. S. A. Fields.⁷⁵⁸ Likewise, Hyannis boys who learned how to plant trees at the National Forest in Halsey, Timothy Barnes and Jess Bartlett, came home to visit their parents in early-November.⁷⁵⁹ Bartlett returned home again around Christmas with Gerald Yobey to be with family.⁷⁶⁰ Trips home by enrollees who worked nearby were still common during the Civilian Conservation Corp's final days. In early-February 1940, Keith Rittenhouse traveled home to Loup County for the weekend from his post at the CCC camp at the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey.⁷⁶¹ Closeness to family also allowed parents to visit their sons if they were unable to make it home to them. Mr. and Mrs. Luther Pierce of the Burwell area in Garfield County were two such doting parents when in late-November 1935 they visited their son, Leland, at a Corps camp at Nenzel.⁷⁶² Frequent contact with family reinforced Sandhills CCC enrollees' connections to the Sandhills region but also reminded them of why they were toiling as foresters, road builders,

⁷⁵⁶ *Garden County News*, June 15, 1933, 1

⁷⁵⁷ *Garden County News*, September 7, 1933, 1

⁷⁵⁸ *Grant County Tribune*, June 12, 1935, 4

⁷⁵⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, November 13, 1935, 4

⁷⁶⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, December 25, 1935, 4

⁷⁶¹ *Taylor Clarion*, February 8, 1940, 1

⁷⁶² *The Burwell Tribune*, December 5, 1935, 4

and carpenters. Trips home also allowed them to still help out on the ranch or farm in a limited fashion if their families were rural Sandhills agriculturalists.

For many young Sandhills CCC men, joining the Corps also had the opposite effect as it exposed them to new places and experiences far from home. One such individual was Elmer Morrell of Arthur. *The Arthur Enterprise* reported on Morrell's experiences in its January 4th, 1934, issue:

Mr. and Mrs. Roy Morrell received a letter this week from their son, Elmer, who is in CCC work out at Roseberg, Oregon. The greater part of his letter was taken up with a description of a trip to the coast which the boys took at Christmas time. On this trip he saw the ocean for the first time and was much impressed at the sight of a ship at sea. Among other things of interest to him were the light house, which the boys were permitted to climb via the spiral stairway, the seals which he said reminded him of sheep heads, and the redwood forest through which they drove on their way back to the camp. Roseberg, where he is stationed, is about 130 miles from Portland. He likes his work and has signed up for another six months.⁷⁶³

Experiences such as those had by Morrell helped Sandhills CCC enrollees understand that there were different American regions beyond their sandy borders that were no less beautiful or important to American agriculture or business than their own, nor less impervious to the impacts of the Great Depression. In short, the CCC served as a gateway for some young Sandhills males to experience broader aspects of American culture and hopefully gain an appreciation and respect for other Americans who hailed from other areas beyond their own insulated, regional borders.

As previously mentioned, the Civilian Conservation Corps also provided young Sandhills men with an opportunity to earn a small wage. Some did in fact receive pay increases based on performance. Three such fortunate men were from Garden County. The *Garden County News* wrote of the good fortune of Eugene Greenlee, William Rieshe, and William King in late-1933: "Eugene Greenlee was promoted to leader at a salary of \$45.00

⁷⁶³ *The Arthur Enterprise*, January 4, 1934, 1

per month, and is the youngest in the group receiving more than the allotted \$30.00 per month. William Rieshe, formerly of Lewellen, was advanced to assistant leader, at a salary of \$36.00 per month...William King of Lewellen...\$36.00 per month...”⁷⁶⁴ In some instances, the CCC allowed not only young men enlisted in its program to improve their professional status, but also those who were loosely affiliated with it. One such individual was Reverend W. M. Daubenspeck of Oshkosh. The *Garden County News* wrote of Daubenspeck’s opportunity to spread the word of God outside of Oshkosh: “Some time ago Rev. W. M. Daubenspeck received an appointment as a reserve chaplain in the CCC department but declined to have any publicity made of the matter pending being called into service. A couple of weeks ago he was notified that there was a vacancy to be filled and was asked if he could report at once if called. His reply was in the affirmative. Last Friday he received word to report at Ft. Crook on December 9th for an assignment some place in the state and he will leave the last of this week for that place...This appointment means that Rev. Daubenspeck will devote his entire time to the boys in various camps in a territory to which he is assigned...”⁷⁶⁵ Thus, the benefit of the CCC not only offered some limited avenues at personal advancement for its young Sandhills men if they worked hard enough but also for individuals who could serve a unique niche within the Corps, such as Daubenspeck. In this regard, the Civilian Conservation Corp’s central message of hope and helping Sandhillers feel useful again applied across demographics. This was a positive message that appealed to many as evidenced by the aforementioned numerous young men who joined the CCC from across the Sandhills.

⁷⁶⁴ *Garden County News*, December 21, 1933, 1

⁷⁶⁵ *Garden County News*, December 5, 1935, 1

Times did not always go smoothly for the CCC in the Sandhills. The camps at Halsey and near Valentine experienced their share of heartache, especially during the program's later years. In early- August 1937, the CCC camp at Hackberry Lake, near Valentine, suffered extensive damage to two of its buildings due to fire caused by lightning.⁷⁶⁶ The damage was estimated at costing the CCC anywhere between \$4,000.00 and \$5,000.00.⁷⁶⁷ In August of 1940, fire was again a threat to the CCC in the Sandhills. *The Stapleton Enterprise* wrote of a fire that damaged the Nebraska National Forest in Halsey in late-July 1940: "Fourteen separate fires set by lightning at the Nebraska National Forest, near Halsey Wednesday night, destroyed 150 acres of older trees and burned over 600 acres of grazing land...During most of the night more than 250 men were fighting the blazes. About 200 of these were forest service employees and boys from the CCC camp there, while fifty or sixty nearby residents were called in to assist...The fires over the entire area were under control at 5 a. m., after nearly eight hours of strenuous effort on the part of workers."⁷⁶⁸

Besides struggling to hold off natural disaster, the Sandhills CCC also experienced personal loss. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the sad passing of a CCC boy at Halsey in March of 1941 from apparently natural causes: "A young CCC Lieutenant, only 22, Morris Arbitman at Halsey, was found dead in bed last Saturday around 7 o'clock. He was a graduate of Creighton university, past president of the Round Table of Jewish Youth and of Phi Beta Epsilon social fraternity. He was a son of Mr. and Mrs. Max Arbitman of

⁷⁶⁶ *The Valentine Republican* in the *Brown County Democrat*, August 6, 1937, 1

⁷⁶⁷ *The Valentine Republican* in the *Brown County Democrat*, August 6, 1937, 1

⁷⁶⁸ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, August 1, 1940, 1

Omaha.”⁷⁶⁹ While Arbitman’s death was tragic and unexpected, it once again is an example of cultural interchange amongst young Americans precipitated by the CCC. Sandhillers did not just travel to other areas of the state or far away to the Pacific Northwest, city boys also came to the Sandhills. Despite these tragedies and setbacks, the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Sandhills served an overall positive and useful role through the building and road improvements it made in forests and preserves, its conservation efforts in these places, and the cultural interchanges it led to among young CCC enrollees. Other New Deal programs helped provide jobs for unemployed Sandhillers, improved Sandhills infrastructure, and helped shift Sandhills society away from a “frontier” image and towards a more modern one. Two such impactful programs were the Civil Works Administration and the Public Works Administration.

Providing Work and Infrastructure: The Legacy of the CWA and PWA in the Sandhills

In the fall of 1933, rampant unemployment was still a considerable problem for the American people. In early-September, Garfield County alone registered 297 people as unemployed in the county.⁷⁷⁰ All of these people but forty-seven were from Garfield County.⁷⁷¹ Less than a year later, the employment situation remained tight in Lincoln and Keith counties as there was now 2,621 unemployed in Lincoln and 700 in Keith.⁷⁷² People who did not live there were requested to stay away if they were looking for work as the unemployment figures were supposed to improve with the establishment of the Sutherland Project, a reclamation project which was to employ individuals from North Platte and

⁷⁶⁹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, March 12, 1941, 1

⁷⁷⁰ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 7, 1933, 4

⁷⁷¹ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 7, 1933, 4

⁷⁷² *The Burwell Tribune*, May 24, 1934, 1

Ogallala.⁷⁷³ Times were tough and people did not remain idle. Michael Golay wrote of the situation in western Nebraska that Roosevelt disciple Lorena Hickok uncovered in 1933:

Problems were most acute in the sprawling, sparsely settled western counties; one covered 9,500 square miles. In some districts out there, Hickok told Hopkins, the relief rolls contained only two or three families, and not because most western Nebraskans were holding their own. Grasshoppers and drought had hit the western regions hard. Keeney, the state farmers' union head, predicted that relief applications would spike in the west as Hopkins's Civil Works Administration gained momentum. 'Those fellows don't like to go on the county,' Keeney said. 'They'll almost starve first. What they want is jobs.' The jobs would be coming and soon.⁷⁷⁴

In order to fight this intrinsic unemployment enemy and provide jobs Roosevelt created more New Deal programs beyond just the Civilian Conservation Corps. These new programs accepted all who were unemployed, no matter their age, and gave them a chance for work on federally endorsed projects. One such program was the aforementioned Civil Works Administration. Edsforth wrote of the program's origins and purpose: "On November 9, 1933, FDR issued an executive order creating the Civil Works Administration (CWA). CWA demonstrated Hopkins' ability to quickly mobilize the resources of the federal government. Financed with the unspent balances of other relief programs and administered by federal relief officials already in place in the states, Hopkins had 1,500,000 unemployed people enrolled in CWA construction projects by the end of the month."⁷⁷⁵ Designed to be an impermanent, economy boosting measure, the Civil Works Administration employed millions of Americans in the winter of 1933-1934 who only months earlier had been near starvation. Historian T. H. Watkins wrote of its fast growth and national popularity: "By the height of the CWA effort in the middle of January, a shade more than the promised four million were in fact working, with a payroll of more than \$62 million spent on thousands of projects, among them the construction and repair of highways and roads, bridges, schools,

⁷⁷³ *The Burwell Tribune*, May 24, 1931, 1

⁷⁷⁴ Michael Golay, *America 1933: The Great Depression, Lorena Hickok, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Shaping of the New Deal* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 178

⁷⁷⁵ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 160

parks and playgrounds, hospitals, airports, flood control facilities, privies, and other public works. Overall, the program was enormously popular, and when the original allocation was gone, Hopkins went to the president and the president went to the Congress, and Congress, with an eye on the 1934 elections, provided another \$950 million, \$450 million to be used to carry the CWA through a phasing-down period, the rest to be used to finance continuing FERA programs.”⁷⁷⁶ One such region that received a sufficient share of CWA funds and jobs was the Nebraska Sandhills.

By late-November 1933, the benefits of the Civil Works Administration were finally being seen in the Sandhills. Petitions were immediately put forth for funds for many useful projects in many counties. One way CWA funds were used was to improve community main and side streets. Architecture Professor Gabrielle Esperdy wrote of the effect that such improvements had on Americans, in general, during the Depression-era: “Most of the money was spent on exterior renovations, especially new facades attached to the fronts of existing buildings. These ‘modernized’ storefronts were usually fabricated of such machine-age materials as structural glass, enameled steel, glass blocks, and extruded aluminum. On Main Streets where breadlines and forgotten men were all too familiar, these storefronts offered a striking counterpoint, an image of modernity that was deliberately at odds with the dismal present because it symbolized a hopeful future.”⁷⁷⁷ Street improvements had been common projects in urban areas even prior to the Great Depression. One such city was Manhattan. Donald L. Miller wrote of improvement plans, Thomas Adams had for Manhattan in the early-1930s: “Adams and his fellow planners also suggested a parkway and major

⁷⁷⁶ T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston and New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 126-127

⁷⁷⁷ Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3

beautification program for the Hudson shoreline north of the main dockage and rail facilities of the New York Central Railroad, a project Moses had unveiled in 1930.⁷⁷⁸ While many buildings were not renovated and Sandhills communities were not as vast and wealthy as the nation's urban metropolises, Sandhillers did support and share the idea of improving their streets so that their communities no longer appeared as just frontier hamlets, but also as modern American towns. While they may not have been fancy like Manhattan, Sandhills communities did not have to remain frozen in time on Frederick Jackson Turner's 19th century frontier.

In Brown County alone, multiple project funds were suggested and sought for: grading community streets, painting public buildings, repairing culverts, and cleaning up ditches.⁷⁷⁹ Street improvements had also been conducted in many Sandhills communities as a means to provide limited employment opportunities in the earliest days of the Depression. The *Garden County News* reported on the results of a street project and those employed in Oshkosh in early-May 1930: "A number of bad holes, have been filled in and the streets smoothed over, while shaped up according to grade. Several new sidewalks are being put in and the village is having a new cross walk built across the street from Ross Casey's to connect with the sidewalk from the east. Among those having put in new walks are Ed S. Wood, Ed S. Peterson, Leslie Twiford and Frank W. Longer."⁷⁸⁰ In late-May 1930, Tryon's leaders similarly prepared to make improvements on their main street in the form of three street lights and two intersection posts.⁷⁸¹ Nearly a year later, in March 1931, Valentine's

⁷⁷⁸ Donald L. Miller, *Supreme City: How Jazz Age Manhattan Gave Birth to Modern America* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 450

⁷⁷⁹ *Brown County Democrat*, December 1, 1933, 1

⁷⁸⁰ *Garden County News*, May 1, 1930, 1

⁷⁸¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, May 29, 1930, 1

community leaders also considered improving the town's main street and debated the installment of overhead lights as well as curbs and gutters.⁷⁸² Three months later, the Roberts Construction Company of Lincoln was prepared to start work on Valentine's main street.⁷⁸³ Under Roosevelt's CWA, further community street improvement projects were implemented to foster employment and thus aid in revitalizing both people and place.

Sandhillers also used available funds, as they had done under Hoover, to continue building up the region's rough transportation networks. During the early-1930s there was a renewed national interest in improving the nation's road system. Some U.S. government officials, senators, and congressman even sought funding appropriations for projects within their states that paid to employ their constituents in freeway building projects. Earl Swift wrote of the importance of the Federal Aid Highway Bill, which passed in 1934, to this goal: "Sponsored by Sen. Carl Hayden of Arizona and Rep. Wilburn Cartwright of Oklahoma, it contained a provision that set aside up to 1.5 percent of each state's Federal aid apportionment for highway planning and research."⁷⁸⁴ While the era of interstate development in Nebraska was years away yet, funding for regular paved highways nonetheless was a high priority during Roosevelt's first term. Sandhills' county governments did not reject such appropriation as it helped to counter their unemployment problem. In Hooker County, the unemployed were put to work on road projects during the program's earliest days. The *Hooker County Tribune* described the CWA's criteria for project funding, the work process, and projects underway in the county in late-November:

⁷⁸² *The Valentine Republican*, March 27, 1931, 1

⁷⁸³ *The Valentine Republican*, June 19, 1931, 1

⁷⁸⁴ Earl Swift, *The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2011), 116

Nebraska's quota for civil works was four million dollars and this was prorated among the counties on a basis of 75 per cent on population and 25 per cent based on the number of relief cases. Hooker county's quota was 19 men to work until about February 1. Civil works projects must be projects that will be of use to the general public and 90 per cent of the allotments must be for hand labor. District Engineer Eubank was in Mullen last Saturday and he is trying to get our quota raised to 50 men. The city has made application to surface twelve blocks and there is to be a county project north to the river and then the work on state highway No. 2. Men unemployed are urged to register at the county clerk's office. Chester Campbell has charge of the re-employment office. Twelve men worked on state highway No. 2 three days. Five men straightened a bend in the river just east of the bridge, work that will be needed to be done if our north and south highway is built...The county is furnishing a bus to take men to and from work and they must be on time or otherwise have to furnish their own transportation or be docked for being late. Marion Bullington is the foreman for the gang and F. W. Pool is time-keeper.⁷⁸⁵

CWA dollars in other Sandhills counties were also delegated to various road projects in November. This was considered a logical first applicable use of these funds as winter approached and many Sandhills roads were in dire need of improvement. In Sheridan County, CWA funding was approved for two road projects, one of which included the graveling and grading of the highway south of Rushville for six miles, and in McPherson County sixteen of the county's registered unemployed men began work on the road west of Tryon for \$0.40 an hour.⁷⁸⁶

The *Brown County Democrat* reported on similar opportunities for Brown County's unemployed in its November 24th, 1933, issue: "According to press dispatches from Lincoln, Brown county's job allotment is 101. Wednesday morning thirteen men were put to work on the road work- five from Ainsworth, four from Long Pine and four from Johnstown. The Ainsworth men were placed on Highways 7 and 20 making repairs."⁷⁸⁷ The *Grant County Tribune* similarly noted the county's road construction employment opportunities in early-December: "Grant county now has 14 men working on Highway No 2 and has 20 men at

⁷⁸⁵ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 30, 1933, 1

⁷⁸⁶ *Sheridan County Star*, November 30, 1933, 1; *The Tryon Graphic*, November 30, 1933, 1

⁷⁸⁷ *Brown County Democrat*, November 24, 1933, 1

work on Frye lake under Civil Works Projects...⁷⁸⁸ Morrill County roads also received much needed maintenance thanks to the CWA. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported in mid-November 1933: “Every day sees men being given employment on the highway project East of Bridgeport...already put more than 150 men to work at fair wages that has resulted in a pay roll of more than \$3000 per month being distributed here, and it is estimated that more than 200 men will be employed before the end of the month.”⁷⁸⁹ Two weeks later the newspaper’s report proved nearly prophetic as the *News- Blade* further reported: “Sixty men in Morrill county who were idle two weeks ago, and were on the relief rolls, are now at work earning living wages, having been taken off the relief by operation of the new CWA...These men are working on the highways of this community under direction of the State Highway department on projects that have been approved by the State board.”⁷⁹⁰ In Custer County, \$44,000.00 worth of CWA funds was granted to be used primarily on road improvements; however, the county was able to employ men on other smaller projects as well.⁷⁹¹ The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of projects being worked on by Custer County’s numerous unemployed in early- December:

Broken Bow opened up work on two projects Monday noon. Re-grading and planting the courthouse lawn, on which an alternating shift of 24 men are engaged in order to get the work out of the way before bad weather interrupts. The other projects which opened Monday is the widening and improvement of the Muddy Creek which runs through the city. Men employed on these projects were taken from the relief rolls of the county. A thirty hour week is in effect on these projects. Highway work is in progress on the Miller to Ansley road, Arnold, Sargent, Comstock, Mason City, Callaway. The road project at Anselmo has been completed sometime ago. So many men are on the relief rolls and on the registered unemployment list that the work will necessarily have to be divided as equally as possible in order that it go the full round.⁷⁹²

⁷⁸⁸ *Grant County Tribune*, December 6, 1933, 1

⁷⁸⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 16, 1933, 1

⁷⁹⁰ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 30, 1933, 1

⁷⁹¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, December 6, 1933, 2

⁷⁹² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, December 6, 1933, 2

By the end of the month, over four-hundred men were employed on these various projects within the county. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of how many were employed and what they were being paid: “Four hundred and sixteen men working on various Civil Works Administration projects in Custer county received a total payroll of \$5,592.70 Saturday. This sum was divided into 34 payrolls with 537 checks. The county total of 448 men will soon be on the payrolls.”⁷⁹³ Most other Sandhills counties experienced an influx of labor seekers as the winter wore on also.

Custer County was not alone in looking for other projects to fund beside road work. Sheridan County was also finding other positions that could be funded with CWA funds but unlike other counties, it offered them to a forgotten demographic: women. In December, Sheridan County allotted CWA funds for fifteen women who were qualified to be hired as librarians and teachers within the county.⁷⁹⁴ Later in the month it was announced that the total allotment set aside for these women was \$1,200.00 for a two month period.⁷⁹⁵ Despite Custer County’s efforts at December lawn landscaping and Sheridan County’s attempt at providing work to the county’s poor wives, mothers, and sisters, most Sandhills counties were still appropriating CWA funds for street and highway improvements before January 1934 dawned. In Garden County, the county’s unemployed began work on a total of five miles of Oshkosh’s city streets simultaneously while grading work was being done on Highway 27 north out of town and in Arthur County eighteen of the county’s fifty unemployed men began work fixing the highway south of Arthur to Ogallala and the

⁷⁹³ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, December 20, 1933, 2

⁷⁹⁴ *Sheridan County Star*, December 14, 1933, 1

⁷⁹⁵ *Sheridan County Star*, December 28, 1933, 1

highway east to Tryon.⁷⁹⁶ Like their Tryon contemporaries, they toiled for \$0.40 an hour.⁷⁹⁷ Concerns over frost and freezing temperatures sometimes led to counties finding alternate work for laborers and, if necessary, use of CWA funds. *The Tryon Graphic* noted such a possibility in McPherson County in mid-December: “Should the ground freeze up it is thought that the men will be put to work on highway repair. A little of this work can be done even though the ground is frozen. Substitute projects are being planned and the local CWA committee will seek to have them approved by the state committee so that other work will be ready in the event the road and highway work is held up for any length of time.”⁷⁹⁸

Despite attempts at finding alternate work by local county officials as December wore on, multiple CWA projects continued to be approved in the Sandhills that allotted funds primarily for road projects. In Brown County, the community of Long Pine received \$672.00 for county road work whereas the town of Johnstown was provided \$328.00 for street upkeep and the county seat of Ainsworth was given \$1,427.00 for work on schools, streets, and the community’s water lines.⁷⁹⁹ Likewise, Logan and Sheridan counties received additional road funding. Logan County’s CWA committee members, R. L. Walker, A. R. Ensign, and George Viehmeyer, traveled to Lincoln in late- November and received approval from the CWA State Committee for four road projects in Logan County, one of which required the surfacing of the road north and west of Stapleton into the Sandhills.⁸⁰⁰ In late-December, Sheridan County received \$1,000.00 to surface a mail route north of Ellsworth.⁸⁰¹ By the end of December 1933 many of the road projects had to temporarily shut down either from

⁷⁹⁶ *Garden County News*, December 7, 1933, 1; *The Arthur Enterprise*, December 14, 1933, 3

⁷⁹⁷ *The Arthur Enterprise*, December 14, 1933, 3

⁷⁹⁸ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 14, 1933, 1

⁷⁹⁹ *Brown County Democrat*, December 15, 1933, 1

⁸⁰⁰ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, December 21, 1933, 1

⁸⁰¹ *Sheridan County Star*, December 28, 1933, 1

funding issues or the weather. One project was the road running west from Tryon in McPherson County. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of why work was curtailed and the subsequent projects that would be offered instead to CWA workers:

Grading on the C. W. A. project west of town was stopped the first of the week following instructions received to that effect from the Dist. Engineer's office at North Platte. Now the stretch of road grade will be covered with hay or straw, this work being started this week... Two other C. W. A. projects will be started this week. A project to paint and calsomine the interior of the County High School... will be started as soon as materials arrive. This work should be underway before the last of the week. A project for the cleaning, painting and calsomining of the interior of the County Court house will also be started as soon as materials arrive. This project may not be started until the one at the high school is completed. The men for these two projects will be selected from the relief rolls and unemployed lists now in the office of the Re-employment committee. A project of highway repair will be started some time soon. Possibly not until warmer weather. We understand that the state department, who is in charge of this project, plans to work only a small crew.⁸⁰²

Thus, some Sandhills CWA road projects began to subside as 1934 dawned largely due to weather and bureaucratic issues. Despite these issues, Sandhillers did not take long in coming up with new ideas and ways to use Civil Works Administration funds.

In early-January 1934, Sandhills counties again requested and utilized CWA funds for a variety of projects. As Watkins alluded to, many such CWA requests were met throughout the country during January 1934. In Cherry County, projects employed men that were unrelated to roadwork. Near Valentine, three-hundred fifteen men were employed grading one of the airport's runways and surfacing it with clay as well as cleaning up the community's old metal dump which had been an eyesore near Highway 20.⁸⁰³ Later in January, many of the CWA projects were again geared to roadwork. By January 25th, 1934, Garden County maintained a total of five CWA projects, all of which were highway or street related in the county and in or near the towns of Oshkosh, Lisco, and Lewellen.⁸⁰⁴ Nebraska Sandhills road projects did not just employ locals but also attracted workers from out of state.

⁸⁰² *The Tryon Graphic*, December 28, 1933, 1

⁸⁰³ *The Valentine Republican*, January 19, 1934, 1

⁸⁰⁴ *Garden County News*, January 25, 1934, 1

The Sandhills harsh environment proved difficult for many to remain. One such individual was struggling western South Dakota farmer Clair Van Schaak. Paula M. Nelson wrote of Van Schaak's efforts to find work in western Nebraska in 1934: "Clair Van Schaak heard of a road- building job in Nebraska and went there to find work, leaving Rose and the children on the farm. After an absence of several weeks he returned, disheartened. He had found work, but the sandy soil of western Nebraska had overworked his best horse and the mare died, a loss far greater than his meager wages were worth. He then went to work on a local Works Progress Administration project."⁸⁰⁵ From this example, it is apparent that physical labor of this type in the hills was not easy and not everyone was suited for it no matter how badly they needed money.

CWA projects continued in the north-central Sandhills into early-February. Many of these Sandhills counties had benefitted greatly from CWA help. By February 1st, Hooker County had received \$2,682.95; Grant \$3,971.00; Blaine \$3,078.10; and Thomas had netted the largest allotment with \$4,496.41.⁸⁰⁶ Of Thomas County's allotment \$370.00 went to work on the Thedford Cemetery; \$154.00 was for road improvement along the railroad tracks near said cemetery; \$145.00 was for labor on repairing a river bridge; \$370.00 went to improvements on one of the schools in Thedford; Seneca received \$1,200.00 for street and road improvement and \$246.00 for its cemetery; and Halsey also was allotted \$792.00 for street and road work.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰⁵ Paula M. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 148

⁸⁰⁶ *Hooker County Tribune*, February 8, 1934, 1

⁸⁰⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, December 20, 1933, 1

In mid-February, a point at which Roosevelt had originally intended CWA projects to be concluded by, Sandhills counties continued to submit new requests for more CWA allotments due in large part to Congress setting aside more funds for the program. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of the projects the Sheridan County CWA committee had requested funds for in mid-February:

...the county C. W. A. committee, determined on a number of projects to be submitted under the new \$95,000,000 appropriation which passed Congress Wednesday evening. Each community named several projects which they would like to see carried out. Locally, project No. 1 is the road south of Rushville graded and graveled to the river. Project No. 2 would be the drainage of savage lake at the southwest corner of the city. Project No. 3 would be the establishing of a definite and permanent grade for the city and curbs and gutters in certain sections of the business district. Project No. 4 calls for improvements at the school.⁸⁰⁸

CWA funds were still provided Sandhills counties later in February. Garden County received an allotment to pay for the hiring of a much needed county nurse that would be stationed at one of the local schools.⁸⁰⁹ Finally, in late-February and early-March, CWA efforts began to end in the Sandhills just as they were all throughout the United States. In late-February the CWA work force in McPherson County was cut to only fifteen men and a week later *The Tryon Graphic* reported: “Monday eight men went to work on the state project of highway repair in the eastern part of the county and the first shift of the six men working on the repair of county buildings began where they had left off last week. The men are working fifteen hours per week and are drawing forty cents per hour.”⁸¹⁰ Some projects still started up even though it was unlikely the CWA would guide them through to completion. One such project was the new auditorium at Halsey, which was to be constructed with a combination of CWA and private efforts. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* reported on the project’s details in its March 7th, 1934, issue: “The new building will

⁸⁰⁸ *Sheridan County Star*, February 15, 1934, 1

⁸⁰⁹ *Garden County News*, February 22, 1934, 1

⁸¹⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, February 22, 1934, 1; *The Tryon Graphic*, March 1, 1934, 1

be around 36 x 70 feet...and modern in every respect. A great deal of donation labor is being applied, C. W. A. labor and other funds will be furnished by Halsey School District.”⁸¹¹ Two months later, the editor of the *Herald-Clipper* further remarked on the progress of the auditorium that CWA labor had helped start: “While enroute (sic) home from Dunning Friday, the publisher stopped over in Halsey a short time and while there Mrs. Besley unlocked the auditorium so we might have a view of the inside of the new auditorium. While the inside work is not finished and the floor not laid, it already has the appearance of a very nice structure- very spacious, light and modern in every particular.”⁸¹² Despite still helping to implement Sandhills projects in early- March, such as the Halsey Auditorium, the program’s time was now limited.

The end of the highly successful program was very apparent to Sandhillers. On March 1st, 1934, the *Sheridan County Star* alerted readers: “In accordance with instructions from National Administrator Hopkins, not more than 28,500 persons were to be retained on civil works projects in Nebraska for the week beginning February 23. Beginning with that date it was estimated that approximately 7,000 persons were dropped from the payroll.”⁸¹³ Before the end of the month, all Sandhills residents were aware that if they had been unemployed before November 1933 they were about to be again thanks in large part to their media sources informing them of the CWA’s shut down process. On March 8th, 1934, the *Garden County News* alerted readers: “According to instructions the county heads of the CWA work in the county are making plans to discontinue the work in that department within

⁸¹¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, March 7, 1934, 1

⁸¹² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, May 23, 1934, 1

⁸¹³ *Sheridan County Star*, March 1, 1934, 1

a very short time.”⁸¹⁴ Later in the month, the *Brown County Democrat* and *Sheridan County Star* made similar pronouncements, informing readers that the Civilian Works Administration was to end on March 31st and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration would take over unfinished projects on April 1st.⁸¹⁵ On April 6th, *The Valentine Republican* informed readers that the Civil Works Administration had indeed passed, stating: “CWA, the civil works administration, under which several hundred men in Cherry county have been given work in the last few months, ended Saturday evening. Further relief work is now under the NERA, the national emergency relief administration.”⁸¹⁶ No matter which program replaced the CWA (FERA or NERA), the Civil Works Administration’s legacy was a positive one in the Sandhills as a multitude of infrastructure projects were undertaken and unemployed individuals, including women, were allowed to work again. The *Sheridan County Star* reported in mid-April on the program’s significant influence in the state of Nebraska during the previous five months that:

When the federal government’s five million dollar CWA program ended last week, a survey of achievements showed improvements on more than 5,000 miles of highway in this state. Seventy-six counties report 444 miles of grading completed, 3,242 miles improved by graveling or other changes, about 1,400 bridges repaired, several dozen new bridges constructed and new graveling completed on more than 70 miles of highway. Federal funds made possible the improvement of over 175 parks, 125 cemeteries, 21 airports and 16 fair grounds. About 245,000 feet of storm and sanitary sewer and water main were handled, as well as 45,000 feet of drainage ditches dug. Court houses in forty-two counties were improved, 145 city buildings repaired and 16 new town buildings reported. Repairs were made on 350 city schools and 600 ruarl (sic) school buildings.⁸¹⁷

Due to these improvements and the jobs such projects offered, it was difficult for Sandhillers to see the CWA end. Smith contended that: “The CWA did more than provide an overdue cash infusion to the economy; it restored a nation’s self-respect.”⁸¹⁸ While the Civil Works

⁸¹⁴ *Garden County News*, March 8, 1934, 1

⁸¹⁵ *Brown County Democrat*, March 23, 1934, 1; *Sheridan County Star*, March 29, 1934, 1

⁸¹⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, April 6, 1934, 1

⁸¹⁷ *Sheridan County Star*, April 12, 1934, 1

⁸¹⁸ Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, 346

Administration was a temporary work program that had run its course, this did not mean that the New Deal was abandoning the Sandhills. The Sandhills labor situation continued to improve through further infrastructure improvements under another New Deal program: the Public Works Administration.

The Public Works Administration was a New Deal program that was also created in 1933; however, unlike its CWA cousin, it was to be more than a source of temporary employment for the nation's downtrodden. The PWA offered long term employment and investment. Robert D. Leighninger, Jr., wrote of the Public Works Administration's investment and financial success: "In addition to congressional appropriations, PWA had another source of income. As recipients of PWA loans began to repay them, this money, with interest, began to accrue. Securities that PWA had accepted as collateral for these loans were also being sold, first to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and later on the open market. At first this was sent back to the federal treasury, but in 1935 it was made available to PWA for further loans. This added another \$395 million to the program. That this 'revolving fund' existed at all is testimony to the financial stability of the loan program."⁸¹⁹ Through such revolving funds, the Public Works Administration invested in projects similar to what the CWA had but also focused on irrigation works. Such projects were important to agriculturalists in the Nebraska Sandhills, and the state as a whole, due to annual concerns over aridity. Watkins wrote of the creation of the PWA, its purpose, and results: "...the Public Works Administration (PWA)...directed with scrupulous care and terrible energy by Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes...was given \$3.3 billion to fund its operations in June, 1933,...The federal government had supported public works before...But never before had

⁸¹⁹ Robert D. Leighninger Jr., *Long-Range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal* (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 80

there been public works to match the public works of the New Deal. During the six effective years of its life, the PWA would finance a total of 34,508 projects at a cost of a little more than \$6 billion, employing in any given year half a million workers or more.”⁸²⁰

Many of the early PWA bids from the Sandhills did not receive any of this appropriation. However, as spring turned to summer in 1935, Nebraska and the Sandhills region received more PWA funding. Two of the largest projects allotted funds were hydraulic power operations which benefitted the state’s more populated areas and not the Sandhills. *The Arthur Enterprise* wrote of the projects’ status and expenditures: “The Platte Valley and Columbus power projects which accounted for \$14,800,000 of the \$15,341,000 allotted for power developments in Nebraska, accounted for the Cornhusker state’s top position, disclosed in a report of the public works administration to congress on the status of applications of power projects for funds from the PWA...The report, certified as brought up to date as of April 24, showed the Platte Valley project had already expended \$336,452 and had contracts let for \$3,781, 888 of work. The Columbus project was reported to have expended \$59,218 and to have let contracts for \$1,643,508.”⁸²¹ Sandhills counties received less funds by the mid-summer of 1935; however, many smaller infrastructure projects were still able to be completed through multiple channels of funding. *The Arthur Enterprise* further reported in early-July 1935: “Several Sheridan county bridges swept away by a cloudburst in 1933, were replaced, with federal aid. Keith county obtained two new bridges with the state contributing 50 per cent, PWA 30 per cent, and the county 20 per cent.”⁸²² Despite being somewhat shortchanged regarding PWA applications for power or irrigation

⁸²⁰ Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 144

⁸²¹ *The Arthur Enterprise*, May 23, 1935, 1

⁸²² *The Arthur Enterprise*, July 4, 1935, 1

projects, attempts at gathering support for Sandhills irrigation projects continued in the late-1930s. An irrigation project that had a significant impact on the Sandhills, in particular Keith County, once it was approved was the Tri-County Project. The Tri-County Project was the brainchild of Holdrege Mayor C. W. McConaughy who as early as 1913 sought methods to provide adequate additional moisture besides just rainfall to farmers living on or near the Platte River Valley at the southern edge of the Sandhills. Historian Gene E. Hamaker wrote of McConaughy's idea to meet this challenge: "His plan was to supplement the annual rainfall by soaking the sub-soil with water from the Platte River during its flood stages in the spring and fall."⁸²³ Early on, Nebraska politicians, such as Senator George Norris, were very supportive of McConaughy's ideas. Hamaker wrote of this support: "C. W. McConaughy, returning from talks with Nebraska representatives in Washington, Senator George W. Norris in particular, reported they had promised to give all possible assistance. Congressman Silas R. Barton substantiated this statement by introducing an amendment to the Urgent Deficiency Appropriation bill 'for the investigation of the underground currents and artesian wells, and the preparation of reports upon the best methods of utilizing the water resources of southwestern Nebraska, \$100,000 to remain available during the fiscal year of 1914.' This request 'for a doctor to diagnose our case' failed on a point of order, but Barton continued his quest by turning to the Reclamation Service. This effort also proved unavailing."⁸²⁴ Due to various bureaucratic issues, fluctuating public support, and changes in the Nebraska political climate, the Tri-County Project was never more than a dream during the late-1910s and 1920s. The project did not even warrant much consideration in 1917 when the United States entered World War I and increased irrigation project expenditures could be argued as vital

⁸²³ Gene E. Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers: A History of the Tri-County Project To 1935* (Minden, Nebraska: Warp Publishing Company, 1964), 7

⁸²⁴ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 9-10

necessities to the war effort's success due to the significant role they played in assisting in food production for both the military and the home front. Much of this neglect had to do with how much the domestic project was projected to cost during a time when national funds were being utilized for the war in Europe. Hamaker wrote of the rejection McConaughy and George Kingsley received when they were soliciting Congressional officials for support in 1917: "Their hopes were dampened by the replies received from Washington. Earl B. Gaddis, secretary to Senator Hitchcock, informed Henry C. Richmond, secretary of the State Council of Defense, that he had taken the matter up with the director of the Reclamation Service, A. P. Davis. Davis recalled that the 1914 report had judged the project would cost about \$4,000,000. He estimated the present cost, due to the increased expense for materials and labor, would be more nearly \$6,000,000. Consequently, Gaddis reported, it appeared that so huge an expenditure in three Nebraska counties 'would stand little show of getting through.' In an interview given to the press, A. P. Davis expressed a similar opinion of the project's chances. Citing the probable cost of the plan, Davis said that the government did not have that much money to spend at this time."⁸²⁵

By the early-1930s, political attitudes had nearly reversed themselves as unremitting drought in 1931 made potential legislation for new or on-hold state irrigation projects of prevalent importance. Hamaker wrote of the impact environmental factors had on Nebraska politics and the Tri-County Project in 1931: "Continued drouth and depression stirred interest in irrigation in all the Platte valley west of Grand Island and in the neighboring states of Colorado and Wyoming...Steps were already being taken to introduce legislation to create irrigation and power districts in Nebraska. The chances for the success of the measure were

⁸²⁵ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 25

increased when Governor Charles Bryan announced his support of its purposes in his inaugural address before the 47th session of the Nebraska legislature. Bryan made two recommendations: first, that ‘legislation be enacted permitting the organization of irrigation and power districts. Existing irrigation districts ought to be permitted to generate and sell electric power. Such a law would enable the irrigation districts having water power possibilities to develop the same and by the profit on the sale of the current help pay the cost of irrigation.’ Second, he proposed that the ‘legislature petition congress to build one or more huge reservoirs in western Nebraska for the purpose of holding back flood waters...’⁸²⁶

Beyond Bryan, other important Nebraska politicians such as Senator George Norris supported the plan. Hamaker wrote of Norris’ arguments for damming the Platte: “The Senator observed that over the years the development of hydro-electric power had assumed greater importance...The cost of developing a federal program of tributary flood control ‘should be divided between flood control, irrigation, navigation and power,” Norris asserted. ‘It is not a local question,’ he said, ‘it is the broadest kind of a national question’ and the dams along the Platte were only a ‘small part of the whole scheme.’”⁸²⁷ For Norris the Tri-County Project was a significant part of New Deal reclamation projects.

Despite political support for such a Nebraska irrigation project, progress on its funding and approval remained stagnant for the next two years as communities along the Platte, such as Sutherland and Grand Island, squabbled over water rights and appropriation. There were also concerns over engineering and construction. Norris, responding to a letter written by Mr. W. V. Hoagland of North Platte who was checking on the project’s status, bluntly stated his frustrations: “I have been handicapped in the years that have passed,

⁸²⁶ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 111

⁸²⁷ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 116

because for the last hundred years the alleged scientific engineers have held that the way to cope with flood waters of the Mississippi River was to build levies and dikes along the lower portion of that great stream. We have spent many hundreds of millions of dollars from public funds to do this, but when the floods come, the bed of the river is filled up with silt brought down all the way from Montana, and eventually the dikes are overflowed, and the damage is much greater than it would have been had there been no dikes built. This ancient way of controlling floods has been jealously adhered to, and is still adhered to by most of the Army engineers.”⁸²⁸ Finally, in late-1933 the Tri-County Project was ready to appear before the Federal government for consideration. Hamaker wrote of its submission to the PWA for consideration: “The Tri-County application was finally on its way to Washington... Canaday and Mickey accompanied by Val Kuska, left for Washington by automobile on Thursday, 23 November 1933. The application was sent from Omaha the same day. It was received in Washington the 27th of November.”⁸²⁹ After receiving the application, PWA engineers chose a site near Keystone for the project’s dam on the North Platte River in April 1934. Haymaker wrote of their selection process and soil findings: “What was probably the most important outcome of the visit of the P. W. A. engineers was not even mentioned in the local newspaper accounts of the tour. This was Major Olberg’s recommendation to build a large on-river dam near Keystone in place of the Plum Creek reservoirs... Sutherland, for their part, had taken a working party accompanied by their chief engineer, Donald Price; their consulting engineer, J. P. Hogan and his assistant, E. E. Halmos; State Engineer Cochran; and Dr. George E. Condra to the site of the proposed dam and had soil borings to a depth of

⁸²⁸ George Norris to W. V. Hoagland, April 29, 1933, George William Norris Collection, 1861-1944, Series I, Norris Correspondence (General) 1900-1944, RG3298.AM, Box 1, Folder 18, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

⁸²⁹ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 164

fifty feet. The borings revealed nothing but sand. The Sutherland board of directors, meeting the 28th of April, expressed a fear that a dam on such frail foundations might threaten the residents of the valley, perhaps even wipe out the city of North Platte if it broke.”⁸³⁰

The findings of sand in the soil structure of the potential dam site should not have come as a shock to the investigators as the location they chose bordered the Sandhills in northern Keith County. Eventually such structural concerns passed and after further bureaucratic wrangling, such as Garfield and Loup Counties were experiencing with their own irrigation projects at the time, the Tri-County project and the dam on the North Platte River near Ogallala was finally approved for Public Works Administration funds in September 1935. Hamaker wrote of the project’s approval and Nebraskans’ reactions: “The greatest news ever to come to south central Nebraska broke just after noon the 26th of September.”⁸³¹ Despite this victory the project was still on the ropes. In 1936 in state legal issues threatened to derail the project. Historian James Aucoin wrote of the Tri-County’s legal woes: “...the Tri-County Project almost folded in 1936 when opponents, including Grand Island, won the landmark transbasin diversion ruling in *Osterman et al. v. Central Nebraska Public Power District*...That threw the economic feasibility of Tri-County into limbo, and the federal Public Works Administration required Central Nebraska officials to reevaluate the project’s chance of success.”⁸³² Eventually the problem was sorted out with the assistance of the United States Supreme Court. Aucoin further wrote: “In January 1938, however, the U. S. Supreme Court upheld a segment of the Roosevelt administration’s New

⁸³⁰ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 178-179

⁸³¹ Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 209

⁸³² James Aucoin, *Water in Nebraska: Use, Politics, Policies* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 47

Deal by ruling that publicly financed hydroelectric projects are constitutional...⁸³³ Farmers in south central and eastern Nebraska were pleased that the project was finally approved and funded by the PWA as well as legally supported, but it was the Sandhills residents and North Platte valley farmers of Garden and Keith counties who dealt with the hardships and eventual success of the project's successful construction and completion during the late- 1930s and into the early-1940s.

Construction work began on the project's smaller, but necessary, projects such as rudimentary canals and storage ponds in early-1936. Physical work on the actual dam site at Keystone did not commence until 1937. In February 1936, Tri-County engineers conducted surveys west of Keystone on the North Platte River near Lisco for smaller dam sites for storage ponds which were essential to the successful completion of the larger dam. The *Garden County News* reported on these surveys in its February 6th, 1936, issue: "The men are working independent of the reclamation crew which made soil and rock tests at Keystone and at Belmar last year...Mr. McCullough, head of the supply department, and Mr. Trumbull, head of the soil engineers, were in town the first of the week, securing bids on supplies and attending to other matters connected with the work that is yet to be done. At Lisco the survey is being made a block west of main street and is about three hundred feet west of the old site that was surveyed and tested a few years ago by the reclamation officials. The head engineers for the tri-county project are said to appreciate the fact that storage water on the river is absolutely necessary to the success of their big venture in irrigation and power generation. The main problem seems to be the selection of the location...But the building of

⁸³³ Aucoin, *Water in Nebraska*, 47

these storage ponds is absolutely necessary.”⁸³⁴ Two months later a dam site was finally chosen. The Oshkosh paper described its dimensions and location: “We are informed that the dam will be a 70-foot structure and that it will be necessary to build a settling basin at some point above the back water, which will put this basin near the townsite (sic) of Lewellen. The engineers have made several other profile surveys farther west on the river and it is rather expected that if the dam at Cedar Point is to be a 70-foot affair, that another storage reservoir will be constructed later on at some point farther west, probably at or near Lisco...Meanwhile this county can get no highway work on No. 26 while the matter is still unsettled.”⁸³⁵ One year later, following the surveying and establishment of these rudimentary storage dams on the North Platte, work on the large dam at Keystone was finally ready to commence.

The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District, the hydraulic power entity which came to be in charge of and associated with the Tri-County Project, finally began accepting construction bids for the dam in the late-spring of 1937. *The Arthur Enterprise* described the bidding process and construction work needed done on the dam: “The bids are to be opened on May 21...The plans to be bid on call for steel sheeting, piling etc. The dam will be of earth and will be of approximately 140 feet high, and about 2 miles long. It is supposed to empound (sic) two million acre feet of water. The water will be backed up several miles, and last estimates we heard of, gave the point at which the water would reach would be about two or three miles below the town of Lewellen...Some time ago some of the officials of the Tri-county project gave it out that work would be started on this construction about the first of June, and if satisfactory bids are received it seems likely that this should be

⁸³⁴ *Garden County News*, February 6, 1936, 1, 8

⁸³⁵ *Garden County News*, April 2, 1936, 1

done.”⁸³⁶ The bidding process closed by the end of May as the final bids were decided upon. The *Garden County News* wrote of the first successful accepted bid: “Three western firms were pooled in the low bid on the first part of the Keystone reservoir construction last Friday. Their offer was about two hundred thousand dollars under the estimate made by the Tri-county district engineer’s estimates. Formal letting of the contract was withheld pending the arrival of the bond indenture. Thirteen contractors submitted bids on the work. Start of driving of the steel piling on this job, the second largest earth dam in the United States, will be started by September first.”⁸³⁷ Like the potential dams make-up, the June 1st and September 1st deadlines were not set in stone; however, finally by late-June construction efforts began in earnest. The *Garden County News* detailed the establishment of the work crew headquarters and the extension of additional rail lines to the site:

Buildings are being erected for offices and workmen’s quarters and the large drag line outfit is being assembled to begin action at the earliest possible moment. Three large caterpillar tractor outfits (sic) were engaged in removing tons of dirt each trip from the hillside to the river bottom. The Union Pacific railroad has the grade for switches and nearly two miles of track across the river valley nearing completion. This switch track has junction with the main line about two miles west of the town of Keystone and will serve in affording means for transporting the large amount of material needed for use in the construction of the big on river dam, which will be the second largest earth dam in the United States.⁸³⁸

By early-August, the construction crew’s early efforts in moving and pushing the soil about with their equipment resulted in a rudimentary dam that was quite impressive to locals and yet at the same time its completion was viewed as unimaginable. The *Garden County News* outlined the worker’s progress in early-August:

Few people who have not visited the site of the Keystone dam, on which construction is now nicely started a few miles down the river from here, have a conception of the enormity of the project. Even to those who have been there since the work started it is difficult to grasp the real amount of labor and material its completion will require, and just what the results of its building will be. The dam is 2 ½ miles across the top and over 1 ½ miles in length at its base. The width at the base will be 1,000 feet

⁸³⁶ *The Arthur Enterprise*, April 29, 1937, 4

⁸³⁷ *Garden County News*, May 27, 1937, 1

⁸³⁸ *Garden County News*, June 24, 1937, 1

and the water impounded will reach a depth of 142 feet, forming a lake 23 miles long, with a surface area of 30,000 acres. It will be the second largest earth dam in the world, requiring enough earth in its construction to excavate 160 acres of land to a depth of 93 feet.⁸³⁹

While the *Garden County News* was uncertain whether to report the dam's measurements as being the second largest earthen dam in the United States or the world, Sandhillers were certain of the impact it had on their lives. The two most significant ways it impacted Sandhillers was through employment and land sales.

Many of the Keystone dam's construction workers hailed from the nearby valleys and hills. To the local Sandhills unemployed the dam offered them a chance at work that they could not find elsewhere. Many of these unemployed workers came from Garden County. The *News* wrote of the solicitation of labor from the county: "A call for fifty eligible Garden county men to work on the Keystone dam project came to this county Saturday from the manager in charge of that place. As many men as could be reached were notified and Sunday morning thirty men went to Keystone where they were put to work doing common labor. The work is done in four six hour shifts during the twenty-four hours of each day, Sunday included and the men were divided so that some were put on each shift. It was stated Sunday that forty more men could have been put to work had they appeared for duty..."⁸⁴⁰ Work on the dam was difficult and workers, whether local or not, were not immune to accidents or danger. One worker that had one such unfortunate experience was Robert McCoy. The *Garden County News* chronicled his misfortune in late-1939:

Ogallala- Robert McCoy, 26, is in a hospital here suffering from exposure and shock as a result of an unanticipated trip thru a 600-foot 18-inch pipe filled with mud and water at Kingsley dam. McCoy, employee on the Central Nebraska public power and irrigation district's dam was sucked feet first into the pipe, used to convey mud from the top of a hill at the south end of the dam to the core. The pipe dropped 30 feet vertically, then 570 feet at an angle. McCoy walked 500 feet to a shack before

⁸³⁹ *Garden County News*, August 5, 1937, 1

⁸⁴⁰ *Garden County News*, August 26, 1937, 1

collapsing. He was rushed here and a resuscitator used. His stomach and lungs contained muddy water. A physician said he is expected to recover.⁸⁴¹

Fortunately most Sandhills workers on the Keystone dam did not have such physically “draining” experiences. However, they were sufficiently impacted by the dam’s arrival in other ways, primarily the impact it had on the nearby Sandhills lands and those who owned them.

Progress on the Keystone dam continued uninterrupted throughout 1937. The lands near the dam were not the only ones impacted by construction. The project required more acres to the west for future shorelines and access roads. Lands were also needed to store construction assets and equipment on. Thus, while progress was made on the large dam, more lands were acquired as the year came to a close to meet these needs. While many individuals in the region were not supportive of the project, others believed in the prosperity such a large reservoir could bring to the southwestern Sandhills and the North Platte River Valley by boosting the economy through tourism and recreational activities as well as increased irrigation opportunities for agriculturalists. Thus, many Sandhills landowners near the construction zone supported the reservoir’s progress by selling needed land for its expansion. In turn, they were more than sufficiently compensated for their support. During the Great Depression, such large sums were not easily rejected, even from agriculturalists with means. Two such individuals who gained heavier pockets thanks to the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District were Ed and Helene Prochaska.

The Prochaskas were land speculators in northern Keith County who sold multiple properties in and around Ogallala in the late-1930s and early-1940s. On May 21st, 1938, the Prochaskas sold Block 45, Lot 1, in the Aufdengarten addition in Ogallala to Viola Haney for

⁸⁴¹ *Garden County News*, December 14, 1939, 1

\$1.00.⁸⁴² In 1940, they sold more properties in Ogallala as they sold Block 17, Lot 3, of the Aufdengarten addition to Catherine Wlaschin for the greater profit of \$3,500.00 on August 1st, 1940.⁸⁴³ The Prochaskas continued their successful land dealings after the United States entered World War II as they sold Block 2, Lots 4 & 5, in Smith's First Addition in Ogallala to John J. Friedman on October 14th, 1942.⁸⁴⁴ Much of their success in realty stemmed from land sales in the area of Keith County that became the future site of Lake McConaughy or Kingsley Dam. On December 31st, 1937, the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District purchased the Southeast Quarter and the South Half of the Southwest Quarter, and Lots One , Two, three, and Four of Section Thirty-six, Township Fifteen North, Range Thirty-nine West of the Sixth Principal Meridian in Keith County from Prochaskas for \$19,500.00.⁸⁴⁵ Similarly, Howard R. Chingren and Bessie Chingren were paid \$9,000.00 for the East Half of Section Six, Township Fourteen North, Range Thirty-eight West in Keith County from the Irrigation District on December 31st, 1937.⁸⁴⁶ Two years earlier they had also sold a tract in Section 6, Township 14, Range 38 totaling 4.90 acres to the State of Nebraska for \$50.70 in preparation for the upcoming reclamation project on June 18th, 1935.⁸⁴⁷ The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District also purchased the Southwest Quarter of Section Six, Township Fourteen North, Range Thirty- eight West in Keith County on the same day from Eber and Anna Lowe of Keith County for \$2,000.00.⁸⁴⁸ These lands were to be used for a public road and for a right of way for the Kansas Pipe Line

⁸⁴² *Keith County Deed Record 10*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 234

⁸⁴³ *Keith County Deed Record 11*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 126

⁸⁴⁴ *Keith County Deed Record 11*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 544

⁸⁴⁵ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 366

⁸⁴⁶ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 367

⁸⁴⁷ *Keith County Deed Record 9*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 258

⁸⁴⁸ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 375-376

and Gas Company.⁸⁴⁹ Thus, even land purchases for areas that would not be underwater were not cheap.

Landowners that lived in the county were not the only ones to profit from the PWA project. Absentee landowners, who no longer resided in Keith County but instead lived in places as far away as the nation's west coast, also profited from the venture. One such individual who sought sunnier and, perhaps, more prosperous climates was Cassell Delatour. In late-December 1937, Delatour lived in Los Angeles, California, but still owned the Southeast Quarter of the Southwest Quarter and Lots Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven in Section Thirty-one, Township Fifteen North, Range Thirty-eight West in Keith County.⁸⁵⁰ As it had done with other Keith County landowners, the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District bought these lands to be used for public road access from Delatour on the last day of 1937 for the generous sum of \$15,600.00.⁸⁵¹ And so the land purchases went. Not all of them were for empty range and farm lands. Some were for the lands within community boundaries near the future shoreline of Nebraska's largest man made ocean.

The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District purchased lands within the town of Lemoyne, most of which were town lots. These purchases occurred as the irrigation district needed lands for road, railroad, or pipeline right of ways, like those purchased from Delatour and the Lowes, only these right of ways happened to run closer to rural communities on the Sandhills fringe in northern Keith County. Construction companies may have also required storage space for equipment and in turn purchased lots within communities near the construction site. In the end, it was fortunate the irrigation district

⁸⁴⁹ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 375-376

⁸⁵⁰ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 374

⁸⁵¹ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 374

bought much of the land in the community as in early-1941 Lemoyne was moved to the north by the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District to prevent it from being put underwater. Like their rural contemporaries, “townies” who sold their properties in towns such as Lemoyne generally made a significant profit from such sales. Two such individuals were John and Ida McQueen who sold six lots within the Jacob’s First Addition of Lemoyne to the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District for \$1,800.00 on December 31st, 1937.⁸⁵² Like the Prochaskas, the McQueens seem to have been engaged in some limited land speculation as they later sold Block 42, Lot 10, of the Searle’s third addition in Ogallala to Stella A. Rice and Block 42, Lot 9, to Elsie Ford on May 14th, 1938, to help add some additional income.⁸⁵³ Whatever their motive, they set an example for others in Lemoyne to follow. Spouses F. P. and A. J. Sutton followed suit on December 31st, 1937, as they sold Lots Two and Three of Block Three, Jacob’s Second Addition in Lemoyne to the irrigation district for \$300.00.⁸⁵⁴ Frank and Cassie Wight made one of the largest profits from the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District’s purchases in Lemoyne. The Wights made \$75,000.00 on December 31st, 1937, when they sold all of block four, the west one-hundred sixty feet of block three and Lots two and three just south of Lemoyne to the irrigation district; however, they also sold other rural lands near Lemoyne which accounted for a significant portion of the \$75,000.00 payment.⁸⁵⁵ The rural lands were to be possibly used for a new right of way for the Union Pacific Railroad and an easement for the Sinclair

⁸⁵² *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 370

⁸⁵³ *Keith County Deed Record 11*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 184-185

⁸⁵⁴ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 371

⁸⁵⁵ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 369

Pipe Line Company.⁸⁵⁶ Despite large profits for some, not all northern Keith County residents profited well from the presence of the PWA.

One such resident who needed a significant profit the most but did not get one was widow, Mary Jacobs. Jacobs was forced to sell all of block four in the original town plat of Lemoyne as well as Lots Two and Three south of the Union Pacific Railroad right of way in Section Twenty, Township Fifteen North, Range Thirty-nine west in Keith County to the irrigation district for \$1.00 on December 31st, 1937.⁸⁵⁷ Undoubtedly Jacobs sold cheap as she was in debt and owed money on the lands she sold. Despite Jacobs' personal difficulties, many Sandhillers living in northern Keith County prospered as the Sandhills and North Platte River valley environment changed from an agrarian to an aquatic one. The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District made many of their personal dreams for financial success a reality as the district reshaped northern Keith County through its land deals. Between December 28, 1937, and September 9th, 1941, the CNPP & ID made one-hundred seventy-one such land deals in the southern Sandhills and along the North Platte River Valley within the county.⁸⁵⁸ As the decade ended and the 1940s began the dream of profiting from the recreational aspects of the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's decades long project was finally becoming reality for northern Keith County agriculturalists and businessmen.

Nearly a year after the multiple land purchases in and around Lemoyne, the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District was ready to permanently alter the flow of the North Platte River in Keith County as the dam's construction reached a critical phase. The

⁸⁵⁶ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 369

⁸⁵⁷ *Keith County Deed Record 7*, Ogallala, Nebraska, 368

⁸⁵⁸ *Keith County General Index to Deeds, Book G*, Ogallala, Nebraska

Garden County News described the river's diversion and thousands of cubic yards of soil removal that was necessary for it:

Engineers of the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District today were putting the finishing touches on the Kingsley Dam site near Ogallala in order to divert the North Platte river... The Tri-County District will divert the North Platte river through a large canal to a 700- foot long tube which is 28 feet in diameter. The funnel shaped opening of this tunnel is west of the base of the famous Morning Glory super-flood control structure. Once the dam has been completed, this opening will be permanently sealed, and will be used only when it is necessary to open the top gates on the Morning Glory. From then on, the overflow of the dammed North Platte will be released back to the river through the equally gigantic outlet tower, and its own independent tube... Early diversion is necessary so that workmen may get onto a dry riverbed to construct what engineers call a core trench and a mat. The sand, now lying on either side of the deeply driven steel piling will be scooped out to about 20 feet. The, the dusty loess of the nearby southern hills will be brought in, wetted down, and rolled to almost impervious solidity by the use of specially designed heavy rollers, similar to those used in street construction. So many inches of loess, then so many rolls; until the packed loess forms a suitable foundation for the gravity fill of the dam proper. Engineers estimated that it would be necessary to move 155,000 cubic yards of sand from the site, and to transport 204,000 cubic yards of clay and loess back in. It has been necessary, they said, to move more than 550,000 cubic yards of dirt of all types in order to bring about the river's diversion. Construction will start soon, they added, on the 600-foot tunnel into the hills on the southern bank in order to 'insert' a concrete wall which will prevent seepage in that direction.⁸⁵⁹

Construction on the reservoir and dam continued for two more years as construction equipment altered the northern Keith County landscape as so many toy bulldozers scraping soil in a child's sandbox. Despite progress on the dam, the project still had to jump political hurdles on its way to completion. In the autumn of 1938, Senator Norris uncovered that the project was still struggling with some appropriation issues. Historian Richard Lowitt wrote of Norris's correspondence for funding with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes: "Ickes responded to Norris's telegram with a copy of a confidential report indicating that it probably would be necessary to allot another \$6 million to protect the government's investment in the Tri-County project- thus his hesitation. In addition, he mentioned mounting congressional criticism of the fact that 'Nebraska, in proportion, has had more Public Works funds since the beginning than any other state in the Union.'"⁸⁶⁰ Eventually the problem was resolved as

⁸⁵⁹ *Garden County News*, December 1, 1938, 1

⁸⁶⁰ Richard Lowitt, *George W. Norris: The Triumph of a Progressive, 1933-1944* (Urbana: University of

Roosevelt intervened. Lowitt wrote of the President's assistance: "The president, after receiving an independent review of the Nebraska projects, recommended that \$5,890,000 be allotted to the Tri-County project, a sum sufficient to complete the Kingsley Dam."⁸⁶¹ Thus, with the late funding issues flushed out, the Tri-County Project's final construction phase went forward unimpeded.

In late-February 1939, the construction tide was turned and the end of the construction phase began as two large dredges arrived on site at Keystone to more rapidly move the project's soil. The *Garden County News* wrote of their capabilities: "These dredges, each capable of pumping 2,500 cubic yards of earth per hour, are now being set up from material being shipped in over the nearby railroad. Both dredges will pump earth from vegetation-stripped soil- one above and the other below the dam. They eventually will build a massive obstruction across the North Platte river approximately a quarter of a mile in width at the base and to the height of a thirteen-story office building."⁸⁶² A year and a half later, as Hitler's Armies conquered and plundered Europe the dredging was nearing its end. Tri-County Engineer George Carter considered the project's dredging work seventy-five percent completed and the dam itself eighty-four percent finished on September 12th, 1940.⁸⁶³ The *Garden County News* further reported on this date: "...the equivalent of 271,365 railroad gondola coal cars of gravel, sand and dirt, enough to form a train 2,713 miles long, have been placed in the two-mile long earth-core dam, second largest in the world. Such a train would reach three-fourths across the nation..."⁸⁶⁴ By this time, the dam at Keystone was over one

Illinois Press, 1978), 243

⁸⁶¹ Lowitt, *George W. Norris*, 244

⁸⁶² *Garden County News*, February 23, 1939, 1

⁸⁶³ *Garden County News*, September 12, 1940, 1

⁸⁶⁴ *Garden County News*, September 12, 1940, 1

hundred feet high.⁸⁶⁵ As the reservoir's completion neared, buildings that were utilized by work crews in areas that were to be put underwater were moved to be further utilized by locals instead of being torn down. Such thriftiness exhibited by the Nebraska Sandhillers of Garden and Keith counties was a lasting legacy of the Great Depression. One Sandhills community that wholeheartedly accepted these buildings was Oshkosh. The *Garden County News* reported on their arrival in mid-September 1940:

The number of residential buildings in Oshkosh has been augmented during the past week by the removal of several from the Tri-county reservoir site to town. These buildings are being removed from the district which will be incorporated in the large lake to be formed back of Kingsley dam, when it is completed and the water of the North Platte river is turned in for irrigation storage. Among the buildings arriving here during the past week is one purchased by S. H. Nichols. It has been located on a lot next to the residence property of Mrs. Anna Swanson, in the south part of town. It is a pretentious house of seven rooms and, when the refinishing work contemplated by Mr. Nichols is completed, will add much to the improvement and appearance of that part of the city...It is said that prospects are that several more buildings will be moved here from the area to be submerged in the water of the artificial lake. With new buildings projected and those now under construction, much needed housing facilities will be materially increased.⁸⁶⁶

The housing boom in Oshkosh continued in early-1941 as C. G. Bergquist moved two more buildings, which by then he owned, from the Kingsley Dam district to the Garden County seat.⁸⁶⁷

Beyond the removal of the construction crews' buildings, early-1941 heralded other important milestones for the long time irrigation project. In early-January, the Tri-County Project produced its first hydroelectric power. While it took place seventy miles downstream at one of the project's "power houses," it was still significant for positive publicity for the work being accomplished near Keystone and Ogallala. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of the event's significance and the personal achievement it was for long suffering supporter, Senator George Norris:

⁸⁶⁵ *The Tryon Graphic*, September 12, 1940, 1

⁸⁶⁶ *Garden County News*, September 19, 1940, 1

⁸⁶⁷ *Garden County News*, January 23, 1941, 1

Senator George W. Norris, the Senior Senator from Nebraska, turned a switch Sunday to put the Jeffrey canyon power house of the Tri-County, the Central Nebraska public power and irrigation district into operation, a climax of nearly thirty years of his labor for this and other Nebraska power projects. When the power house “went on the line” with 9,000 kilowatts of electricity, it represented the first power production of the thirty million dollar Tri-County district now nearing completion. The Senator made a brief talk to the group of personal friends, officials and workers present and said in part, “the labor of 30 years is culminated in what you see here today,” and he predicted the 60 million dollars of public power and irrigation projects in the state would bring “happiness to every home” eventually. The Jeffrey canyon power house is on the south side of the Platte Valley almost due south of Brady.⁸⁶⁸

By mid-February, the reservoir made its own headlines as the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District finally filled it with water. *The Stapleton Enterprise* noted this achievement: “Flow in the Platte River has been harnessed to the needs of man and crops and a dream 25 years realized when storage of water behind the giant Kingsley Dam started last week. Approximately 3,500 acre feet of water had been stored by Monday after the gates were closed for the first time late Saturday afternoon.”⁸⁶⁹ This was only the beginning as continued preparations were made for the deluge that was to come. *The Garden County News* wrote of the final projects within the construction zone and the reservoir’s eventual uses:

The reservoir has a storage capacity of 2,000,000 acre feet, enough to cover 2,000,000 acres of land a foot deep...workmen clearing brush from the 32,000 acre reservoir area and those laying 73 acres of concrete riprap blocks on the upstream face of the dam now can keep ahead of the rising storage waters. Tricounty (sic) engineers now are barricading abandoned roads in the basin. The town of Lemoyne has been moved from the reservoir area and Tricounty (sic) rebuilt 32 miles of Union Pacific railroad to clear the submerged area. The storage area at capacity will form a lake 25 miles long and from two to four miles wide with 130 miles of shoreline...The water first will produce electricity before reaching the Tri-county irrigation area of 200,000 acres in parts of Gosper, Phelps, Kearney and a small portion of Adams county. Production of electricity...will help meet the district’s bond obligations and make it possible to deliver water to irrigators at a lower cost to them.⁸⁷⁰

As Kingsley Dam neared completion, members of the Tri-County Project came up with an idea to preserve the project’s history for future Nebraskans. *The Arthur Enterprise* wrote of the project leader’s efforts: “The Tri-County Project plans to bury for posterity a ‘Time

⁸⁶⁸ *The Tryon Graphic*, January 9, 1941, 1

⁸⁶⁹ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, February 13, 1941, 4

⁸⁷⁰ *Garden County News*, February 13, 1941, 1

Capsule' about one hundred feet deep in the giant George P. Kingsley Dam at its dedication late this spring or summer...One of the drains used when the earth core fill was made is being left open so the capsule can be buried...1000 or 10000 yrs (sic) from now, Nebraskans may decide the dam has outlived its usefulness. Or a blitzkrieg of the future, when everyone travels by air, may have destroyed it. If this ever happens, Nebraskans of 2941 or 12941 A. D. can open the capsule and see how 'Pioneer' Nebraskans of 1941 lived."⁸⁷¹

The project came to a close in the summer of 1941 with the dam's dedication. Hamaker wrote of the event: "The 22nd of July 1941 the Kingsley dam was dedicated and storage water, collecting there since the first of the year, was diverted into canals for summer irrigation."⁸⁷² The *Keith County News* melodramatically wrote of the ceremony and Keith County's vanquished foe: "Kingsley Dam is officially, formerly and perpetually dedicated. It is the first time in the history of Nebraska that 2,000 people gathered in 100 degrees of heat to cast their blessings on a great pile of sand and gravel- which was once their bitterest enemy. For generations the people of Nebraska have sworn a vengeance on the dirt and sand that filled the air, blotted out the sun and eventually laid itself over the fertile farm lands to choke vegetation to death. So seven miles north of Ogallala Tuesday afternoon a memorable event for Nebraska took place."⁸⁷³ Such a simplistic assertion seemed to corroborate Worster's arguments as it implies that humans on the Great Plains sought mastery over their environment and not compatibility. Historian Patricia Limerick's comments on land and water issues in the American West are also important for providing context for how these issues were framed by some locals and the newspaper in that period: "The events of Western

⁸⁷¹ *The Arthur Enterprise*, February 20, 1941, 1

⁸⁷² Hamaker, *Irrigation Pioneers*, 212

⁸⁷³ *Keith County News*, July 24, 1941, 1

history represent, not a simple process of territorial expansion, but an array of efforts to wrap the concept of property around unwieldy objects...The development of most of these other resources depended on the control of water.”⁸⁷⁴ Thus, for northern Keith County businessmen and agriculturalists, the “unwieldy object” of the new dam combined with its water control functions represented an achievement in American engineering but also a chance at profit.

Despite the *Keith County News*’s somewhat exaggerated musings over the reasons for the dam’s construction, others made more significant and appreciative comments on the efforts it took to build it and its purpose. One such individual was Franklin Roosevelt. Throughout the decade, and even before, Nebraska Senator George Norris had been one of the project’s greatest champions and this fact was not lost on Roosevelt. Roosevelt wrote Norris his appreciation, congratulations for his efforts, and his personal views on the dam’s importance in a letter which was republished in the *Keith County News*: “I feel that the dedication of Kingsley dam in your state must not be allowed to pass without expressing to you, and through you I hope to the people of Nebraska, my congratulations and my personal satisfaction over the completion of this undertaking. This great dam, largest earth-filled dam in the world save for Fort Peck in Montana, takes its place in the front rank of the monumental structures this nation is rearing to conserve our national resources and use them to build a stronger nation and a better life for our people. It will bring new life to drouth-ridden farm lands new hope and well-being to victims of the drouth.”⁸⁷⁵ Roosevelt was not the only one to praise Norris’s efforts. The *News* wrote of acting PWA leader, K. Sewell

⁸⁷⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 71-72

⁸⁷⁵ Roosevelt to Norris, *Keith County News*, July 24, 1941, 1

Wingfield's comments on Norris at the dedication ceremony: "It was to Senator Norris that Mr. Wingfield gave the bulk of credit for the realization of the Tri-County dream. Through Nebraska's veteran senator came the money for constructing the Tri-County project."⁸⁷⁶

Lowitt wrote of the final legacy of the Tri-County Project and its erstwhile senator: "...with Norris serving as the Washington liaison, the completion of the Tri-County project was seen as a potent force shaping a better life for Nebraska citizens..."⁸⁷⁷ In the end, even Roosevelt and Norris's political opponents had to acknowledge that, despite the political infighting that threatened to destroy it, the project was a bedrock achievement for the New Deal within the state of Nebraska.

Nebraska cattlemen were equally impressed. The Nebraska Stock Growers Association, which held its annual meeting in Ogallala in June of 1941, received a private tour of the dam prior to its dedication. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of well-known Sandhills locals who were in attendance as well as Nebraska politicians: "Earl Monahan, Hyannis, president of the association, will preside at the sessions which begin at 1:30 P. M. Thursday. Following the program Thursday a tour of Kingsley dam will be made, with a barbecue at the dam. Friday evening the convention banquet will be held with Governor Dwight Griswold delivering the main address."⁸⁷⁸ Despite all of the setbacks and travails encountered over nearly three decades, the Tri-County Project was a success in 1941 due in large part to Public Works Administration support. Its legacy of cooperation between multiple levels of government and individuals with various backgrounds was a testament to the tenacity of two of the project's two greatest champions, besides Roosevelt and Norris,

⁸⁷⁶ *Keith County News*, July 24, 1941, 1

⁸⁷⁷ Lowitt, *George W. Norris*, 410

⁸⁷⁸ *Sheridan County Star*, June 12, 1941, 1

George Kingsley and C. W. McConaughy, for whom the colossal dam and resulting man-made lake were named.

Despite its success, the project did have its local detractors. Protestors to certain PWA projects were not uncommon if they had some negative impact on individuals. The key was to limit such an impact. Undoubtedly, many Lemoyne residents resented their town being moved and many citizens of Keystone were angered at the challenge to their community sovereignty the movement of the railroad lines away from the river valley posed. This had led the town to take legal action against the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District and the Union Pacific in mid-1938. The *Garden County News* wrote of the community's reasoning for such an action: "District Judge Tewell has enjoined the Central Nebraska public power and irrigation district and the Union Pacific railroad from moving railroad tracks which would be submerged by waters of the Kingsley dam, now under construction. The hearing was set for next fall. The suit was filed by Keystone, Nebr., residents who alleged that continuance of Keystone as a trading center is dependent upon maintaining the railroad and station in their present location and that their interests would be damaged by a change."⁸⁷⁹ The lawsuit did not prove successful as the Union Pacific line was indeed moved later in 1938. The *Garden County News* wrote of the rail line's shift: "Work on moving the 34 miles of Union Pacific major branch spur-line tracks out of the way of the dam and reservoir some two miles to the top of the sandhills is progressing 'most satisfactorily,' it was said. This construction, to be completed by next July, is up to schedule."⁸⁸⁰ Despite some local protests and, as in the case of the Tri-County Project, obstructions and political challenges from other parts of the state which could be negatively

⁸⁷⁹ *Garden County News*, July 14, 1938, 1

⁸⁸⁰ *Garden County News*, December 1, 1938, 1

impacted by said projects, the successful passing of Public Works Administration applications from Sandhills counties generally was the responsibility of bureaucratic agents in Washington, D. C., no matter how strenuously such projects were supported or ridiculed. Beyond the Tri-County Project, other Sandhills counties sought PWA funds for irrigation projects with varying levels of success. Two such counties were Garfield and Loup.

Early in 1935, agriculturalists in the Sandhills counties around Loup and Garfield Counties sought an irrigation project from the Loup River system that was paid for with funds from the PWA. Unfortunately, in this case federal government approval proved difficult to attain. Undoubtedly much of this difficulty was due to the approval of the Tri-County Project. Despite setbacks, residents in Loup County had reason to hope that eventually the funding would come to finance such a project. In early-January 1935, *The Taylor Clarion* wrote of the project's status with PWA committeemen: "Nine engineers, constituting the Mississippi committee of the PWA Wednesday recommended expenditure of a billion dollars over a 20 year period in development of mid-west waterways but urged that no further power development take place in the Missouri river basin, according to Washington dispatches in the daily press. Both the North and Middle Loup projects were given high approval for irrigation development. No project in Nebraska were given Class A rating, which would call for immediate development, but both Loup projects were rated as Class B, which classification is defined to mean not feasible now but which may become so in the near future."⁸⁸¹ Nearly two months later the project remained at a standstill, but residents of Loup and Garfield Counties remained hopeful that the project could come to pass. In late-February, the project received a much needed boost when, according to *The*

⁸⁸¹ *The Taylor Clarion*, January 8, 1935, 1

Burwell Tribune: “ Chances of developing power and irrigation projects in the North and Middle Loup valleys in Nebraska brightened today as Representative Coffee obtained the promise of Dr. Elwood Mead, federal reclamation commissioner for a personal inspection of the area... ‘Dr. Mead promised to look the projects over himself,’ Coffee said, ‘and stated he would try to get out to Nebraska to go over them within the next two weeks.’ Coffee also reported that the reclamation commissioner has recommended allotment of \$10,000 for a complete survey by the reclamation service of the possibilities in the two valleys for power and irrigation development.”⁸⁸² *The Tribune* went on to report that the main reason the project had not proceeded in the past was that the Federal Government could only provide funds for labor, while funding for the rest of the project, such as land purchases, was the responsibility of the local level.⁸⁸³ Unlike the difficulties in Loup and Garfield County had in gathering PWA funds for their requests, Sheridan County was somewhat more successful. The *Sheridan County Star* reported on the progress of the county’s many projects in its March 28th, 1935, issue:

As compared to some counties there has been no major Public Works projects carried on in Sheridan County. However, during the past sixteen months \$150,000 has been expended in the north end of the country on forty-five (sic) projects... The Public Works work in Sheridan County has moved along quite smoothly and without much fanfare and for that reason few realize no doubt that such a large sum has been expended... The following summary gives an idea of various projects developed in this county to date. Rushville:- Grading and graveling county roads, Asst. Librarian County road repair, Asst. School libraries, Re-employment office, Toy repair, athletic field, Building community hall, airport, all at a cost of \$37, 643.00. Gordon:- Airport, grading and graveling streets, sewing project, Asst. librarian, repair state highway, County road repair, Asst. school librarian, Re-employment office, toy repair, Park improvement, athletic field, all at a cost of \$34,918.00.⁸⁸⁴

While Sheridan County was not appropriated large irrigation projects, it nonetheless made important strides in rebuilding the infrastructure of its Sandhills communities with the help of PWA funds during the 1930s.

⁸⁸² *The Burwell Tribune*, February 28, 1935, 1

⁸⁸³ *The Burwell Tribune*, February 28, 1935, 1

⁸⁸⁴ *Sheridan County Star*, March 28, 1935, 1

By March 1935, the conditions surrounding the PWA application process for the North Loup Irrigation and Power project had changed as it gained new Federal support. However, this support came with certain conditions that were to be met primarily by the citizens of Garfield County and the county seat of Burwell. *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of the renewed interest in the project and its conditions for passing the PWA review process: “The proposal of the PWA board was outlined by the representatives of the engineers is to the effect that a combined loan and grant of \$2,000,000 would be made to the North Loup district for the construction of an irrigation...power system providing that certain conditions and specifications could be met with. The conditions are that \$687,000 is to be an...gift by the government on the project and the balance...is to be in the shape of a loan...draw four percent interest...amortized for a period of thirty years. To secure the payment of the loan the government insists...the signing up of 30,000 acres of land at the rate of \$3 per acre for which the landowner receives water and ditch maintenance, the Village of Burwell must buy and consume from the power project \$25,000 and the City of Ord \$50,000 worth of power yearly at a fixed rate.”⁸⁸⁵ Despite these requirements placed on Garfield and Valley County residents, the project was agreed upon and finally two years later construction began.

By mid-1937, construction began on the project at nearly the same time work was being done on the reservoir near Ogallala. The July 22nd, 1937, issue of *The Burwell Tribune* described the earliest irrigation work near Burwell: “The first material for the Irrigation ditch dam across the Loup at Burwell was moved in the latter part of last week. Starting of the work on this part of the project has been slightly delayed on account of the contractor first taking up the dam below Ord, where it was thought that by speeding up the

⁸⁸⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, March 28, 1935, 1

work it would be possible to throw water into the ditch on the lower end this fall. The next ten days or two weeks will see the work on the dam at this place underway.”⁸⁸⁶ Subsequent work following July was slow and tedious; however, by September work began in earnest. *The Tribune* detailed the construction efforts and challenges in late-September 1937, under the heading “Commence Work On Dam:”

Driving the steel piling for the new irrigation dam just north of the north bridge commenced the first of the week. Already we understand that the contractor is finding the task slow by reason of the shale rock that covers the bottom of the river at this point. This was only to be expected as a lot of trouble was encountered with this rock foundation when the present bridge was erected and the old frame pile sustained bridge was in use contractors found it all but impossible to drive piling through the rock foundation. However, once they did get them down to stay, as we never heard of their being able to pull one after it had been hammered down.⁸⁸⁷

Eventually the rock conditions were overcome and by the spring of 1938 the dam was holding back dangerous flood waters from a significant spring storm. *The Tribune* chronicled the dam’s hardiness in the face of this challenge: “The Burwell Dam was a busy place between the hours of midnight and daylight this morning. A four inch rain near Kent resulted in a sudden raise of the waters of the Loup bringing with it rubbish that clogged the spillway and within a few minutes the lake rose rapidly and for a time it was feared that the dam would go out entirely. Although at a late hour farmers below the dam were notified and advised to move cattle and livestock to higher ground. Fortunately however the dam held and this was not necessary.”⁸⁸⁸ The environmental challenges the dam near Burwell faced were similar to the application obstacles it faced in its infancy. In the end, as with the Tri-County Project, the PWA recognized that the use of its funds for reclamation projects in the Sandhills , such as the one in Garfield County, was worthwhile and beneficial to locals for

⁸⁸⁶ *The Burwell Tribune*, July 22, 1937, 1

⁸⁸⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 23, 1937, 1

⁸⁸⁸ *The Burwell Tribune*, May 12, 1938, 1

the water source it channeled during years of drought and the employment opportunities its construction created. Other Sandhills counties constructed or considered constructing dams as a means to create employment opportunities. Two such counties were Sheridan and Cherry.

In late-1934, agriculturalists in Sheridan County called for irrigation projects similar to those being developed to the south along the North Platte River and to the southeast on the Loup. Unremitting drought led many ranchers to request some sort of water reclamation service in order to acquire more water resources. From these requests grew a campaign to dam the Niobrara River in Sheridan County. The November 22nd, 1934, issue of the *Sheridan County Star* detailed the need for such a structure:

On numerous occasions during the past year or two we have heard numerous complaints from ranchmen south of here relative to the drying up of their lakes. This condition, they say, has not only affected the stock water supply, but has also reduced the hay yield. Ranchers so affected have condemned the project launched a few years ago which called for the draining of many lakes in the more northernly (sic) part of the sand hill lake region. This plan, they say, has changed the entire water level of the entire sand hill region, and as a consequence, lakes further south have dried up. Under the present policy of the Federal government, practically all water conservation proposals with merit have been looked upon with much favor. Because of this a number of different proposals have been made looking to a development on the Niobrara river in this county. These proposals have covered power development, irrigation and park development. To date none of these have caught on to the extent of actual development. There is a possibility, however, of a Niobrara project possible of development at the minimum of expense, which would be far-reaching in its benefits. We refer to the water level raising possibilities through the lake region by damming (sic) the Niobrara at a suitable point...Whether such a project would go further than a sub-irrigation proposal could be left to developments. But it seems there is no question as to the benefits obtainable from raising the water level throughout this section, and especially in the sand hill regions.⁸⁸⁹

Despite Sheridan County residents' hopes at "cursing" the Niobrara, such a project failed to gather enough adequate large scale support, PWA or otherwise, to move beyond the theoretical phase.

⁸⁸⁹ *Sheridan County Star*, November 22, 1934, 1

Residents of Cherry County were more successful in their dam building efforts in 1938. The dam under construction on Minnechaduza Creek, which required new ponds, was to benefit the local fish hatchery. *The Valentine Republican* issue of July 22nd, 1938, described the dam's construction progress and purpose for use:

Considerable work in the way of clearing out trees and brush in the vicinity of the new dam to be built on Minnekadusa (sic) creek near the fish hatchery has already been accomplished, and some work has been done on the site of the dam. A canal has been dug, starting above the old dam, by which the waters of the creek are led past the new dam site, which is near the county bridge, so that the creek bed can be worked in. The new dam will have abutments twenty feet high, with a water level of sixteen feet. There will be about ninety feet of concrete and the balance of the three hundred foot dam will be of earth construction, but with a concrete core. This will raise the water level so that water can be piped to a tract south of the hatchery about twenty acres in extent, on which can be built many ponds, obviating the use of those built a few years ago west of the buildings, and some of those up the canyon, which are now in danger of washing out every time there is a big rain on the table land north of the hatchery. Mel Merritt, in charge of the work, states that the new dam will also result in the formation of a nice little lake, and that the surrounding brush can be cleared out so as to make a nice natural park near the dam.⁸⁹⁰

While it is unclear if this hatchery dam was paid for with Federal, state, or local funds, it is nonetheless another example of the desire of Nebraska Sandhills' residents to concurrently be good stewards of their environment while at the same time finding new methods to make it more sustainable for themselves and other animals. Thus, in the 1930s, water reclamation projects were viewed by Sandhillers as essential methods to simultaneously conquer the problems of drought and unemployment through the water and construction jobs yielded by such projects. In the end the projects proved successful in combating both drought and unemployment and were long-lasting. Charles A. Flowerday wrote of the significance of the state's Depression-era irrigation projects in the modern day: "When finished in 1938 to 1941, five federally funded projects irrigated a total of 285,000 acres of cropland. Today, this still represents one-quarter of all surface-water irrigation and more than 40 percent of all

⁸⁹⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, July 22, 1938, 1

irrigation projects in the state.”⁸⁹¹ Despite significant obstacles, irrigation projects in the Sandhills were largely supported by the Public Works Administration and their successful construction and completion represented the predominant progressive spirit that prevailed in the region during the most difficult days of the Great Depression. However, not all Sandhills counties were fortunate enough to be awarded irrigation projects within their boundaries. Many found other beneficial uses for Public Works Administration funds that adequately improved Sandhills’ infrastructure.

In comparison to requests for PWA funds for Sandhills irrigation and public works projects, Sandhills construction projects for new public buildings were received with less obstruction or debate amongst PWA commissioners and funds were generally made easily available. During the late 1930s, Sandhills school buildings, city halls, and courthouses were approved for PWA funding; however, as with the bridge projects in Keith County many of their successful completions were dependent upon the passing of community or county bond measures to match PWA allotments. In early- October 1935, while bureaucrats were still revising plans for the Garfield and Loup County irrigation projects, the PWA instead allotted \$54,000.00 to School District Fifteen of Burwell in Garfield County to be applied to the construction of a new school building.⁸⁹² *The Burwell Tribune* described the allotment’s disbursement and what was necessary of the county’s citizens to assure the new building’s successful construction: “This is a forty-five per cent grant on a new building that is to cost approximately \$120,000. A special election must now be held on the issuance of a bond of a sufficient amount to carry the balance of fifty-five percent. In order to take advantage of the

⁸⁹¹ Charles A. Flowerday, Ed., *Flat Water: A History of Nebraska and Its Water*, Resource Report No. 12 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Lincoln Conservation and Survey Division, 1993), 120

⁸⁹² *The Burwell Tribune*, October 3, 1935, 1

grant work on the new building must start on or prior to December 15.”⁸⁹³ Garfield County residents exhibited progressive attitudes endemic to Sandhillers of the era and at the voting booth passed the bond measure. One year later, when PWA State Engineer Inspector, Joseph Evans, visited the county, the project was near completion. *The Tribune* noted Evans arrival in Garfield County in early-October 1936 and the project’s progress: “Mr. Evans was accompanied by F. E. Nienze, his office Engineer and Harold O. Foster, Traveling Engineer. All three officials complemented the Board of Education and the Contractors on the progress being made and the quality of work being performed. Mr. Evans reported the project fifty per cent completed and stated that it should be finished about February 1st, 1937, if present progress is maintained.”⁸⁹⁴ Burwell was not alone in erecting a new school building for its students with the aid of the Federal government. Other Sandhills communities also followed suit during 1936 and 1937. Stapleton, the county-seat of Logan County, was one such community.

In Stapleton, like Burwell, the Public Works Administration furnished forty-five percent of the community’s new high school’s construction costs.⁸⁹⁵ The local newspaper reported on the start of the school’s construction, contractors, and those responsible for its design in early- May of 1936:

Ground was broken Monday of this week in the actual construction of the new \$48,000 Baker Rural high school building in Stapleton and it is expected that the concrete will be started by the last of the week. A car of steel construction material was unloaded this week and a car of brick is expected in a few days. W. L. Phillips’ Sons of North Platte have the general contract for erecting the building and Dale and Howard Phillips are personally in charge of the work. Charles M. Nye of Omaha, project supervisor for the PWA, is here in the interest of the federal government, which is furnishing 45 percent of the price of the building. J. F. Reynolds of Lincoln, architect, has been here this week to

⁸⁹³ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 3, 1935, 1

⁸⁹⁴ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 8, 1936, 1

⁸⁹⁵ *Blaine County Booster*, May 7, 1936, 1

assist in interpreting plans and specifications. Work will be rushed on the project during the summer in order that the building may be ready for occupancy next fall in time for the opening of school.⁸⁹⁶

In early-1937, the town of Halsey worked on a similar project to complement its auditorium which had been built with CWA funds while the village of Brewster in Blaine County also constructed a new educational facility for its local students.⁸⁹⁷ Like he had done just months earlier in Burwell, PWA State Engineer Inspector Evans traveled to these Sandhills locales to assess their progress in February 1937. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of Evans's trip to the Sandhills towns of Brewster, Halsey, and Alliance as well as the northwest Panhandle community of Chadron:

Joseph D. Evans, State Engineer Inspector for the Public Works Administration in Omaha, was in this vicinity recently inspecting P. W. A. projects. He made a trip to the Halsey and Brewster schools, accompanied by F. F. Wulf, Resident Engineer Inspector. Mr. Evans continued on his trip Monday morning, stopping first at Alliance, where a City Hall and Auditorium is nearing completion, then at Chadron, where the County Court House is under construction, thence down Highway No. 20. Mr. Evans found Highway No. 16 from Omaha to Wahoo very icy, but from there to Dunning the roads were very good. He expressed his pleasure at visiting again the open cattle country and admired the progressive spirit of the communities...⁸⁹⁸

Following the lead of communities such as Halsey and Brewster, other Sandhills towns sought support both from the PWA and local voters in constructing better schools as the decade waned. Under the heading "Local School Bond Election Friday: PWA Application Must Be Made By October 1st," the *Sheridan County Star* reported in its September 22, 1938, issue: "Tomorrow, Friday 23rd, is a red letter day for School district number 2, Rushville Voters are asked to place their stamp of approval on a bond issue of \$28,000, this sum to be matched with a grant of \$27,000 from the federal PWA funds, for the rection (sic) of a new elementary school building. The new building, for which the necessary temporary plans have been made to be submitted to federal authorities following the bond election, is

⁸⁹⁶ *Stapleton Enterprise in Blaine County Booster*, May 7, 1936, 1

⁸⁹⁷ *Blaine County Booster*, February 11, 1937, 1

⁸⁹⁸ *Blaine County Booster*, February 11, 1937, 1

designed to handle 300 pupils. The building would be of brick construction and would be located on the lot where the old building now is. The new building would face east.”⁸⁹⁹ The vote for the elementary school bond issue was successful as a contractor from Salina, Kansas, was awarded the job of school construction in late- March 1939.⁹⁰⁰

At the same time Rushville residents were debating contributing to construction of a new elementary school, the people of Alliance, as they had done earlier with their City Hall and Auditorium, accepted PWA funds for a school. The *Star* reported: “By a vote of 2 to 1 the voters of Alliance last Saturday approved a bond issue of \$27,500 to finance the districts share of an addition to their high school building. PWA will furnish \$22,500 toward the total cost of construction.”⁹⁰¹ From these examples, it is apparent that Sandhills residents throughout the region overwhelmingly supported the improvement of educational facilities, with Federal aid, at a time when the region was experiencing environmental and financial hardship. Schools were viewed as a source of community pride and stability. By accepting bond referendums, Sandhills residents demonstrated their willingness to contribute to the continued viability and existence of their communities even when many individuals had little disposable income. A town with a school was more likely to survive due to the basic fact that it offered educational services and was more likely to attract outside business patrons who came to view school sporting events or bring their children into town to school from the countryside. Communities that did not offer such facilities risked their demise during the financially and environmentally uncertain 1930s. In short, by supporting the construction of new schools or the improvement of existing ones, Sandhillers fought to keep their towns

⁸⁹⁹ *Sheridan County Star*, September 22, 1938, 1

⁹⁰⁰ *Sheridan County Star*, March 23, 1939, 1

⁹⁰¹ *Sheridan County Star*, September 22, 1938, 1

from becoming abandoned desolate ghost towns during the Great Depression. Passing school bond referendums were not the only way to assure such efforts. Sandhills' residents also agreed to invest in other important building and infrastructure measures during the late-1930s and early-1940s to insure their communities' continued survivability and prosperity.

Besides schools, Sandhills residents supported the construction of city halls and courthouses as such local government structures contributed to their community's viability and stability, or at least the appearance thereof. In late-1935, just as Alliance did later in early-1937, Ainsworth residents agreed to the construction of a new \$25,000 city hall of which forty-five percent was met by PWA funds and the remaining fifty-five percent was gained through a voted and agreed upon bond measure.⁹⁰² In 1938, their neighbors to the east in Brown County petitioned the PWA for funds for the construction of a new courthouse in Bassett. Eventually Federal funds were granted for this project; however, once again locals were asked to contribute their share of responsibility for funding. The July 7th, 1938, issue of the *Rock County Leader* reported on the project's progression:

According to information received here President Roosevelt last Thursday approved the Rock county PWA project for a new county court house. The amount approved was for \$30,117 of federal donations. From local boosters of the project it is learned that the county's contribution must be somewhere within \$17,000. This amount can not be exactly determined until more tentative plans have been submitted and approved-but from the state headquarters it is learned that it will not exceed \$17,000. There is only one way in which the county's share can be secured and that is through a bond issue of some kind. The total cost of the entire project under a preliminary survey would be close to \$50,000 exclusive of the grounds which are already county property.⁹⁰³

As the decade closed not all Public Works Administration projects in the region were so grandiose. As many CWA projects had aided in community or county road or street improvements, so \$155,000 of PWA funds were used in Gordon to fix up the decrepit town

⁹⁰² *Brown County Democrat*, October 4, 1935, 1

⁹⁰³ *Rock County Leader*, July 7, 1938, 1

streets.⁹⁰⁴ At the same time, Rushville also hired contractor Harry C. Minnick of Alliance to build a \$7,000 city water well paid for with PWA money.⁹⁰⁵ Such projects did not cost as much as larger construction efforts, such as irrigation systems and schools; nonetheless they were significant for maintaining community progress during the destabilized 1930s.

Not all requests for Public Works Administration funds were successful. Despite their initial rejection, many local Sandhills communities completed the projects on their own out of necessity if they had the funds to do so. This was the case in Hyannis in the late-1930s. In late-September 1938, the Hyannis Village Board applied for a PWA grant to build a \$30,000.00 light plant, of which the Public Works Administration would be responsible for \$13,500.00 of its construction.⁹⁰⁶ In early- November the Hyannis Village Board learned of the project's PWA rejection from Congressman Harry Coffee.⁹⁰⁷ While their dream for a new plant was dead, Hyannis Village Board members were not deterred and quickly set themselves with the task of figuring out how to improve the community's existing electrical facilities which were in dire straits. A new engine was needed for the Hyannis Light Plant so shortly after learning of their rejection by the PWA the Hyannis Village Board acquired a slightly used one-hundred twenty horsepower Fairbanks Morse engine to meet this need.⁹⁰⁸ The *Grant County Tribune* reported on the quality and age of the used engine: "The cost of the engine is \$3,750, plus freight from Stuart, Iowa (where it is now located) and installation charges. The total cost is expected to be about \$5,000. One of the 25 horsepower engines now at the plant was traded in at \$250. Work will start immediately on removing it. The

⁹⁰⁴ *Sheridan County Star*, March 23, 1939, 1

⁹⁰⁵ *Sheridan County Star*, March 23, 1939, 1

⁹⁰⁶ *Grant County Tribune*, September 21, 1938, 1

⁹⁰⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, November 16, 1938, 1

⁹⁰⁸ *Grant County Tribune*, November 16, 1938, 1

new engine is a converted Diesel and has been run about 90 days. The Fairbanks Morse Co. gives a new engine guarantee on it.”⁹⁰⁹ The improvements to the existing light plant continued later in the month. The *Grant County Tribune* wrote of more help the plant was getting from Iowa: “More improvements for the Hyannis municipal power plant were contracted for at a special meeting of the village board Wednesday, November 23, when arrangements were made with George Young, registered electrician of Des Moines, Ia., who was present at the meeting, to remodel the switch board and install a voltage regulator. Mr. Young said it would take about two weeks to get the material required here and he will then return to begin work.”⁹¹⁰ The two weeks turned into two months as Young finally completed his work on the light plant’s switchboard in early-February 1939 while en route to California for vacation.⁹¹¹ Young became a regular fixture himself in Hyannis as he returned again in October 1939 to attach new lightning arrestors for the sum of \$372.00.⁹¹² By the autumn of 1941, Young’s efforts proved successful as the Hyannis light plant was again fully operational and refurbished. The Hyannis Village Board, once again placing importance on the town’s electricity, voted to increase the plant’s employees’ salaries. The *Grant County Tribune* described their financial raise: “The members of the village board took action at their regular meeting Monday night to increase the salaries of the three municipal light plant employees \$10 each per month. This was done in line with increased living costs.”⁹¹³ While the Hyannis light plant was not a CWA or PWA project, it nonetheless provides evidence of Sandhillers’ concern for rebuilding their local infrastructure during the 1930s. If they could not acquire government funding to help with this, they used a combination of ingenuity and

⁹⁰⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, November 16, 1938, 1

⁹¹⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, November 30, 1938, 1

⁹¹¹ *Grant County Tribune*, February 8, 1939, 1

⁹¹² *Grant County Tribune*, October 18, 1939, 1

⁹¹³ *Grant County Tribune*, October 8, 1941, 1

piece meal efforts to accomplish what was necessary to meet the modern standards of much of the rest of the country. Such resilience was endemic of many residents on the Great Plains during this era. Despite the Hyannis example, the CWA's and PWA's influence on Sandhills infrastructure was widely apparent to and appreciated by Sandhillers of the era. The modernizing impact it had on what, it could be argued, was still the region's frontier environment could not be denied. The improved infrastructure left behind in the hills after the Depression was Roosevelt's greatest lasting legacy to the region. Sandhillers still appreciate the benefits of these large-scale public works programs, most apparent in Kingsley Dam and Lake McConaughy, to this day. The Works Progress Administration continued efforts at progress.

The Works Progress Administration and the Sandhills: Continuing Roosevelt's Legacy

At the same time that large scale public works projects were being facilitated in the Sandhills by the Public Works Administration, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided funding for smaller projects within communities that helped put forth Roosevelt's agenda of progress and improvement as a means to counter the unemployment, malaise, and feelings of morbidity that were common during the Great Depression. In many ways, inadvertent or not, Roosevelt's WPA eliminated many of the remaining frontier aspects of the American West that historian Frederick Jackson Turner believed had already passed from the American scene in 1893. Ronald Edsforth wrote of the Works Progress Administration's purpose and accomplishments: "The second New Deal's biggest work relief program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), also contributed greatly to the modernization of rural America. WPA workers recruited from local relief rolls constructed or renovated thousands of public buildings, water systems, and recreational facilities in small towns across the

continent. WPA workers also built or repaired 572,000 miles of rural roads before the program was terminated in 1943.”⁹¹⁴ Like the CWA and PWA before it, the Works Progress Administration was significant for providing work to Sandhills’ individuals who needed it; however, unlike the CWA it was not constricted by a deadline and a short bureaucratic lifespan. T. H. Watkins wrote of the WPA’s contribution to the New Deal and the overall impact it had on American citizens:

...the Works Progress Administration... was the most massive and comprehensive effort ever undertaken in the nation’s history up to that time to ensure that every able-bodied American male- and even some able-bodied American females- would be able to earn at least the basic needs of life for themselves and their families. Even more than the New Deal’s earlier relief programs, it was responsible for the creation of a new and immutable intimacy between the people and their government- an intimacy so thoroughly in place today that it is difficult to remember that it once was a revolutionary concept. After the success of the CWA program in the winter of 1933-1934, Hopkins was convinced that a major work program was the only form of federal relief that would put food on the tables of workers and their families without starving them of their pride, and in the middle of September, 1934, he had gone to Roosevelt with a proposal to expand the FERA’s work program by another four million jobs...He signed the WPA’s authorizing legislation, the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, on April 8, and by early summer the new agency, with Hopkins at its head, was spending the first of the more than \$11 billion the agency would go through before being canceled in 1943...Over the course of its life, the WPA would employ more than 8.5 million people in three thousand counties across the land on 1.4 million individual projects. The workers of the WPA , according to historian Edward Robb Ellis, ‘built 651,087 miles of highways, roads and streets; constructed, repaired or improved 124,031 bridges; erected 125,110 public buildings, created 8,192 public parks; built or improved 853 airports.’ They did so at an average salary of only \$41.57 a month, but it was better than utter joblessness and the thin and demeaning comfort of the dole.⁹¹⁵

Many of these unemployed hailed directly from the Sandhills.

During the Great Depression it was not always easy to find work for all of the unemployed on Sandhills WPA jobs as some projects could only handle so many individuals. Worse yet, there was not always an overabundance of Works Progress Administration projects available to work on in the hills. The latter was a concern for Sheridan County’s unemployed in August 1935. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of the temporary closing of the county’s relief office do to a lack of available government projects: “County Relief Director Packard is busy closing the affairs of his office preparatory to closing relief work in

⁹¹⁴ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 222

⁹¹⁵ Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 248-249

the county at the end of the month... What the future of relief work will be in the county is yet undetermined. The county-state contract expired the first of August, but was renewed for one month pending a definite program. According to unemployment Director Margaret Peters there are 1500 now registered in this county for work relief. Of this number 600 are on active work relief, while 273 are on direct relief... it is the purpose of the Federal Government to provide work for all on relief through WPA projects.”⁹¹⁶ Whereas Sheridan County struggled to get WPA projects in August 1935, other Sandhills counties were still unsure of the application process. One such county was Thomas County. On August 21st, 1935, the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* published a letter it received directly from the Works Progress Administration located in Alliance which informed Thomas County residents of the purpose of the WPA and how to apply to it for aid. The letter read: “Editor Newspaper: ‘Your community can get paved streets or other improvements such as school buildings, swimming pool, street surfacing, water main extensions, sewer system and farm-to-market roads, at one-third the regular cost by making a project application to the Works Progress Administration office at Alliance, Nebr. The Federal government will pay a major share of the cost...’”⁹¹⁷ The situation was similar in late-September 1935 in Greeley County as community leaders of Greeley asked for a petition to be signed by the town’s residents requesting WPA funds to employ individuals to build new curbs and gutters for the town streets.⁹¹⁸

By October 1935, WPA projects began to be implemented in the Sandhills. Many offered work to those who were talented in writing or research. Edsforth wrote of the

⁹¹⁶ *Sheridan County Star*, August 15, 1935, 1

⁹¹⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, August 21, 1935, 1

⁹¹⁸ *The Greeley Citizen*, September 26, 1935, 1

opportunities the WPA provided writers: “By 1943 tens of thousands of impoverished painters, sculptors, musicians, actors, and writers had earned WPA security wages.”⁹¹⁹ Two such writer friendly projects were implemented in Rock County and dealt with library and archival work. The *Rock County Leader* described both projects: “A library, or community service program, will cost \$576 plus sponsor’s contribution of \$192, and work will be given two persons for a period of one year. The state administrator has also approved another project for the Rock county work on which will be started soon. This project consists of re-writing old county records in the county judge’s office and will require the employment of five persons for a period of 12 months. The expenditure for this work will be \$2,640.”⁹²⁰ In November 1935, while many WPA projects in Nebraska were temporarily stopped due to Federal funding issues wherein only \$4,970,000.00 out of the promised \$11,000,000.00 was available for use, Sheridan County, as in Rock County, received approval for a library in Rushville.⁹²¹

By the end of 1935, the unemployment situation was such that a significant number of Sandhillers relied on WPA projects for employment as did Nebraskans, in general. The *Rock County Leader* reported of the employment situation in that county as the year came to an end: “Semi-monthly report of the WPA for the first half of November showing the number of persons employed and earnings, lists Rock county as having a total of 35 persons employed on projects. Of these 34 came from relief rolls and for the two weeks work were paid \$476, 1 came from non-relief rolls and was paid \$37...During the following week ending November 23, employment in the county jumped to 53, with 52 from relief rolls and 1

⁹¹⁹ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 224

⁹²⁰ *Rock County Leader*, October 24, 1935, 1

⁹²¹ *Rock County Leader*, November 28, 1935, 1; *Sheridan County Star*, November 7, 1935, 1

from non-relief. 49 of these persons were men, 4 women...In the entire state the total number of persons employed by the WPA increased that week from 4,029 to 8,303, reaching a maximum on November 30 of 17,459.”⁹²² Available WPA projects continued to expand as the decade progressed. In early-August 1936, the game refuges of the Sandhills let jobs to men who were willing to do manual labor. The Crescent Lake Migratory Game Bird Refuge offered fifty jobs to men willing to construct roads and build fences whereas the refuge near Valentine provided work to one-hundred fifty men with similar skill sets.⁹²³ Nonetheless, employment was still a concern for some Sandhills counties as 1936 came to an end. In Brown County, 257 people were unemployed out of a total population of 5,772, whereas there were 250 out of 3,207 in Garfield, 417 out of 5,099 in Garden, 541 out of 8,442 in Greeley, 1,192 out of 16,509 in Holt, 1,188 out of 25,627 in Lincoln, 335 out of 6,721 in Keith, 190 out of 3,366 in Rock, and 142 out of 2,335 in Wheeler.⁹²⁴ Where the county populations were lower, there was less unemployment. In Arthur County there was only one person listed as unemployed out of a total county population of 1,344 whereas in Hooker there were 53 people out of 1,180 and in Blaine 25 out of a total population of 1,584.⁹²⁵ While many Sandhillers were employed through the New Deal there were still clearly some bureaucratic issues that needed resolved to guarantee full employment. These issues led to tensions in Sheridan County in 1937.

Sandhills women were also employed by WPA projects; however, their employment programs sometimes received attention for all the wrong reasons. In early-1937, women that

⁹²² *Rock County Leader*, December 12, 1935, 1

⁹²³ *Garden County News*, August 6, 1936, 1

⁹²⁴ Twenty-sixth Biennial Report, Department of Labor, June 1, 1935 to December 1, 1936, Lincoln, Nebraska, 12-13

⁹²⁵ Twenty-sixth Biennial Report, Department of Labor, June 1, 1935 to December 1, 1936, Lincoln, Nebraska, 12

were removed from relief roll lists protested in Rushville. The *Sheridan County Star* reported on January 14th, 1937:

Not to be out-done by the General Motors “Sit-Down Strike” Rushville was the scene of one on Tuesday. The local Relief office was forced last week to take several women off the Sewing project. On Tuesday 16 women from Hay Springs met at the Court House and demanded to be put back on the rolls, in some form that they might receive the porper (sic) clothing and food. Our local office and the Commissioners were helpless to do anything but wired in to Lincoln to see if there was anything that could be done. Upon being informed that nothing could be done that day- the ladies left.⁹²⁶

This example illustrates some of the problems inherent with the Federal relief program.

While it was designed to provide jobs for those who needed work, it was very difficult to determine who needed work or who was struggling financially more than others. This led some individuals to feel as if they were being short-changed by the Federal government. One of the nation’s most prominent female citizens supported women actively speaking up about their desperate plights during the 1930s and thus would have appreciated the Sheridan County women’s efforts to keep their jobs. Joseph P. Lash wrote of Eleanor Roosevelt’s views on proactivity during the Depression: “She directed her appeal to women and young people particularly, because she thought they were less involved with the past than the men, and, therefore, freer to consider new ideas and accept drastic change.”⁹²⁷ Thus, in their efforts to protest against the WPA demanding they keep their jobs, Sheridan County women were ironically doing what the First Lady would have approved of: speaking out. As previously mentioned, this was not the first time Sheridan County had had troubles with the WPA. In 1935 they were short of projects. Eleven months later the situation with the Sheridan County sewing project was much improved. The *Sheridan County Star* reported on the project’s success:

⁹²⁶ *Sheridan County Star*, January 14, 1937,1

⁹²⁷ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship Based on Eleanor Roosevelt’s Private Papers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 482

According to Mrs. Cleo Jensen, County Supervisor, thirty-six women are now employed in this county on the W. P. A. Sewing Project. During this year the federal government has spent \$25,176.00 on this national project. Sheridan County has received their portion of this fund and in addition the county has appropriated \$1,164. During this year 9,699 garments have been made under the county sewing project. These (sic) consist of complete layettes, dresses, shirts, under garments and comforters...The garments are for distribution in Sheridan county only and go to people who are eligible for aid. According to the County Director not only does the WPA Sewing Project give work to the 36 women but the clothing made by them go to the needy, excepting the sewing women themselves, thus relieving the county government of considerable relief expenditures.⁹²⁸

Thus, WPA projects were utilized in multiple facets to handle the county's problems even if at times they could be controversial and cause tensions in a period that needed no more.

Many Sandhills counties utilized Works Progress Administration funds for repairs on or the construction of local government buildings. Whereas towns like Alliance had used PWA funding to build a city hall, WPA funds were likewise used by many to build or repair the region's courthouses. In mid-October 1937, four individuals were hired to fix the Garden County courthouse roof in Oshkosh as well as paint the building's inside walls.⁹²⁹ From 1938 to 1940, Rock County likewise went through the process of soliciting WPA funds to construct a new courthouse and voting on a bond measure to match the Federal allotment. The October 6th, 1938, issue of the *Rock County Leader* noted the amount of the required bond and the poor condition of the existing court house: "The proposed bond issue will be in the amount of \$17,000.00. That is the total amount that the people of Rock county will have to raise in order to have a new courthouse and jail...The present building is very difficult to heat because of the large amount of heat loss due to its poor condition, and because each room must be heated by a stove. The new building will be heated by a furnace, making it easier to regulate the amount of heat and will of course hold the heat much better than the present building. These two factors will thus make the expense of heating no greater, and

⁹²⁸ *Sheridan County Star*, November 4, 1937, 1

⁹²⁹ *Garden County News*, October 14, 1937, 1

possibly less, than at present.”⁹³⁰ Nearly two years later, Rock County received additional funding from the WPA to complete the new courthouse in the center of Bassett and improve its surrounding aesthetics. The *Leader* described the new allotment and its proposed usage in mid-February 1940: “...an additional federal grant had been sanctioned by the Works Progress Administration and approved by the President, in the sum of \$3,690 for completion of the Rock county court house. Under the provisions of the additional grant the money is to be expended in demolishing the old building, building walks, curbs, gutters and drives, and in grading and landscaping the grounds. Work on the county’s new court house is rapidly nearing completion and it is thought that officials will be able to move in some time between March 15 and April 1.”⁹³¹ Thus, Rock County’s courthouse became a symbol of progress, similar to the stereotypical American image of a “city on a hill,” as more of the region’s nineteenth century “frontier” imagery past away.

Unlike Rock County, Sheridan County did not require a brand new building; however, what needed done to the structure was still a major undertaking. In the spring of 1940, Sheridan County also received grant money totaling \$2,567.00 for refurbishments on their court house.⁹³² Throughout the years the structure fell into disrepair and needed extensive cleaning. The *Sheridan County Star* reported in its April 25, 1940, issue on the work done: “The work to be performed consists of cleaning walls, woodwork, doors ceilings, furniture and small equipment; cleaning, washing and repairing furnishings such as curtains, draperies, and upholstery; renewing stair rails, molding window casings, mopboards, wains-

⁹³⁰ *Rock County Leader*, October 6, 1938, 1

⁹³¹ *Rock County Leader*, February 15, 1940, 1

⁹³² *Sheridan County Star*, April 25, 1940, 1

coating and doors by varnishing; and patching and painting damaged walls and ceilings.”⁹³³

Thus, throughout the Sandhills, county courthouses were improved with WPA funds. The refurbishment of these structures represented Sandhillers’ resilience through the desolation of the Depression and efforts at modernizing their society.

During the last three years of the Great Depression, other projects were completed in the Sandhills that improved the quality of life of most of the region’s residents. In the spring of 1938, the town of Burwell received \$10,056.00 from the WPA to improve the town’s water lines and in July of 1940 the people of Lewellen celebrated the opening of a new \$13,000.00 swimming pool that was built solely with WPA labor.⁹³⁴ In the spring of 1941, Orlan B. Winter, editor of the *Blaine County Booster* in Dunning, received word from U. S. Representative Harry B. Coffee that Roosevelt had authorized \$30, 268.00 of Works Progress Administration funds for the improvement of various roads in Blaine County.⁹³⁵ From this example, it is apparent that Sandhillers utilized several New Deal agencies to improve the frontier conditions of their roads.

On the eve of the United States entry into World War II, the WPA was again making headlines throughout the region. The *Blaine County Booster* reported on November 6th, 1941: “Effective with all payroll periods beginning on and after November 1, 1941, an increase in wages will be given WPA certified worker...during the present emergency to assist in the meeting of increased costs of living. This additional payment amounts to an increase in the earnings of \$4.80 for 120 hours on the 4- week basis for persons assigned in Unskilled ‘B,’ Unskilled ‘A,’ Intermediate and Skilled classifications. For those assigned to

⁹³³ *Sheridan County Star*, April 25, 1940, 1

⁹³⁴ *The Burwell Tribune*, May 19, 1938, 1; *Garden County News*, July 25, 1940, 1

⁹³⁵ *Blaine County Booster*, March 13, 1941, 1

Professional and Technical wage class, the increase for the 120 hours or 4-week basis will be \$3.60... This increase on the basis of the number of persons employed as of September 30 will amount to approximately \$67,430.00 per fiscal month in the state of Nebraska.”⁹³⁶ With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Sandhills residents’ concerns over how their taxes would be impacted by this news quickly disappeared. Nonetheless, throughout the latter years of the Great Depression Sandhills counties applied for and willingly accepted Works Progress Administration funds just as they had funding from the CWA and PWA. All three of these New Deal programs were overall viewed positively by Sandhills residents as they had provided projects to improve Sandhills infrastructure and the funds to employ the region’s needy in such endeavors. However, not all New Deal programs were viewed with such respect by the region’s mainly agrarian populace. One such program that was not enthusiastically received was the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

Democrats No More: The Negative Impact of the Agricultural Adjustment Act

Roosevelt’s New Deal was overwhelmingly welcomed in the Sandhills immediately following his inauguration and throughout the rest of the 1930s the programs that dealt with infrastructure improvement and job creation, such as the CWA, PWA, and WPA, were utilized and appreciated to their full effect. However, Sandhills agriculturalists came to view the New Deal with skepticism due to the implementation of one program they viewed as a threat to their economic and agricultural autonomy. The Agricultural Adjustment Act was one of the original New Deal programs implemented by Roosevelt during his first one-hundred days in office. It was controversial at the time (and still is viewed as such by many economic pundits today) as it was imposed to raise agricultural prices by controlling which

⁹³⁶ *Blaine County Booster*, November 6, 1941, 8

agricultural commodities were allowed into the market. Ronald Edsforth wrote of the tumultuous conditions in early 1933 which inspired Roosevelt to create the AAA and its purpose:

The President wanted to resolve the farm crisis before spring planting. He knew that millions of farmers were desperate, and that stabilizing the banks had so far done nothing to address their problems. Mass demonstrations and defiance of property laws continued in the most distressed areas. FDR realized that government inaction would provoke even greater disorders... The extraordinary bill he sent to Congress on March 16th asked for a grant of power to plan the nation's output of food and fiber... With Franklin Roosevelt's full support, Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace and his new Assistant Secretary Rexford Tugwell presented a plan for voluntary domestic allotment- a scheme that would pay farmers who agreed to reduce production of specified commodities. Wallace and Tugwell feared a knockdown fight with proponents of other ideas; instead they found the agricultural establishment nervous and compliant. The farm leaders were easily persuaded to support a delegation of broad authority to the Secretary of Agriculture after he promised to include in the bill a variety of policies to raise commodity prices. Only inflation was counted out. Thus the proposal that emerged on March 16th temporarily pleased almost all of the agricultural establishment.⁹³⁷

The Agricultural Adjustment Act was at first welcomed throughout the Great Plains by agriculturalists as a means to effectively preserve their way of life against the environmental, psychological, and financial consequences of the region's destructive and persistent drought. Historian R. Douglas Hurt wrote of their most basic reasons for participating in the program:

"Nearly all Great Plains farmers participated in the AAA program. Indeed, they could not afford to do otherwise. Although they preferred to plant as much wheat as possible and hope for rain, they had little choice but to accept AAA checks: they needed the money."⁹³⁸ For instance, in Haskell County, Kansas, farmers welcomed the AAA as it provided them some guaranteed income during a time when income from agricultural production was limited.

Historian Donald Worster wrote of the program's reception in southwestern Kansas:

"Although a cutback program was on the face of it absurd in a region where not much was growing, Haskell farmers did not waste time laughing. The government did not care whether your prospects for a crop were good or bad, so long as you agreed not to plant some of your

⁹³⁷ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 171-172

⁹³⁸ Hurt, *The Big Empty*, 101

fields. Haskell farmers therefore signed up *en masse*; 99 per cent of the county's operators- and in five townships it was 100 per cent- made contracts with AAA by mid-September 1933. Under the terms of the contract they agreed to plant that fall, and for the next two years, only the acreage allowed them by Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace."⁹³⁹

Farmers throughout the state of Kansas welcomed the program as most of their personal financial situations were in dire straits. Renowned Kansas historian Craig Miner wrote of the AAA's hope-inspiring affects in western Kansas: "When the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) bill passed in 1933 during the famous hundred days of legislation, that attitude of being willing to give it a try prevailed. A Dodge City editorial offered that the bill, providing for restrictions on acres planted (allotment), low interest loans, and commodity price subsidies, 'has aroused new hopes throughout the country,' and that there was little criticism of it."⁹⁴⁰ Meade County farmer Lawrence Svobida observed that the rare Kansans who were critical of the AAA were very hypocritical when it came to accepting money from the Federal Government. Svobida wrote of his observations of these type of Kansans in 1933: "There were mouthy individuals who seized every opportunity to run down this entire program, talking as long as anyone would listen to them, condemning it as useless, crooked, revolutionary, or dictatorial; but it was noteworthy that when the first AAA payments were made available, shortly before Christmas, these same wordy critics made a beeline to the courthouse."⁹⁴¹

While some Great Plains agriculturalists may have had reservations about the program, as Svobida discussed, most still took advantage of what it offered them. Cotton

⁹³⁹ Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 156

⁹⁴⁰ Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940*, 260

⁹⁴¹ Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*, 77

farmers in the Texas panhandle benefitted from the AAA just as their wheat farming brethren in Kansas did. Geoff Cunfer wrote of Texas farmer William DeLoach's experiences with the Agricultural Adjustment Act in Lamb County, Texas: "In 1933 DeLoach plowed up 55 acres of already-growing cotton in exchange for a check from the federal government. Lamb County led the state in the cotton-reduction program, bringing nearly \$1.4 million into the county in 1933. The federal money revived business in the area. In January 1934 the DeLoaches' son Bud, now farming on his own, bought his first tractor."⁹⁴² For farmers mired in the depths of the Oklahoma dust bowl, the Agricultural Adjustment Act was also seen as a necessary and virtuous tool that would pave the way to prosperity. Oklahoman Caroline Henderson wrote in a July 26th, 1935, letter to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace: "To ourselves, injured by twenty-seven years of experience to the 'plan-as-you-go' system of agriculture, dependent principally upon the vagaries of the shifting seasons, the very flexibility of the [AAA] plans, the apparent willingness of those in charge to adapt the program to new or unforeseen conditions, gives us confidence in the sincerity of the purpose to prepare the way for better days in agriculture...In our part of the country the voluntary responses to the campaign for controlled production as an experiment for the benefit of farmers was practically unanimous."⁹⁴³ Agriculturalists in northeastern Colorado, not far from the Sandhills' southwestern borders, also welcomed Federal assistance in their drought ridden lands. Jean Gray wrote of how farmers reacted to the AAA in Phillips County, Colorado: "In December 1933, 900 Phillips County farmers signed contracts under the AAA's wheat allotment and production control program. By the following January, the number increased to 1,400. These farmers received \$115,000 in subsidies for land kept out

⁹⁴² Cunfer, *On The Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment*, 171

⁹⁴³ Caroline Henderson, *Letters From The Dust Bowl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 140, 143

of production that season.”⁹⁴⁴ In 1933, as the rest of their Great Plains brethren had done, Nebraskans also accepted Roosevelt’s new agricultural legislation. Nebraska historians James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle wrote of the AAA’s immediate impact in Nebraska: “Little could be done regarding crops for 1933, but emergency livestock reductions were carried out in the fall of the year.”⁹⁴⁵ These reductions had a significant impact on the Sandhills in particular and in subsequent years had a direct effect on the region’s political views.

Early in the AAA’s implementation, Sandhills agriculturalists similarly accepted the program as a cure to all their agrarian ills and misfortunes as their Great Plains neighbors had. Throughout the summer of 1933, Sandhills’ newspaper editors informed their readers about and encouraged them to participate in the AAA’s efforts to buy Sandhills hogs. The August 24th, 1933, issue of the *Rock County Leader* detailed the hog buying program: “The United States government went into the hog business this week as its first step in an effort to decrease the pig population and establish prices throughout the cornbelt (sic)...The main idea is to purchase pigs of from 25 to 100 pounds, and sows weighing around 275 pounds due to farrow soon. By doing this the government hopes to eliminate the fall crop of pork.”⁹⁴⁶ In Hooker County, the local newspaper informed readers how the program benefitted the nation’s poor and indigent: “Pigs weighing 25 to 30 pounds are bought at \$9.50 per hundred and the price is graduated down to \$6 per hundred for those weighing 96 to 100 pounds. Piggy sows weighing 275 pounds and over are bought at the current market, plus a bonus of

⁹⁴⁴ Jean Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun And The High Plains: Northeastern Colorado History* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2013), 88

⁹⁴⁵ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, Third Edition (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 320

⁹⁴⁶ *Rock County Leader*, August 24, 1933, 1

\$4 per head, with no dockage taken. These prices apply at Chicago...The meat will be distributed through welfare organizations which will pay for it in an amount sufficient to cover the processing and handling by the packers...”⁹⁴⁷ Later in September, Rock County residents were further informed that the Federal Government had doubled down on its hog purchases. The *Leader* reported: “This increase in the maximum number which may be purchased by the end of the emergency hog marketing period on September 29 has been authorized to permit some additional buying in areas where farmers are being forced to market unusually large numbers of pigs on account of extremely short feed supplies and in principal hog-growing areas where processing facilities have substantially limited the sale of pigs thus far. The additional quotas granted thus far bring the maximum purchasable number of pigs up to 4,428,500 head.”⁹⁴⁸ By January 1934, renewed impetus was placed on the Sandhills main agricultural industry: cattle.

The region’s cattle industry was struggling due to the drought just as farmers were in other parts of the Great Plains. Thus, many believed the AAA would prove beneficial to their situation. A letter by Secretary of State Harry Swanson was posted in the January 24th, 1934, issue of the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* arguing that the cattleman’s situation should be addressed: ““While the producers of other food stuffs march toward a dawn of more and better profits the range cattle man can be seen trudging along in the rear... Without a doubt the range cattle man is the genuine original, and often mentioned ‘forgotten man.’ Not only are cattle prices the lowest in history but the cattle man is now faced with the problem of paying higher prices for feeds and all other things he has to buy. The plight of the cattle man should be seriously studied, not only by our representatives in Congress, but

⁹⁴⁷ *Hooker County Tribune*, September 7, 1933, 1

⁹⁴⁸ *Rock County Leader*, September 21, 1933, 1

by every Nebraska citizen who is interested in the welfare of the state.”⁹⁴⁹ Shortly after Swanson’s letter was written the Federal Government began addressing the problem faced by Sandhills ranchers. The AAA fixed cattle prices, as it had done with wheat prices in places such as Kansas, in order to ensure that ranchers received some profit. McPherson County Historian John Kramer described how McPherson County ranchers survived largely due to AAA assistance in 1934: “Although the drouth was not as severe here as in other parts of the state, it caused great hardships to the ranchers of the county. The ranchers obtained government feed loans and also obtained loans from the Birdwood National Farm Loan Association and the North Platte Production Credit Association. The government bought approximately 3,855 head of cattle in this county in 1934 at an average price of fifteen dollars per head. If it had not done this it is doubtful if the ranchers could have obtained anything for their livestock.”⁹⁵⁰ The situation to the north in Cherry County proved equally precarious for ranchmen.

Like Kramer, Cherry County Historian, and Great Depression survivor, Charles S. Reece believed the intervention of the Federal Government was essential to the cattle industry’s survival in the Sandhills. Reece wrote of the county’s environmental challenges in 1934 and the assistance rendered by the Federal Government:

The year of 1934 brought the most severe drouth the county has known. Until that year no serious hay shortage had been experienced but that year the crop was reduced from 10% to 50% of normal. Even the wet valleys produced only about half of the usual crop. The price of cattle was so low that many stockmen were on the verge of bankruptcy. To relieve the situation the federal government bought large numbers of cattle at a stated price for each class of animals. The price for calves was \$8; for yearlings \$12; and for cows about \$20. This purchase of cattle by the government proved to be a real benefit to the cattlemen in two ways; it enabled them to reduce their herds to a size which could be adequately fed on the limited hay crop and at the same time allowed them to rid their herds of inferior and old animals for the above prices. This latter benefit resulted in a thorough housecleaning and an

⁹⁴⁹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 24, 1934, 1

⁹⁵⁰ Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder, Ed., *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction* (Callaway, Nebraska: Loup Valley Queen, 1986), 37

improvement in herds that might otherwise have taken years to accomplish. This government purchasing program was put into effect in all counties stricken by the drouth. In Cherry County 25,605 cattle were sold for which the government paid a total of \$388,764, an average price of \$15.18 per head. The government disposed of this meat after being processed by packing companies to supply food in sections made destitute by the drouth. Fortunately 1935 was a wet year and meadows and pastures soon returned to normal.⁹⁵¹

Purchasing by the Federal Government continued throughout the hills during the summer of 1934. On August 1st, 1934, three hundred head of cattle were purchased by the Federal Government from Garfield County ranchers.⁹⁵² By the end of the month, additional cattle were still being purchased through the AAA. *The Burwell Tribune* reported: "Hundreds of cattle are being shipped out of Garfield county every week as a result of the government purchases. A special train went out with several cars Monday most of which was formerly the property of Valley county owners and a second big shipment of Garfield county owned stock was enroute (sic) for the markets Tuesday."⁹⁵³ Federal cattle purchasing was also conducted along the border of Hooker and Thomas counties in late-August. *The Hooker County Tribune* reported on the process: "Government cattle buying has been extended to this region, with the buying of 371 head at Seneca on Monday of this week. W. W. Derrick, assistant state director of drouth relief, has charge of the buying which was aimed at relief of the dried-out strip of country along the Thomas-Hooker county line. The first day's buying fell short of the quota of 400 by a few head as some men changed their minds or were unable to round up the numbers planned. Wednesday is another busy day at Seneca, when another quota of 400 head from the Hooker county side of the line is eligible for government sale."⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁵¹ Charles S. Reece, *An Early History of Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Plains Trading Company Archives, 1992), 71-72

⁹⁵² *The Burwell Tribune*, August 2, 1934, 1

⁹⁵³ *The Burwell Tribune*, August 30, 1934, 1

⁹⁵⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, August 30, 1934, 1

Two weeks later in mid-September, the Feds were authorized to purchase one-thousand head in four community precincts in Rock County.⁹⁵⁵

As September turned into October more cattle purchases were authorized through the AAA in the western Sandhills as Grant County received a quota requesting six-hundred head and the state received an additional \$1,140,000 to purchase cattle mainly in its northwestern section which included Sheridan County.⁹⁵⁶ By the end of October, the three major cattle shipping points along the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy rail line in Grant County had greatly increased their numbers from the same time the year before. Whitman shipped 223 train car loads through mid-October 1934 in comparison to only 162 the year before, Hyannis increased to 343 from 252, and Ashby increased its car load totals slightly to 150 from 134.⁹⁵⁷ In early-November the cattle buying continued in the northeastern Sandhills as the Federal Government planned to purchase three-hundred cattle from Rock County.⁹⁵⁸ As the cattle buying period ended in 1934, the total number of cattle purchased from the Sandhills was astronomical in comparison to the year before. The December 6th, 1934, issue of the *Blaine County Booster* reported on the AAA's success in the central Sandhills alone that: "Final figures from the Agricultural office at Thedford show that 10,705 head of cattle were purchased by the government from ranchers of this district (Blaine, Thomas, Hooker, and Grant counties)...Forty-one sale dates occurred for the four counties and a number more for Cherry county along this railroad. Of these sales, 11 were primarily for Thomas county cattle, where 2393 head were sold, and 10 for Blaine county, where 2830 head were sold. Of this number, 39 were condemned in Thomas county and 40 condemned in Blaine county as

⁹⁵⁵ *Rock County Leader*, September 6, 1934, 1

⁹⁵⁶ *Grant County Tribune*, October 17, 1934, 1; *Sheridan County Star*, October 18, 1934, 1

⁹⁵⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, October 24, 1934, 1

⁹⁵⁸ *Rock County Leader*, November 1, 1934, 1

unfit for food, and were killed and buried in the vicinity. Total number of condemned drouth cattle in the district amounted to 208.”⁹⁵⁹ In early-November, the *Sheridan County Star* reported that: “The largest number of cattle have been bought in Custer County...42,520 head in all. Cherry county is second and Valley county third.”⁹⁶⁰ Due in large part to these significant numbers, the AAA was accepted by many Sandhills ranchers in 1934. However, many still found it difficult to part with their cattle at low prices. Historian Nellie Snyder Yost wrote of rancher’s feelings in 1934: “

But the bitterest pill of all, for the helpless cattlemen, that drouth and depression year of 1934, was the forced sale of their cattle...No rains fell anywhere, reserves of feed and money were used up. All across the Great Plains it was the same- ranges burned out, no hay to put up, wells and streams going dry. Even in the Sandhills pastures were short and lakes drying up. With the depression nation wide, unemployment and hunger everywhere, there was no demand for beef and ranchmen could not sell their cattle. Neither could they feed them any longer...Through the burning summer days, farmers and ranchmen drove their rib-thin critters to the designated points and watched the results of years of hard work go under the hammer for a pittance- often not even enough to pay off the loans against them...On August 4, 1934, the NSGA held a protest meeting with cattlemen from North Platte to Valentine, from Chadron to Broken Bow, sitting in. The government price scale was the burr under the blanket. Based on appraisals of the poorest grades of cattle, it was patently unfair to cattlemen who, at considerable expense over the years, had upgraded their herds to some of the best in the nation. Range conditions were the same everywhere, with high-grade cattle perishing for want of feed and water the same as scrubs, and it seemed downright unjust to offer the same top price, about \$20, for both kinds.⁹⁶¹

These attitudes became more common as the decade progressed due to a desire for better prices for the improved quality of livestock which in turn was due to the improved Sandhills’ environment.

As the mid-term election of 1934 neared, the majority of the Sandhillers still supported the New Deal, including the AAA, even though they were suffering through a period of intense regional drought. Mary Cochran Grimes wrote of the reasons Nebraskans supported her Democratic father, Roy Cochran, the former State Engineer in his run for the

⁹⁵⁹ *Blaine County Booster*, December 6, 1934, 1

⁹⁶⁰ *Sheridan County Star*, November 8, 1934, 1

⁹⁶¹ Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 250-251

governorship: “By 1934, the political scene changed. Bryan, who had served as governor for a total of three terms, decided to run for the United States Senate... Thanks to his twelve years of planning and inspecting highways, Roy Cochran was well known throughout the state. He knew the state like the palm of his hand, and he was respected for his honesty.”⁹⁶² Local newspaper editors praised the New Deal and supported Democratic candidates for the state’s major offices. The *Hooker County Tribune* raved in its November 1st, 1934, issue under the heading and sub-heading, “Vote For Roy Cochran For Governor: Vote To Keep The New Deal:” “By their vote next Tuesday, the people of Nebraska will say whether or not they want the New Deal in Nebraska. The New Deal, as every man and woman in Nebraska knows, has meant higher prices for farm products, better business conditions, more employment, safe banks, an opportunity for farmers and home owners to prevent mortgage foreclosures- and other conditions so much more desirable than the conditions which prevailed in Nebraska in 1930, 1931, and 1932... There never has been a time in Nebraska history when it was so important to elect all the candidates of one political party. Advantages of the New Deal to Nebraska and its citizens are such that the democratic candidates should be elected- not just because they are democrats, but because they will do everything in their power to let Nebraska continue to enjoy the advantages of the New Deal.”⁹⁶³ Earlier in September, the *Sheridan County Star* likewise began soliciting for the upcoming election as it ran an article entitled, “New Deal Deserves Support,” in its

⁹⁶² Mary Cochran Grimes, *Aileen and Roy: Up from the Sand Hills to the State House* (Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., 2008), 134

⁹⁶³ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 1, 1934, 1

September 20, 1934, issue.⁹⁶⁴ The efforts of these newspapers paid off as the prominent state offices, such as governor, went to Cochran and the Democrats.

Despite these successes there was reason for the Democrats to be concerned as their victories were not as overwhelming as two years earlier and some Sandhills counties demonstrated some Republican retrenchment. The *Sheridan County Star* reported the narrowing gap in Nebraska's governor's race under the heading, "Heavy Dem. Vote Cast Tuesday: Burke, Cochran, Coffee elected," in its November 8th, 1934, issue: "State returns in 1932 showed Griswold defeated in the Democratic landslide by 40,000 votes. With everything swinging more Democratic this election, 20,000 votes is all the total is predicted and that no doubt high, as when those figures are considered it will be seen, in the face of such a decided Democratic vote, Mr. Griswold made a very fine run."⁹⁶⁵ The results were more disquieting for Democrats on a local level in Loup County as four of the five major county offices including County Clerk and County Sheriff swung to Republicans.⁹⁶⁶ McPherson County strongly returned to its Republican roots as the county's voters cast 423 votes for Griswold in comparison to 208 for Cochran in the governor's race, 353 votes for the Republican Mathers to 268 votes for the Democrat Coffee in the race for the U. S. House of Representatives, and 316 votes for the Republican Marsh compared to 260 votes for the Democrat Swanson in the contest for Secretary of State.⁹⁶⁷ In Wheeler County, Cochran lost in his bid for governor as Griswold narrowly defeated him 521 to 505 votes.⁹⁶⁸ While it is uncertain as to why certain counties were shifting back to Republican politics, it was clear

⁹⁶⁴ *Sheridan County Star*, September 20, 1934, 1

⁹⁶⁵ *Sheridan County Star*, November 8, 1934, 1

⁹⁶⁶ *The Taylor Clarion*, November 8, 1934, 1

⁹⁶⁷ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 8, 1934, 1

⁹⁶⁸ *Wheeler County Independent*, November 8, 1934, 4

that the New Deal's agricultural influence had started to wane. Earlier in August 1934, the *Rock County Leader* republished an editorial from the Lincoln Journal entitled simply, "Propaganda," in its August 2nd, 1934, issue: "Francis Flood is a paid representative of the AAA. He is making speeches in Nebraska telling of the accomplishments of the administration and what it proposes to do. What he says is pure propaganda for the administration paid for by the people. The administration is boosting itself. Those who listen to its propagandists may properly bear this in mind."⁹⁶⁹ Thus, while individuals such as Charles Reece supported the AAA and recognized its benefits, other Sandhillers who believed it would hurt their long-term financial positions rather than help them became more numerous. These individuals were ranchers.

As early as July of 1935, efforts were put forth by the Roosevelt administration to quell Sandhills ranchers' concerns. The July 4th, 1935, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune* reported on a meeting between AAA representatives and Cherry County ranchers in Valentine that: "Hon. J. N. Norton, from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of Washington, D. C., delivered a stirring and understandable discussion of the aims and purposes of the AAA on June 21st at Valentine. Representatives and leading producers from nearly all of Cherry county precincts were present. Expressions from a number of the ranchers indicated that they were very much more sympathetic after having heard the discussion. They stated that they now realized the movement as an act on the part of Agricultural interests rather than the regimentation or governmental control... V. Vaniman presented the farm bureau movement and its aims. He set up the possibilities of the Farm Bureau as the permanent representative organization- sponsoring all agricultural production:

⁹⁶⁹ *Lincoln Journal* in *Rock County Leader*, August 2, 1934, 1

marketing, transportation, taxation and legislation programs. He outlined the set-up of a county farm bureau and its relation to the Nebraska Farm Bureau (sic) Federation, a state organization and in turn the federation of various state organizations into the American Farm Bureau Federation⁹⁷⁰ Despite this meeting and its attempts at establishing a sense of cooperation and understanding between ranchmen and the Federal Government, there were Sandhills ranchers who already distrusted the AAA and its system of fixed prices. One such individual was Cherry County rancher Vic Thompson. Thompson wrote of his personal experiences during the Great Depression, the AAA, and the Federal Government's cattle purchasing and elimination practices:

During the Great Depression of the 1930s the price of cows dropped to practically nothing...the cattlemen were paid \$15 per cow. At most sites many of the thinner cattle were driven to an excavation and shot. The carcasses then were covered with dirt. Vic Thompson lived south of Merriman at the time, and he was determined not to sell his purebred Herefords for that price. He had no money for a train ticket so he rode in a cold cattle car to Omaha. Thompson sought out Harry Dickonsen, at that time president of the freight division on the C & NW. Thompson knew that the railroad had given free return passage for cattle shipped to livestock shows in Kansas City and Denver. By gentleman's agreement the railroad offered the same privilege to Thompson so that he could transport his cattle to Iowa where there was sufficient feed. Later the railroad lines adopted the same policy to aid drouth-stricken ranchers. Cattle were wintered on Iowa cornstalk fields and then returned to Sandhill rangeland during the summer. Thompson couldn't even pay for the initial shipping charges to Iowa, and the C & NW carried him on debt for three years until he was able to repay the railroad.⁹⁷¹

Two years after Thompson shipped his cattle to Iowa in the winter, problems for Sandhills ranchers were further exacerbated. The *Rock County Leader* reported in its February 6th, 1936, issue: "The state of Iowa has placed a ban on untested feeder and grazing cattle on Nebraska counties which do not have modified accredited rating in bovine tuberculosis tests. The order went into effect February 1 and applies to 27 western Nebraska counties. Holt, Rock, Keya Paha, Brown and Cherry are among the counties to which the order applies."⁹⁷²

⁹⁷⁰ *Hooker County Tribune*, July 4, 1935, 1

⁹⁷¹ Marianne Brinda Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 183

⁹⁷² *Rock County Leader*, February 6, 1936, 1

Thus, Sandhills ranchers were prevented one of their best means of circumventing low AAA cattle prices: shipping their cattle out of state to feed in the winter in order to avoid their cheap sale in the autumn. Such obstructions to profit did not make Sandhills ranchers more amenable to the AAA or its associated programs.

In the spring of 1936, the AAA faced even more national challenges as it was ruled unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court. Edsforth wrote of the decision: “In January 1936 the Supreme Court decided six to three that a suit brought by former Republican national committee chairman William Butler on behalf of Hoosac Mills, a cotton cloth manufacturer, correctly identified AAA tax on processors as an unconstitutional effort to control agricultural production.”⁹⁷³ Despite this strong rebuttal of the New Deal, Roosevelt persisted in his belief in agricultural reform and would not wholly abandon the AAA. Edsforth wrote of Roosevelt’s response to this challenge: “Four days after the Butler decision, FDR told reporters he favored a new acreage reduction program that would ‘retain and regain soil fertility.’ Two months later Congress approved the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, which continued production control efforts in the name of promoting sound agricultural practices.”⁹⁷⁴ In April 1936, Sandhills ranchers first had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with this amendment to the Agricultural Adjustment Act. A meeting was held in Thedford in April 1936 in order to introduce ranchers to Roosevelt’s new Soil Conservation program. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of the meeting in its April 22nd, 1936, issue:

Sixteen sandhill and range counties were represented at a meeting held in Thedford Wednesday to discuss ways and means of extending the Soil Conservation program to local needs. In general, most of the men were primarily cattle men who run a few hundred head of cattle, but whose primary income

⁹⁷³ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 178-179

⁹⁷⁴ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 179

is from them. Discussions thruout (sic) the morning and afternoon were in response to recent recognition on the part of administrating officials that our Sandhills Region needs special consideration. The coming program as it stands does not recognize the fact our grass lands are as much a part of our national resources as that land once kissed by the plow. The State Committee on Conservation, with whom powers of approval rest, has indicated willingness to receive recommendations from a representative group of the men themselves.⁹⁷⁵

One rancher who was in attendance at the meeting was Grant County rancher Earl Monahan.⁹⁷⁶ Monahan held less than favorable views of the AAA and the new Soil Conservation program and only one month later, along with other powerful Sandhills ranchers, voiced his displeasure with Roosevelt's policies at a meeting in Alliance. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of the deteriorating relationship between AAA/Soil Conservation Officials and Sandhills ranchers as exhibited by their exchange at the late-May meeting in Alliance:

A group of Disapproving ranchmen brought an abrupt close to a soil conservation meeting here Tuesday afternoon. After the soil conservation program was explained by state officials, the ranchmen arose individually to condemn the plan, the principles behind it, and the administration which fostered it. The Stockgrowers voted 37 to 12 against taking any part in soil conservation, and walked out. W. H. Brokaw of the college of agriculture, said he believed there was a misunderstanding among the ranchers as to the purpose of the meeting, and added, 'We are satisfied if they are.' 'They seemed to think we were trying to sell them something,' he said. 'The soil conservation program now is for the sole benefit of the farmer, but it could be made applicable to ranchmen for the restoration of range grass if they wanted a part in the program. The ranchers indicated they didn't. We have performed our duty'...ranchmen who spoke were Joe Sanford of Mitchell, F. E. Messersmith of Alliance, and Earl Monahan of Hyannis. Brokaw said stockmen at Ogallala voted Monday 15 to 14, against participation in the program.⁹⁷⁷

Due to dissatisfaction with AAA cattle prices and confusion over how a soil plan insinuated for farmers on the southern Great Plains applied to them in the heart of Nebraska's cattle country, Sandhills ranchers began to abandon Roosevelt and the New Deal.

In 1935, Monahan's Grant County alone only contained 17 agricultural operations which owned and worked 499 acres or less of land out of a total 115.⁹⁷⁸ Thus, many larger

⁹⁷⁵ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 22, 1936, 4

⁹⁷⁶ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 22, 1936, 4

⁹⁷⁷ *Blaine County Booster*, May 28, 1936, 1

⁹⁷⁸ 1935 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table IV, 355

Sandhills ranchers believed there was little need for an intrusive government program that was intended for their farming rivals, of whom most were no longer in the hills as the Depression had forced the few remaining to sell. Before the meetings in Thedford and Alliance, other Sandhill ranchmen had voiced their concern over similar programs. Cherry County rancher Irwin Adamson published a letter in *The Valentine Republican* on January 24th, 1936, which argued against the creation of a Cherry County Farm Bureau as Adamson believed, besides the fact such a program was ill suited to the mostly ranchland of Cherry County, that such a program would favor a processing tax on cattle and in this sense be antithetical to local Sandhills ranchers.⁹⁷⁹ The anti-New Deal fervor spread throughout the region's prominent ranchmen throughout 1936. Ruth VanAckeren and Robert Howard wrote of the changing attitudes of these ranchers against the AAA's Soil Conservation program: "C. J. Abbott, William Iodence, Frank Messersmith, Earl Monahan, and Luther Phipps were among stockgrowers who called the program un-American. 'There is more wind erosion originating in Washington than in any part of the country,' Abbott charged."⁹⁸⁰ Following the cue of these leading ranchers, other Sandhills agriculturalists followed suit and the Sandhills' election results for 1936 were very different than they had been only two years earlier.

In the summer of 1936, changes in the weather and continuing stagnant cattle prices did not help attract further support or reassert past support for the AAA. *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of the suddenly improving weather conditions: "Rains in the past week have brought considerable moisture to different parts of the country and have brightened crop prospects

⁹⁷⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, January 24, 1936, 1

⁹⁸⁰ Ruth VanAckeren and Robert M. Howard, *Lawrence Bixby: Preserver of the Old Spade Ranch* (Lincoln: State Historical Society Foundation, 1995), 95

considerably...The rye crop is earlier than common with most fields now headed out and on fair ground a good stand. Prospects now are for a good yield. Oats are to be reported good also...In most parts of the county grass on pasture land is good..."⁹⁸¹ The improved range conditions led to healthier cows; however, prices still remained anemic. The *Grant County Tribune* reported in early-June under the heading, "Fat Cattle Selling At a Loss:" "The market report for May 28 quotes the bulk of fat steers at \$6.75 to \$7.75 per hundred."⁹⁸² Cattle prices were much the same in the northeastern Sandhills as the *Rock County Leader* reported in mid-June: "Although there seemed to be a fair demand for grass fed cattle prices were a little draggy at the Bassett sale yards Wednesday largely due to a drouthy (sic) condition in some of the feeder sections of the country."⁹⁸³ Due to these factors, coupled with an overall distrust of large government and the interference it represented, as evidenced by Sandhills' ranchers reactions to the AAA Soil Conservation meeting in May 1936, the Agricultural Adjustment Act became a political albatross for Democrats in the Sandhills that they could not easily rid themselves of. Thus, the New Deal began its political descent among Sandhills' agriculturalists. This was exemplified in the presidential elections of 1936 and 1940.

Following the failure of AAA representatives to impress their program upon the region's leading ranchmen in the spring of 1936, Sandhillers voiced their opinion at the voting booth. In November of 1936, just as it had four years prior, the state of Nebraska supported Roosevelt; however, many of the Sandhills counties reverted to their past political affiliation, undoubtedly due in large part to what they viewed as the administration's failure

⁹⁸¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, June 4, 1936, 1

⁹⁸² *Grant County Tribune*, June 10, 1936, 1

⁹⁸³ *Rock County Leader*, June 18, 1936, 1

to pass successful and appropriate agricultural relief measures for the region. Historian Michael Johnston Grant pin-pointed the most significant reason that Great Plains residents fled from the New Deal: “New Deal political opponents also made virulent charges against its ‘regimentation’ tendencies. Throughout the plains, the states’ Republican Party platforms castigated the New Deal for stealing the farmers’ power to run their own operations...the Nebraska Republican Party criticized the USDA’s management of farmers’ herds and opposed ‘compulsory control of farm production.’ Future prosperity, according to the Nebraska GOP, came from confidence in the economy. It could not be restored ‘by the destruction of individual initiative [or] by bureaucratic interference in and control of business, farming, and industry.’”⁹⁸⁴ Sandhills ranchers felt much the same. The AAA was not what they sought. Ranchers were against this New Deal program but they were not alone in many counties. Town merchants, who catered to the needs of Sandhills ranchers by selling them food and supplies, were thus also indirectly affected by low cattle prices. If the ranchers could not pay due to low seasonal income, then the merchants had no money either. In this regard, the AAA had a trickle-down effect on Sandhills’ ranchers and non-ranchers alike.

The negative response to the AAA led Sandhills townspeople to vote Republican. Most Sandhills’ county returns in 1936 reflected the political shift. While Nebraska as a state remained loyal to Roosevelt, McPherson County did not as it provided Alfred Landon 345 votes to 245 for Roosevelt.⁹⁸⁵ More Sandhills counties also defected from the ranks of the Democrats. Loup County gave Landon 438 votes to 335 for Roosevelt, Garfield County

⁹⁸⁴ Michael Johnston Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 174

⁹⁸⁵ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 5, 1936, 1

voters supported Landon 727 to 672 for Roosevelt, and Arthur County voters believed in Landon 304 votes to Roosevelt's 243.⁹⁸⁶ Despite these political shifts, some Sandhills counties remained loyal to the President. For instance, Thomas County supported Roosevelt with 363 votes to 353 for Landon and Sheridan County, the former home county of Jules Sandoz, overwhelmingly supported Roosevelt 2,428 to 1,907.⁹⁸⁷ Keith, Greeley, and Wheeler counties also supported Roosevelt in large numbers. Keith provided Roosevelt 1,967 votes to 1,080 for Landon, Greeley tallied 1,928 votes for FDR to 1,115 for the Kansas Governor, and Wheeler supported Roosevelt over Landon 477 to 355.⁹⁸⁸ Custer County also provided Roosevelt a victory over Landon, totaling 5,814 votes for FDR to 5,168 for Landon.⁹⁸⁹ In a victory for New Dealers, Roosevelt's biggest champion in Nebraska, Senator George Norris, also retained his seat in the U. S. Senate. Mari Sandoz, preeminent Sandhills author, wrote to James Lawrence, frequent prominent campaigner for Norris and Roosevelt through his position as Editor of *The Lincoln Star*, her congratulations on the victory: "Dear Jimmie Lawrence: Nebraska, the president and the nation are in your eternal debt for your activities toward the retention of Senator Norris in his honored post another six years. Gratefully, Mari Sandoz"⁹⁹⁰ Despite these victories, significant though they were, the damage was done. The days of overall, unyielding Sandhills support for the New Deal had passed.

⁹⁸⁶ *The Taylor Clarion*, November 12, 1936, 3; *The Burwell Tribune*, November 5, 1936, 5; *The Arthur Enterprise*, November 5, 1936, 5

⁹⁸⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 4, 1936, 1; *Sheridan County Star*, November 12, 1936, 3

⁹⁸⁸ *The Keith County News*, November 5, 1936, 1; *The Greeley Citizen*, November 5, 1936, 1; *Wheeler County Independent*, November 5, 1936, 1

⁹⁸⁹ *Custer County Chief*, November 5, 1936, 2

⁹⁹⁰ Sandoz to Lawrence, November 5, 1936, James E. Lawrence Collection, MS1675, Box 7, November 1936 Correspondence Folder, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

In the years following the 1936 election, anti-New Deal fervor continued, some Sandhills ranchers solidified their political clout, and Sandhills cattlemen continued to face challenges that New Deal agricultural programs could not meet. The *Hooker County Tribune*, which had supported the New Deal in the elections of 1932 and 1934, came out wholly against Roosevelt's administration in an editorial in late-March 1937. The paper remarked on its fears of a growing and bloated Federal government under the title, "Smoothing Road To Dictatorship:" "Today the federal government is spending far in excess of income, in spite of the highest taxes in history. Little, if anything, has been done to correct this grave condition...Should this extravagance continue long enough, there can be but one result- national bankruptcy. Few government (sic) survive such a collapse. The way is then paved for iron-handed dictatorship. And dictatorship means government by violence."⁹⁹¹ In January 1937, Earl Monahan, an individual who shared concerns about the motives of an overreaching and enlarged Federal government under Roosevelt, strengthened his position as a political representative for the needs of Sandhills stockmen. The *Grant County Tribune* wrote of a trip Monahan and his wife took to Lincoln: "Earl H. Monahan, having been appointed on a committee by the Nebraska Stockgrowers association to interview members of the legislature in regard to changes of the cattle inspection law, went to Lincoln last Sunday night for that purpose. He was accompanied by Mrs. Monahan."⁹⁹²

Despite Monahan's associations with Nebraska government officials, Sandhills ranchers still faced challenges regarding their cattle, primarily that they could not ship them to other states to sell them or have them graze. As with Iowa a year before, Montana and Wyoming did not accept Sandhills' cattle in the spring of 1937 due to fears of disease

⁹⁹¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, March 25, 1937, 1

⁹⁹² *Grant County Tribune*, January 6, 1937, 5

contamination. The *Sheridan County Star* reported on the quarantine: “Prospects for good grass in eastern Montana and northeastern Wyoming, Dr. Butler said, have caused Nebraska cattlemen to cast their eyes westward for summer grazing ranges. Their hopes for quick shipments were darkened, according to the state veterinarian, when a scourge of scabies appeared in herds that roam twenty-two Nebraska counties. Since Montana and Wyoming are free from scabies- after struggling against the mite for twenty years- livestock authorities of both states hurriedly made plans to ward off its possible return. . . . The Nebraska counties in which cattle have been quarantined are Arthur, Brown, Blaine, Cherry, Custer, Garden, Grant, Greeley, Holt, Hooker, Keith, Keyapaha (sic), Logan, Lincoln, Loupe (sic), Morrill, McPherson, Scott’s Bluff (sic), Sheridan, Rock, Thomas, and Wheeler.”⁹⁹³ Thus, nearly all Sandhills counties were affected by this ban. In September 1937, AAA officials attempted to resell the program to ranchers as they had made some changes to it following the disastrous meeting of the year before. The *Grant County Tribune* reported the program’s revisions in mid-September 1937: “Resolutions were adopted which would make full benefits possible next year. These included taking one fourth. . . of the range land out of use from June 1 to Sept. 15, sinking wells and erection of windmills, tree planting and contour farming, the last to apply to counties not in the sandhills. These resolutions will go to Washington for final approval or rejection.”⁹⁹⁴ Despite these changes, many Sandhills ranchers, such as Monahan, remained skeptical of the program. If government officials had understood the region’s environment better and done a better job of selling the AAA a year before or if Sandhills ranchers had been more amenable to government aid, some kind of government assistance

⁹⁹³ *Sheridan County Star*, April 29, 1937, 9

⁹⁹⁴ *Grant County Tribune*, September 15, 1937, 1

could have been worked out. In general, in 1937 such attempts at cooperation had long passed.

During the late-1930s, Sandhills ranchers could do nothing during such quarantined times but hope the disease would pass and pray for rain for their own ranges. Through the tenacity of local individuals familiar with scabies and the help of Congressman Coffee, the disease was eventually beaten. Yost wrote of this effort: "...Washington proposed sending one of its 'experts' to the range country to supervise the program. Congressman Coffee headed that off by insisting a man familiar with the region be appointed. Despite Washington's conviction that a man without a college diploma couldn't do much of a job, Tom Quinn, who hadn't even gone to high school, got the appointment because of his lifelong knowledge of cattle *and* the country. For two years Quinn rode the mange circuit, a piece of Nebraska nearly as large as all of New England, searching out every mangy critter and dipping every herd where even one was found...Tom rode countless miles, looking behind every hill, in every out-of-the-way corner, making sure not one got by him. And that time, after forty years of mange infestation, the clean-up was complete."⁹⁹⁵ Eventually the environmental challenges faced by the hills alleviated with much needed precipitation.

The moisture outlook improved in the summer of 1937. In mid-July, Grant County alone received a much needed 1.20 inches of rain.⁹⁹⁶ Less than a month later cattle prices showed a rebound with the improving Sandhills range. The *Rock County Leader* reported on improving cattle sales in that county in August; however, they were still cheaper than what the government had been willing to pay four years earlier: "Another large run of cattle, with

⁹⁹⁵ Yost, *The Call of the Range*, 255

⁹⁹⁶ *Grant County Tribune*, July 14, 1937, 1

many of the pens showing good quality stock, the regular weekly sale at the Bassett livestock market opened Wednesday...fat cows showed an upward trend and were from 35c to a dollar and a nickle (sic) higher than a week ago...The cattle run was 1,000 head with good quality fat cows selling at \$8.65 to \$9.15; fair to good cows sold at \$7.50 to \$8.50;...heifer calves went at \$6.60 to \$8.50.”⁹⁹⁷ Due in large part to such economic conditions for their agricultural commodities, Sandhills cattlemen met less than a year later to form a group to protect their interests and hopefully ensure better prices and market recognition. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of efforts to form such a regional entity and the men involved in its May 12th, 1938, issue:

In response to the call of temporary chairman Sam R. McKelvie, the organization committee for the association to advertise Sandhills cattle, met at Valentine last Saturday. The following members of the committee attended the meeting: Sam R. McKelvie, Tom Arnold, Earl Peterson, Earl Monahan, Harold Harms, Albert Salzman, D. J. Cole, James Kreycik, F. E. Wentworth, who substituted for H. G. Thorley of Springview; and George B. Gross, temporary secretary...The committee chose ‘Sandhills Feeder Cattle Producers’ as a name for the organization. The following paragraph of the preamble states the aims and purposes of the organization as adopted at the meeting Saturday. ‘The association is organized for the purpose of advertising, popularizing improving the quality, and aiding in the sale of Sandhills feeder cattle; maintaining a code of ethics between buyers and sellers thereof; and promoting a spirit of cooperation, friendship, and mutual understanding among producers of beef type cattle in this region’...The intense interest which has been aroused in this association is shown by the enthusiastic response of cattlemen large and small, in the cattle producing area of Northwest Nebraska.⁹⁹⁸

By establishing such a group, Sandhills ranchers now had stronger representation to deal with the Federal Government and its New Deal programs if the need arose. The creation of such a group also, in the tradition of large stock growers groups in the west, such as the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, assured that any remaining smaller operators now had less of a voice.

By the summer of 1938, Sandhills ranchers no longer had to worry about the Federal Government purchasing cattle as AAA officials were purchasing less cattle. They also knew

⁹⁹⁷ *Rock County Leader*, August 5, 1937, 1

⁹⁹⁸ *Blaine County Booster*, May 12, 1938, 8

that that part of the program was no longer welcome in the hills. Despite this, the Federal Government did purchase some animals during 1938, but for a different purpose than it had four years prior. As political tensions tightened across Europe and the Japanese Empire continued its fight with the Chinese, the United States Government prepared to ratchet up its military spending for defense measures. Part of this military preparedness included strengthening the U. S. Cavalry. Thus, the Federal Government purchased Sandhills horses early on to be used for the impending defense effort. The *Rock County Leader* wrote of one such purchase: “The U. S. government Tuesday shipped a carload of saddle horses from Bassett to the St. Louis, Mo., training camp where they will be trained for cavalry purposes. There were 22 head in the carload and all had been purchased in the local territory. The average price paid was just a little over \$155 per head, most of the animals brought \$160 a round but the average was cut when several went in at \$155.”⁹⁹⁹ Despite the Feds offering better prices for horses than they had in the past for cattle, Sandhills ranchers were still skeptical of government interference in their markets, as they had believed the AAA had done in the past. Such horse purchases also did not affect the majority of Sandhills ranchers in general as most dealt in cattle not horses. Persistent environmental challenges, which they believed the New Deal was ineffective against, continued to skew their perspectives. Nebraska Progressive political leaders, such as Senator Norris, were not unaware of these views which presented themselves, once again, as political hurdles. Richard Lowitt wrote of Norris’s concerns prior to the mid-term elections of 1938: “The business of restoring soil, averting floods, harnessing rivers, irrigating lands, and providing rural citizens the benefits and blessings of electricity, was a formidable task presenting obstacles that at times seemed

⁹⁹⁹ *Rock County Leader*, May 26, 1938, 1

insurmountable. By 1938 in Nebraska the obstacles had turned many people against the New Deal; Norris persisted and, by appealing to the president, received assurance in the form of crucial allocations that the fight for survival would be won.”¹⁰⁰⁰ Despite such assurances and allocations, the support for the New Deal in Sandhills was in its final days.

By 1940 Roosevelt’s popularity amongst Sandhills agriculturalists was negligible. Such was the case throughout the rest of the state as well. Olson and Naugle wrote of the end of the eight year run of Democratic control over Nebraska: “By 1940, the political pendulum had swung almost completely to the Republican side. Wendell Willkie took the state’s electoral votes away from Roosevelt; Hugh A. Butler, Omaha grain dealer, defeated Governor Cochran for the Senate; and Dwight Griswold finally claimed the executive office by defeating Terry Carpenter.”¹⁰⁰¹ Sandhills voters played a large role in this state-wide political shift. The 1940 Presidential returns in the Sandhills were even further against Roosevelt than they had been in 1936. Earl Monahan, adamant critic of the AAA, publicly threw his support behind Republican challenger Wendell Willkie. The *Grant County Tribune* wrote of Monahan’s trip to meet Willkie: “Earl Monahan left Sunday afternoon on the train for Des Moines, Ia (sic), to attend the conference of agriculture leaders of the middle-western states with Wendell Willkie, Republican candidate for president, which was held in the Iowa capitol Monday. Mr. Monahan was invited by Dwight Griswold, Republican candidate for Governor of Nebraska, to attend the conference as a representative of the Nebraska Stockgrowers (sic) Association.”¹⁰⁰² Monahan, who was re-elected President of

¹⁰⁰⁰ Lowitt, *George W. Norris*, 247

¹⁰⁰¹ Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 327

¹⁰⁰² *Grant County Tribune*, August 7, 1940, 1

the NSGA in June 1941 and thus had a prominent voice in Sandhills politics¹⁰⁰³, was but the first of many Sandhillers in 1940 to critique the New Deal and the AAA through their political affiliations.

Monahan's support of Willkie was more than symbolic but instead led a trend as most Sandhillers followed his lead and strongly voted Republican. In Hooker County, where Roosevelt was greatly supported in his 1932 defeat of Herbert Hoover, Republican candidate Wendell Willkie received 397 votes to Roosevelt's 146.¹⁰⁰⁴ Such disparities were common in the other counties as well. In Garfield County, Willkie defeated Roosevelt 1,036 to 547 whereas in Brown County Willkie crushed Roosevelt with 1,731 votes to Roosevelt's 963.¹⁰⁰⁵ Loup County heralded similar results as Willkie won the county 528 to 285 over Roosevelt.¹⁰⁰⁶ Custer County likewise aligned itself with the Republicans, providing Willkie 6,082 votes to 4,175 for Roosevelt.¹⁰⁰⁷ Similarly in Keith and Wheeler counties Willkie defeated Roosevelt 1,992 to 1,735 and 492 to 425, respectively.¹⁰⁰⁸ The Lincoln County Tribune of Willkie's victory in Lincoln County: "...Roosevelt carried North Platte and Willkie carried the precincts."¹⁰⁰⁹ Perhaps the most shocking Sandhills county defeat for Roosevelt occurred in Greeley County. *The Greeley Citizen* wrote of Willkie's victory: "For the first time in the history of the county, a republican presidential nominee carried Greeley county. Wendell Willkie lead President Roosevelt in this county by a vote of 1,600 to

¹⁰⁰³ *Grant County Tribune*, June 18, 1941, 1

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 7, 1940, 1

¹⁰⁰⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, November 7, 1940, 8; *Brown County Democrat*, November 8, 1940, 1

¹⁰⁰⁶ *The Taylor Clarion*, November 7, 1940, 1

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Custer County Chief*, November 7, 1940, 1

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Keith County News*, November 7, 1940, 1; *Wheeler County Independent*, November 7, 1940, 1

¹⁰⁰⁹ *Lincoln County Tribune*, November 7, 1940, 1

1,435.”¹⁰¹⁰ Even the heartiest of Sandhills Democratic counties could not stem the tide of the Republican swell. Beyond dissatisfaction with the ineffectual Agricultural Adjustment Act, Sandhillers voted against Roosevelt for other reasons. Lavin, Shelley, and Archer wrote of the underlying reasons why so many on the Great Plains had become annoyed and dissatisfied with Roosevelt’s policies:

Much of the dropoff between Roosevelt’s support level in 1940 and his support in earlier elections occurred in the Plains states. Willkie carried the Plains states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado along with neighboring Iowa. He won more than 57 percent of the popular vote in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. Willkie’s support in the Plains has been attributed to resentment of continuing New Deal programs in the light of returning prosperity as the Great Depression of the 1930s ended. Willkie generally supported the New Deal, but he argued that its programs could be managed more effectively and efficiently under a Republican administration. Also, many Plains residents, including many of German ancestry, were strongly isolationist and were skeptical of possible U. S. involvement in another world war. Many supported Willkie, although he, like Roosevelt, was a strong supporter of American preparedness for a possible second world war...a large majority of counties in the heart of the northern Plains supported Willkie, who carried nearly every county in Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota.¹⁰¹¹

R. Douglas Hurt wrote of Nebraska Congressman Carl Curtis’s concerns over the Federal Government’s response to the growing world military crisis: “Curtis considered the Roosevelt administration’s efforts to aid the European democracies as an attempt to divert public criticism from its domestic policies.”¹⁰¹² Thus, uncertainty over the United States’ potential involvement in another global conflict coupled with their distrust of the Agricultural Adjustment Act and the New Deal had returned Nebraska Sandhillers to their Republican roots.

Six months prior to the United States entry into World War II, Sandhillers seemed justified in their voting habits as Sandhills rangeland had significantly improved from seven years ago when the AAA first appeared in the hills. Thus, as Lavin, Shelley, and Archer had

¹⁰¹⁰ *The Greeley Citizen*, November 7, 1940, 1

¹⁰¹¹ Stephen J. Lavin, Fred M. Shelley, and J. Clark Archer, *Atlas of the Great Plains* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 214

¹⁰¹² R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 18

alluded to about Great Plains residents as a whole, some Sandhills agriculturalists felt they no longer needed agricultural assistance from the New Deal. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of the region's flourishing pastures in the summer of 1941: "Cattle wading in grass knee-high, fine calf and lamb crops, the best rainfall in many a year- That was the picture of western Nebraska, western South Dakota, and Wyoming reported by C. H. Anderson of Bingham who attended a two-day Production Credit conference at Alliance...Because of the high state of productivity in the range areas, stockmen attending the sessions said they expect to have cattle and lambs of the highest quality and condition..."¹⁰¹³ While Sandhillers were largely annoyed with the Agricultural Adjustment Act, pockets of support remained in the hills just months prior to the United States' entry into the Second World War. One such place was Sheridan County. Celebrating the successes of the AAA during Sheridan County's fiftieth anniversary, *The Gordon Journal* wrote of how the program was received in the county: "Sheridan County farmers have been cooperating with the AAA Program for the past 9 years. Each year the number of cooperators has increased until at the present time, approximately 90% of the farmers are complying with the 1941 Farm Program in Sheridan County. The progress thus shown can be attributed to several factors, among which the most important is the fact that farmers and other persons interested in the welfare of agriculture have come to recognize the Farm Program as the most important step ever taken by farmers in attempting to cure the ills of their industry."¹⁰¹⁴ Despite the appreciation shown to the program by Sheridan County farmers, most Sandhillers still believed it was too intrusive in

¹⁰¹³ *Sheridan County Star*, June 26, 1941, 1

¹⁰¹⁴ *The Gordon Journal*, Special Section Two, Sheridan County Fiftieth Anniversary Progress Edition, September 18, 1941, 3, Subject File No. N279-sh, Gordon, Nebraska, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

their operations and curtailed chances at greater financial success through its attempt to control the agricultural market.

Feelings against the New Deal and the AAA were growing in other parts of the Great Plains as well for similar reasons. As early as 1933, Kansas farmer Lawrence Svobida questioned some of the program's methods as wasteful. Svobida wrote of the requirement to plow under wheat to receive payment: "My own feeling was that such willful destruction of wheat after it had been grown was outside the bounds of human decency. Right in our own county there were men, women, and children in want, to whom the wasted grain would have been needed food. It was a flaunting in the face of Providence."¹⁰¹⁵ Farmers in Haskell County, Kansas, who benefitted greatly from the AAA in 1933, also pondered its long term effects. Historian Donald Worster wrote of their concerns: "...farmers had some legitimate complaints about the program's design and administration. Most important, the AAA amounted simply to freezing the status quo. Those who were large-scale operators got large scale benefits, while small-scale farmers who risked going to the poorhouse got very little."¹⁰¹⁶ In 1937, in western Kansas, farmers began to look on the AAA with disdain as it restricted their freedom of choice and farming autonomy. Miner described the changing feelings of Kansans against the Federal government: "Nine Western Kansas counties voted down soil conservation districts when proposed in 1937. Even the reorganized AAA received criticism. The farmer, said a Ness man, should not have to 'swallow an AAA pill every time somebody tells him to.'"¹⁰¹⁷

¹⁰¹⁵ Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl*, 87

¹⁰¹⁶ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 158

¹⁰¹⁷ Miner, *Next Year Country*, 281

Like their Kansas and Nebraska brethren, agriculturalists in neighboring Colorado also tired of New Deal intervention in their agricultural fortunes. One such individual whose opinions were similar to those of Grant County's Earl Monahan was Greeley, Colorado, rancher W. D. Farr. Historian Daniel Tyler wrote of the Farrs' opinions of Roosevelt and their origins: "...Governor Johnson concluded in 1944 that, 'As I see it, the New Deal has been the worst fraud ever perpetrated on the American people.' The Farrs seem to have been of this mind-set during the Depression. They were committed Republicans. When FDR ran for reelection in 1936, they threw a 'President's Party,' played games of 'Contract,' and provided the loser with a portrait of FDR."¹⁰¹⁸ In 1939, Wyoming cattlemen also felt that Roosevelt's administration had intruded too much upon their autonomy, particularly in regards to the Taylor Grazing Act. Wyoming Stock Growers Association President Sam C. Hyatt voiced the feelings of Wyoming cattlemen in his annual address to the 67th Annual Convention of the Association held in Kemmerer, Wyoming, on June 1st, 1939, when he stated: "There is now pending, dependent upon Executive action, a reorganization of certain portions of the administrative branches of our Federal Government (sic) which are engaged in supervising and directing the use of our Federally owned grazing lands. Lands of which the very existence and continuance in business of many of our livestock operators of the west are dependent upon... There are men of the livestock industry whose intimate association and successful surmounting of the problems encountered in the pursuit of their vocation are in a position to render price less and valuable information and advice as to the most practical and beneficial administration of these lands. Then why not request the President of the United States to confer with the users of these lands before any drastic changes are made or before

¹⁰¹⁸ Daniel Tyler, *WD Farr: Cowboy In The Boardroom* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 60

formulating a definite policy. If these lands are becoming a burden upon Washington in administering them, why not turn them back to the states where they rightfully belong and let the people of those states work out their own salvation.”¹⁰¹⁹ From these many examples it is apparent that Nebraska Sandhills cattlemen were not alone in their displeasure with the New Deal and its agricultural programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act was at first welcomed by Nebraska Sandhills residents as it guaranteed ranchers some income during a time of extreme drought. Eventually it came to be viewed negatively by almost all in the region due to what many feared as too much government interference in local agriculture and the free market. These feelings led to the political demise of the New Deal in the Sandhills as prominent ranchers led other agriculturalists and local merchants in voting for Republicans in the Presidential elections of 1936 and 1940. Despite these political shifts Sandhills residents still participated in PWA and WPA programs, as has previously been discussed, in great numbers. Beyond the New Deal and agriculture, Sandhillers sought income and prosperity from other means during the Great Depression. The most prominent, and unrealistic, was oil speculation.

Black “Gold” in a Sea of Sand: The Search for Oil in the Rancher’s Kingdom

During the 1930s, many Sandhills residents took advantage of New Deal programs to gain employment or income whereas the region’s ranchers were able to sustain some limited profits on cattle sales through the AAA or on sales later in the decade. However, as the Great Depression wore on and many Sandhillers still struggled despite help from the New Deal or agricultural success, several turned to unproven, and even fanciful, schemes to acquire the

¹⁰¹⁹ Wyoming Stock Growers Association Proceedings of Annual Convention 1939, June 1, 1939, 2-3, box 72, folder 7, Coll. 14, Wyoming Stock Growers Association, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

wealth and prosperity that seemed illusory. Some who owned land believed their assets held wealth, if only the grass that grew for cattle. When oil speculators came to Nebraska from places such as Oklahoma during the Depression years, they listened. Sandhillers heard of examples of successful Texas and Oklahoma ranchers who had found oil on their grasslands which led to a new wave of personal prosperity that eliminated their debts. One such Texas example was the King Ranch. Don Graham wrote of the importance of the discovery of oil on King Ranch in the 1930s: “The second thing Bob Kleberg did was to make sure that if King Ranch had any oil, it would be found, by leasing the land to Humble (later Exxon) in 1933, and using a \$3.5 million loan from Humble to pay off debts. When oil hit big on King Ranch in 1939, it gave him the capital to fund other ambitious projects.”¹⁰²⁰ Sandhillers sought this financial freedom as well.

Oil men began appearing in the hills almost immediately after the Great Crash, but most of the heavy speculation did not occur until the mid-1930s. This was due in part to Dr. George Condra, a leading state geology official, publicly articulating his opinion that Nebraska was a potential oil reservoir. *The Arthur Enterprise* noted Condra’s opinion in late-April 1934: “A new drive to find oil in Nebraska was forecast recently by Dr. George E. Condra of the state geological survey as reports reached him of test well projects in widely separated regions. ‘More than a million acres of Nebraska land is still under oil lease, mostly to large companies,’ he said, ‘and if business recovery continues we undoubtedly will see extensive renewal of prospecting in this state.’ Companies such as Texas, Sinclair and Ohio are still paying rental on oil leases, and one concern recently leased more territory near Imperial. Dr. Condra himself is convinced that the oil-bearing formations of Oklahoma and

¹⁰²⁰ Don Graham, *Kings of Texas: The 150- Year Saga of an American Ranching Empire* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003), 210

Kansas extend into Nebraska. A showing of oil and gas has been reported, Condra said, in a hole near Imperial. Boring will start soon near McCook.”¹⁰²¹ Condra may have made such claims in order to reaffirm his status as Nebraska’s most prominent geological figure even though he lacked significant proof that the whole of the state was full of oil. Historian Brian Frehner argued that such tendencies were common amongst the industry’s leading individuals in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in his work *Finding Oil: The Nature of Petroleum Geology, 1859-1920*. Frehner wrote of these individuals: “Some petroleum geologists recognized they could enhance their authority by extrapolating theoretical abstractions from local knowledge and applying these local practices universally in order to commodify oil in other locales.”¹⁰²² Thus, Condra based his knowledge of Nebraska’s oil content on his familiarity with Kansas and Oklahoma.

While the Imperial example occurred closer to the state’s southwest border with Colorado and outside the boundaries of the Sandhills it was still enough to attract speculators and wildcatters to the region. This example, when coupled with Condra’s unsubstantiated opinion led many speculators to solicit oil leases from Sandhills agriculturalists. These individuals willingly cooperated during a time of economic hardship. Due to this renewed interest, locals believed they might be sitting on top of an ocean of Sandhills oil. The hardships of drought and unemployment led to such wishful thinking. John Kramer wrote of the reason for the oil buzz in McPherson County: “A lack of money during the depression caused people to dream of wealth and riches. It was for this reason that, during the entire thirties, people began to believe that oil would be found in this county. In 1937 a prediction

¹⁰²¹ *The Arthur Enterprise*, April 26, 1934, 1

¹⁰²² Brian Frehner, *Finding Oil: The Nature of Petroleum Geology, 1859-1920* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 8

was even made that there would be oil derricks from Hyannis to North Platte.”¹⁰²³ In 1936, Texas and Oklahoma companies began drilling in the hills in earnest. Numerous Sandhillers signed up for leases believing they could be the next Rockefeller. The *Lincoln County Tribune* wrote of the Texas oil men’s efforts in getting Lincoln County residents to sign on the dotted line shortly after Roosevelt’s reelection in November 1936: “A Representative of the Texas Company is just finishing signing oil leases in the south part of the county. He has canvassed the country from Dickens and Somerset south to the county line and about as far north. Most of the land owners in townships 9, 10 and 11 in ranges 31 and 32 have been approached for leases.”¹⁰²⁴ The *Garden County News* described the methods of and the total acres leased by Byrd-Frost, Inc., in late-March of 1936:

Last Friday’s daily papers told once more of a leasing of about 705,000 acres, which covers a portion of Grant, Hooker, McPherson, Garden, and Sheridan counties. This time the announcement is made by Byrd-Frost, Inc., of Dales, Texas. The announcement describes the land as laying between the Colorado and Wyoming production on the west and the Kansas productions on the southeast. Mr. Frost, member of the firm, expressed his belief that seven highs would be uncovered on this holding...Completion of seismographic work on the original 500,000 acres was announced by Byrd and it was stated that he found several good closed structures that would be tested.¹⁰²⁵

Byrd’s “seismographic” findings were probably supported less by science and more by an ingenious desire to make money. Those who worked for the oil men equally sought profit only they did so through maintaining the job they had drilling for the big oil companies. Drilling crews in Greeley County in early-October 1941 were just pleased to be employed but let it slip that the likelihood of Greeley County residents all becoming oil barons was unlikely. *The Greeley Citizen* informed their readers of the worker’s motto: “No obstacles have as yet been encountered in the sinking of a test oil well on the farm of Ernie Thayer, southeast of O’Connor. After more than two weeks of drilling there has been no halt in the

¹⁰²³ Schroeder, Ed., *McPherson County*, 37

¹⁰²⁴ *Lincoln County Tribune*, November 13, 1936, 1

¹⁰²⁵ *Garden County News*, March 26, 1936, 1

work night or day. ‘What are the prospects for oil?’ one of the crew foremen was asked. ‘Brother,’ he answered, ‘we don’t know a thing.’ ‘Brother,’ he again answered, ‘we are paid \$10 a day, \$1 for working and \$9 for keeping our mouths closed.’”¹⁰²⁶ Thus, Sandhillers had to be wary of oil men’s intentions in a time of tight finances.

Many oil men picked locations based on past experiences not necessarily on scientific information available for the current digging site. Frehner wrote of this practice: “Much of the knowledge that laymen cultivated to prospect for oil was tacit but also local in character. The term ‘local knowledge’ will refer to the sets of beliefs and judgments prospectors made conducting field work in order to study the geology of a particular locale and that they used to inform their ideas of where to drill.”¹⁰²⁷ Out of state oil men sometimes encountered legal difficulties when drilling in the Sandhills specifically how much money was to be distributed to landowners. *The Tryon Graphic* described one such disagreement between the Abbott Company of Grant County and Magnolia Oil Company of Texas and the oil company’s methods of digging in its August 20, 1936, issue:

All difficulties arising from terms of royalties between the Abbott Co., of Hyannis and the Magnolia Oil Company of Texas have been ironed out and work is being started on drilling an oil well northwest of Hyannis on the Abbott Co. holdings. Several large truck loads of equipment have been moved to the ground selected which is six miles from the town of Hyannis. The first well will be drilled where scientific instruments discovered what appeared to be a heavy oil dome. Explorations have been conducted all through the Sandhill country this summer and many sections of land have been leased. Whether further drillings will be conducted will no doubt depend largely on what is found when the Hyannis well is put down.¹⁰²⁸

The Abbott Company was prompted to agree to the drilling just as much by the drought conditions that persisted across the entirety of the state in the summer of 1936 as much as the scientific assurances of the Texas oil speculators. The same issue of the *Graphic* that

¹⁰²⁶ *The Greeley Citizen*, October 9, 1941, 1

¹⁰²⁷ Frehner, *Finding Oil*, 23

¹⁰²⁸ *The Tryon Graphic*, August 20, 1936, 1

reported the drilling incident ran an article just above it describing the intense climatic conditions facing the majority of Nebraskans in 1936 under the heading, “Continued Drouth Deteriorates Crops Over Most of Nebraska.”¹⁰²⁹ Thus, Sandhills ranchers’ pragmatic tendencies were apparent not just in their land dealings or cattle sales, but also in other ventures, such as oil exploration if there was money to be earned, especially when it was desperately needed.

Eventually oil was struck on the Abbott’s land through a joint venture of Byrd-Frost and the Magnolia Company; however the hole was eventually plugged and abandoned at 4,040 feet.¹⁰³⁰ Despite little oil being found in the Sandhills, state officials remained optimistic that an oil boom was imminent. One official was Land Commission employee Harry Swanson. *The Tryon Graphic* described Swanson’s opinion in late-November 1937: “...Leo Swanson predicted recently, ‘oil in great paying quantities will be found on the state school lands of Nebraska.’ Swanson just returned from western counties where he appraised school lands. After making his prediction he added, ‘then all the school debts will be paid, taxes reduced, and teachers, bless them, will receive a living wage. ‘Nebraska school lands are in a wonderful position to show oil production according to geologists throughout all the western counties...’”¹⁰³¹ This example once again raises questions such as how much production, what geologists supported this claim, and where did Swanson believe western Nebraska began and ended? Frehner wrote of such problems regarding trust and oil men: “The different kinds of knowledge prospectors generated from their work gave rise to intense

¹⁰²⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, August 20, 1936, 1

¹⁰³⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, January 6, 1937, 4

¹⁰³¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, November 25, 1937, 1

debates over what constituted reliable and trustworthy geological information.”¹⁰³² In the end, the Sandhills did not contain vast oil fields such as those found in Texas or California and the brief boom of oil speculators subsided as World War II began. Nonetheless, they had left their mark on the region for a short time.

Speculation occurred in most of the western Sandhills counties. Many landowners signed leases. For instance, on June 4th, 1935, Pearl L. Curry of Ashby signed an Oil and Gas Lease with Ferd O. Bollman for \$1.00 on 1,124.44 acres of land in Grant and Garden County.¹⁰³³ Dan Bunnell, Jr., also signed a similar lease with the Sinclair Prairie Oil Company in early-January 1941 for \$1.00 on 23,080 acres of Garden County land.¹⁰³⁴ When oil was not struck, oil speculators released lease holders from their contracts. Rufus and Ophelia Haney and Harry and Nellie Sutton of Arthur County were released from a lease they had signed with Ferd Bollman in April 1935, on June 29th, 1937.¹⁰³⁵ Despite the oil industry’s shortcomings in the Sandhills, the western panhandle of Nebraska did yield oil to speculators. Oil pumps still produce a limited supply of oil near the communities of Sidney and Kimball to the present-day. Some lands in the southwestern Sandhills county of Morrill were not all Sandhills but also farmland in the North Platte River valley. Oil was found in this part of the county even after World War II and the appropriate oil leases signed by landowners of the county. Three such individuals were Henry Sagemuller and Lewis and Catherine Covalt. Sagemuller signed an Oil and Gas Lease for “Ten and more” dollars on August 26th, 1949, with H. P. Macauley of Denver, Colorado, on 5,561.95 acres of Morrill County land and the Covalts signed a lease with the Sinclair Oil and Gas Company for \$1.00

¹⁰³² Frehner, *Finding Oil*, 7

¹⁰³³ *Grant County Miscellaneous Book 1*, Hyannis, Nebraska, 92

¹⁰³⁴ *Garden County Miscellaneous Record 10*, Oshkosh, Nebraska, 118

¹⁰³⁵ *Arthur County Miscellaneous Record 1*, Arthur, Nebraska, 560

on January 2nd, 1950, on 5, 812 acres in Morrill County.¹⁰³⁶ In this regard, oil speculation succeeded in western Nebraska; however, within the Nebraska Sandhills there were no gushers to make Sandhillers rich beyond their wildest dreams. Despite this failure, Sandhills merchants received short term profits through the sale of goods or foodstuffs to those working at Sandhills derrick sites. The brief relationship with the oil industry demonstrated how desperate some Sandhillers were to gain extra income during the latter years of the Depression.

Shelterbelts and Electricity: Remnants of the New Deal

Beyond the CCC, CWA, PWA, WPA, Sandhillers also participated in other New Deal projects such as the Shelterbelt Project to combat wind erosion. It was so popular in February 1935, that State Extension Forester, Earl Maxwell mailed a letter to the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* informing them that orders for trees totaled 498,000 in 1935 compared to only 120,000 in February 1934 and that Green Ash and Russian Olive trees were no longer in stock.¹⁰³⁷ A month later R. H. Dills signed up Custer County farmers in Broken Bow who sought to participate in the Shelterbelt project.¹⁰³⁸ Beyond the Shelterbelt program, a limited number of Sandhills farmers participated in Roosevelt's Rural Rehabilitation Program. Historian Michael Johnston Grant wrote of the Rural Rehabilitation Program's impact and reception on the Great Plains: "...through voluntary programs these 'rugged individualists' surrendered part of their autonomy to the government because of the disastrous economic and environmental climate of the early to mid-1930s. This, of course,

¹⁰³⁶ *Morrill County Miscellaneous Record 17*, Bridgeport, Nebraska, 499-500; *Morrill County Miscellaneous Record 20*, Bridgeport, Nebraska, 49-50

¹⁰³⁷ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, February 13, 1935, 1

¹⁰³⁸ *Custer County Chief* in *The Stapleton Enterprise*, March 28, 1935, 2

contradicted their ideals. By the latter 1930s many people in the plains accepted New Deal commodity and credit assistance as their entitlements from the government. However, they rejected programs they perceived as limiting their autonomy and opportunity or that seemed to propel New Deal reforms further into the countryside. The rural rehabilitation program died as a result.”¹⁰³⁹ Despite its eventual demise, some Sandhills farmers utilized the program to survive the hardships posed by the Sandhills environment during the mid-1930s. In Rock County in late-1934, ninety-nine families were on relief that could potentially participate in the rehabilitation program.¹⁰⁴⁰ J. M. Anderson, the program’s District Representative, asked for support for the program from the people of Bassett and Rock County thus suggesting that in its early stages support for the program was less than overwhelming.¹⁰⁴¹ The project survived the winter and nearly a year later Fred Schoettger was placed in charge of resettling farmers in Rock and Keya Paha counties.¹⁰⁴² In 1936, rehabilitation programs were also necessary for farmers in Logan County. *The Stapleton Enterprise* expressed concern about the growing problem in late-January 1936: “Farm tenancy in Logan county has followed the alarming trend shown by Nebraska and the nation in the past five years. A. E. Russell, rehabilitation supervisor for this county, said today. Since 1930 there has been a gain of 19 tenant-operated farms in Logan county as compared with a decrease of 12 farms run by full owners, he commented.”¹⁰⁴³ Thus, while not wholly popular in the region, Sandhillers did take part in rural rehabilitation.

¹⁰³⁹ Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm*, 6

¹⁰⁴⁰ *Rock County Leader*, November 29, 1934, 1

¹⁰⁴¹ *Rock County Leader*, November 29, 1934, 1

¹⁰⁴² *Rock County Leader*, October 3, 1935, 1

¹⁰⁴³ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, January 23, 1936, 1



(Farmer applying for a loan at the Alliance Resettlement Administration Office in Box Butte County, May 1936. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG4289.)

A final New Deal program that did not affect Sandhills' residents during the Great Depression was the Rural Electrification Administration. Most Sandhills ranchers had to provide their own means of electricity as the REA did not appear in the region until the 1940s and 1950s. Earl Monahan wrote of the generator plants his ranch utilized for electricity until the REA's arrival: "We...went to a 110-volt Kohler plant, purchasing two of them. The only battery was the one to start the engines. When a light was turned on or something plugged in, an engine would start. When too much load was on, the second engine would cut in. Those plants worked very well until one night one of the engines caught on fire. We skimped along on the one motor for some time until we installed two large diesel motors which we used until REA arrived March 17, 1952.¹⁰⁴⁴ Other areas of the

¹⁰⁴⁴ Earl H. Monahan and Robert M. Howard, *Sandhill Horizons: A Story of the Monahan Ranch and Other*

American West received REA assistance long before Sandhills agriculturalists. Such was the case in rural Arizona. Historian Leah Glaser wrote of the administration's final success in Graham and Cochise counties: "At long last, on October 20, 1940, the cooperative's secretary, Mrs. C. M. Byrd, threw a switch at the dedication ceremony for the gas-powered plant in McNeal. Almost five thousand people were in attendance, including Governor Robert Taylor Jones. In a continuous effort to build load, the fair that followed exhibited electric pumps, water heaters, stoves, and several other appliances with the full support of the REA."¹⁰⁴⁵ Despite not being wholly or immediately implemented, Rural Rehabilitation and the REA still impacted the region as the Roosevelt era ended demonstrating that it did have a small measure of success even if it was not readily apparent.

Conclusion

Following Roosevelt's presidential inauguration in 1933, his implementation of the New Deal countered many of the worst aspects of the Great Depression. Millions across the country were employed in various construction projects or were enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps attempting to correct and improve the nation's environmental issues. Sandhillers comprised many of their ranks. Despite the New Deal's positive aspects, Sandhillers questioned its overall successful application to their agricultural practices and markets. The New Deal program that was despised the most was the Agricultural Adjustment Act as Sandhills ranchers viewed its policies of forced government intervention in the agricultural market as beyond meddlesome but potentially socialistic. This led prominent ranchers and their in-town merchant supporters to return to the Republican Party

History of the Area (Alliance, Nebraska: Rader's Place, 1987), 230

¹⁰⁴⁵ Leah S. Glaser, *Electrifying the Rural American West: Stories of Power, People, and Place* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 49

in the elections of 1936 and 1940. This retrenchment notwithstanding, Roosevelt's legacy in the Sandhills was an overall positive one as New Deal programs provided necessary, improved infrastructure in the forms of various highways throughout the hills, dams such as Kingsley Dam at Lake McConaughy, and buildings such as schools and courthouses such as the new Rock County courthouse built in Bassett in the later years of the Depression. Despite the positive benefits of employment and infrastructure provided by these programs, some Sandhillers tried unproven financial schemes through natural resource extraction, such as Sandhills oil drilling, to attain further profits and financial stability. In the end, Sandhills society was defined by the New Deal as its progressive policies shaped Sandhills life during the Great Depression. Beyond the policies of the Federal Government, Sandhills society was impacted by other issues that similarly affected other parts of the country. The issues that affected Sandhillers the most were crime, race, religion, and social cohesion.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bank Robberies, Booze, Baptists, and Basketball: Social Problems in the Nebraska Sandhills during the Economic Depression of the 1930s and their Remedies

During the Great Depression Sandhills society was significantly changed by a series of progressive improvements. Road and building construction projects were implemented through the joint efforts of local bond measures and Federal Government programs such as the PWA and WPA, the Civilian Conservation Corps built improvements to local forests and wildlife preserves, and hydroelectric power was harnessed on the North Platte River with the construction of Lake McConaughy and Kingsley Dam. Progress was seemingly everywhere in the hills as Sandhillers largely and proudly voted Democrat and enjoyed the fruits of their new infrastructure improvements in the form of city streets and swimming pools. Despite these new amenities, environmental and agricultural challenges remained largely consistent during both the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations. Dust storms, severe weather, fire, grasshoppers, foreclosure, migration, and cattle sales remained nearly everyday concerns for Sandhills' residents which nibbled at the edges of the fabric of Sandhills society like a ravenous moth. Due to the positive aspects of infrastructure improvement and the limited job opportunities it provided, coupled with the negative environmental and economic challenges, the years of 1929 to 1941 were simultaneously Sandhills society's most progressive and regressive period as many areas of the hills still exemplified the frontier

characteristics of fifty years prior. Much of this was due to a lack of electricity or other infrastructure improvements which the onset of economic depression did not make easier to implement, at least immediately at its outset. However, beyond these problems Sandhills residents faced other dilemmas and issues that hampered societal development, many of which were not that dissimilar from what other Americans faced during the Depression. Rampant crime, strained or limited relationships with minorities, and the treatment and roles of women in society were other prominent concerns challenging Sandhills' citizens. This chapter examines the prevalence and various types of crime Sandhills' residents endured and dealt with, issues of race in Sandhills society, and the hardships faced by Sandhills women. Whereas crime, race, and gender were at times polarizing and stratifying issues amongst Sandhills residents, religion and community gatherings such as high school sporting events, fairs, and rodeos remedied the instability and uncertainty caused by such issues and brought individuals in Sandhills society closer together during the perilous and uncertain times of the Great Depression. Large scale rabbit or coyote hunts had been conducted in the hills and brought many people together; however, these other events were more frequent and thus consistently brought people together to share in a communal experience. An examination of the latter aspects demonstrates their importance as a stabilizing and reinforcing aspect of Sandhills society. Beyond such positive, unifying aspects one issue was significant to Sandhills society and a constant challenge to its stability: crime.

Moonshine, Murder, and Mayhem: Crime in an Era of Economic Uncertainty

“Sheriff George Brock, of Loup county was shot and fatally wounded at an early hour Wednesday forenoon at Valleyview as he was endeavoring to serve papers on John, Willard and Richard Burkes...Brock went down, one bullet striking him in the face the other in the

shoulder. Brock was evidently able to bring his own gun into action as it shows two recently discharged shell (sic).”¹⁰⁴⁶ Such an account immediately evokes romanticized images of the “Wild West” of the nineteenth century. The heroic sheriff fighting lawless criminals with guns drawn and blazing, wounded and left to die under an autumn sky on the windswept Nebraska prairie. This is the stuff that Oscar winners are made of, a plot line worthy of “Unforgiven” or “Tombstone.” However, the story of George Brock and the Burkes brothers did not take place on the Great Plains frontier in 1870, nor did it happen in 1880 or even 1890. It occurred in the Nebraska Sandhills during the waning days of the Great Depression on October 16, 1940.¹⁰⁴⁷ During the Great Depression era, from 1929-1941, Nebraska Sandhillers shared similar struggles with their agricultural brethren in other parts of the Great Plains. Persistent drought led to crop failures, wilted pastures, livestock losses, and grasshopper and rabbit plagues. These calamities when coupled with economic depression led to farm and ranch foreclosures, migration, and business failings. They also led to higher incidences of crime within the Sandhills region as Sandhills, and non-Sandhills residents passing through the area, sought to compensate for their personal economic losses.

From 1929-1941, Nebraska Sandhills’ citizens both partook in and were victimized by a wide spectrum of criminal activities ranging from petty theft to cold blooded murder that were at least in part caused by the debilitating drought which economically impacted agriculturalists and town merchants alike. If one could not profit and sustain their families from their own occupation, rather it be rancher, farmer, ranch hand, grocer, banker, etc., then many found it necessary to do whatever they had to do to survive. Stealing was one such method. Sandhillers stole for profit, but in many instances many also stole for sustenance.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 17, 1940,1

¹⁰⁴⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, October 17, 1940,1

In 1934, many residents of Mullen, the county seat of Hooker, were so poor that they struggled to pay the milk man. The February 15, 1934, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune*, wrote of their dilemma: “Milk stealing continues to occur at various homes nearly every night, according to information reaching this office, and since patrons have contended with theft along that line for several months past, we believe it high time that the local authorities make an effort to get hold of some of the perpetrators.”¹⁰⁴⁸ While it is possible that some Mullenites could have been profiting from stealing milk and then participating in a milk bootlegging and smuggling ring in the Mullen market, there does not appear to be evidence that such organized crime took place with this commodity within this community. People were stealing milk from their neighbors because they could not afford it. Merchants who lived and operated in Mullen were also impacted indirectly economically by the effects of drought as their rural clients struggled to pay them for what they owed. This led them, their employees, or their children to petty thievery when necessities, such as jars of milk, easily availed themselves in order to save some of their now limited funds.

In contrast, in nearby Valentine in 1937, the bootlegging of milk was attempted by a rather youthful perpetrator; however, his efforts at organized crime were short-lived. According to *The Valentine Republican*: “Milk bottles have disappeared in great quantities in the northeast part of town, and little Merle Monteau, aged nine, being suspected because he was marketing them in large numbers, he was caught with a marked bottle from Joe Spark’s doorstep, Saturday evening...As he has Indian blood...he will be released to Indian authorities if they will place him in an Indian school.”¹⁰⁴⁹ From the examples of milk thievery in Mullen and Valentine it is apparent that foodstuffs during the Great Depression

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Hooker County Tribune*, February 15, 1934, 1

¹⁰⁴⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, February 19, 1937, 1

became cherished commodities that some Sandhillers stole for personal use and others stole in an outlandish attempt to profit. Sandhills law officials took such crimes seriously and were able to capture criminals through the cataloging (i.e. marking) of bottles. In a time of scarcity such food related crimes and the criminals that carried them out were not to be trifled with or laughed off as harmless. Milk was not the only food product that was sought after in such an illegal fashion in western Nebraska.

A few years earlier Sandhills residents in Box Butte and Morrill counties nearly became victims of a bootlegging ring that by today's standards seems as equally ridiculous as the hypothetical Hooker County milk syndicate. In the February 28, 1930, issue of the *Alliance Times-Herald* a column entitled, "Bootleg Sugar Ring Is Nipped In Early Stage" noted:

What was believed to be a large-scale sugar ring that was getting its organization under way was stamped out last week by the combined efforts of sheriffs of counties to the south. The ring was reported to be extending into Box Butte County, but was plying its efforts primarily in the North Platte Valley towns...A couple of the men suspected of crookedness in the affair finally admitted that they had no sugar to sell but that the idea was to get sufficient orders to make it pay and then break into a box car and get enough sacks to fill the orders. Others who were taking orders professed an entire innocence so far as they were personally concerned. The sugar was offered in quantities of five sacks for \$4.50 a sack. Large orders of 25 or more sacks were to be filled at \$4.25 per. So anxious was one of the salesmen to secure a big order that when his customer demanded five sacks immediately he went to a grocer and purchased the sugar at market price and delivered it to the customer at his reduced rate.¹⁰⁵⁰

The *Bridgeport New-Blade* reported in late-February 1930 of how local law enforcement officials first became suspicious of the scheme: "The officers received a tip last week that a number of men of various towns in this section were going around the country soliciting orders for sugar in large quantities and at a price considerably below the market. An immediate investigation had shown that no sugar had been stolen from warehouses or cars in the neighborhood. Still there seemed to be something off color so the officers started

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Alliance Times-Herald*, February 28, 1930, 1

bringing in men from the various counties for questioning. By the time they got through a very peculiar situation was disclosed.”¹⁰⁵¹ While this criminal activity is unlikely to have occurred as a result of the drought, it is nonetheless a significant example of how some western Nebraskans were willing to do anything in order to survive economically during the Great Depression.

Some Sandhills residents were also victims of an unusual phenomenon that was strangely common to the whole of the Great Plains and Midwest during the 1930s: the “gypsy” bandit.¹⁰⁵² “Gypsy” caravans were found throughout the plains going from town to town, sometimes as part of traveling shows or fairs, sometimes not, and almost always when they left individuals found their pockets lighter. Arnold J. Bauer wrote of his experiences with “gypsies” growing up in Clay County, Kansas, during the Great Depression: “During these same years we’d occasionally hear the tinkle of bells, the clip-clop of mules, and strange cries, as gypsies, the men plain, the women wrapped in flowing exotic dresses and scarves, came down the road in their flimsy covered wagons offering to sharpen knives or to sell trinkets and lengths of cloth that we wouldn’t have been caught dead in. The gypsies, like the hobos, were suspect, and to us rather more ominous.”¹⁰⁵³ “Gypsies” were equally frowned upon in the agrarian lands of neighboring Iowa. Curtis Harnack wrote of his own family’s attitude toward gypsies, and other feared threats, while growing up in Depression-era rural Iowa: “In these Depression years of bank robbers, gypsies, tramps, kidnappers, cattle rustlers, and chicken thieves, our farm bristled with guns like a fort, possessed an army

¹⁰⁵¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, February 20, 1930, 1

¹⁰⁵² The term “gypsy” is used in this section in the context provided by the sources of the era. It is placed in quotation marks to note that the race and ethnicity of these individuals is unknown to the author and its use is not meant derogatorily but used only as it appears in primary and secondary sources utilized for this study.

¹⁰⁵³ Arnold J. Bauer, *Time’s Shadow: Remembering a Family Farm in Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 97

of kids to aid in defense and a magazine room of ammunition.”¹⁰⁵⁴ In the Sandhills, people also were wary of these outsiders and for good reason. *The Ord Quiz* reported of one such negative incident with gypsies involving a Greeley County man at the Valley County Fair in late-September 1935: “...a Greeley young man complained that his pocket was picked by one of the gypsy fortune tellers and that he’d lost \$15 in the deal. Threatened with arrest, the gypsy woman restored the money. Sheriff Byrne said he did not know the name of the Greeley man who was robbed at Ord.”¹⁰⁵⁵ Such petty theft was a common concern when “gypsies” visited other Sandhills towns and counties. An example of this occurred in McPherson County earlier in 1935. *The Stapleton Enterprise* wrote of the unfortunate “gypsy” experience of S. T. Lloyd in mid-May: “A band of 25 gypsies was held for investigation at Tryon Monday as a result of the theft of \$200 from S. T. Lloyd, 80-year-old recluse of Flats, by a group of the gypsies. He told the authorities the women, under pretense of telling his fortune, robbed him. Officers said that \$100 of Lloyd’s money was recovered before the gypsies were liberated.”¹⁰⁵⁶ Thus, when “gypsies” told fortunes they simultaneously relieved Sandhillers and other Great Plains residents of theirs. The “gypsy” phenomenon also provided an example of the unique juxtaposition of a traditional lifestyle (i.e. “gypsies” wandering rural areas peddling fortunes and wares) in the Sandhills during a time when the region was trying to shed its “frontier” image with the implementation of infrastructure improvements.

Despite the “gypsies” and beyond milk and sugar stealing, a considerable amount of Sandhills crime revolved around agricultural property or products as many Sandhillers and

¹⁰⁵⁴ Curtis Harnack, *We Have All Gone Away* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 61

¹⁰⁵⁵ *The Ord Quiz* in *The Greeley Citizen*, October 3, 1935, 1

¹⁰⁵⁶ *The Stapleton Enterprise*, May 16, 1935, 1

non-Sandhillers stole items necessary to ranching and farming livelihoods. Two such commonly stolen items were harnesses and saddles. On March 19th, 1937, John Molczyk was arrested in Wheeler County for stealing two harnesses from E. C. Kennedy and son three days earlier.¹⁰⁵⁷ Molczyk was sentenced to serve between one to three years hard labor in the State Reformatory for his transgression.¹⁰⁵⁸ Many individuals stole not just to keep the harnesses, as Molczyk apparently did, but to resell the items they lifted for a profit during an era of difficult financial times. An individual that attempted to profit from a sale of stolen harnesses was Ted Wallace. On May 29th, 1931, Wallace, aided by Phillip Rathburn, stole a set of harnesses from a barn located near Bridgeport on the southwestern periphery of the Sandhills.¹⁰⁵⁹ The pair also lifted another set that evening from Will Reifer's farm near Bayard and, eventually, they were arrested the next day on May 30th when they attempted to sell both sets of harnesses at the sale barn in Scottsbluff.¹⁰⁶⁰ The twenty-one year old Wallace and the eighteen-year old Rathburn plead guilty to the charges in Morrill County District Court a little over two weeks later on June 15th, 1931.¹⁰⁶¹ Similar extralegal practices were carried out in Custer County three years later by one Arthur Bisher. The March 22, 1934, issue of *The Burwell Tribune* remarked of Mr. Bisher's activities:

Several weeks ago unknown parties stole a set of harness and a set of of (sic.) fly nets from the Clarence Jurgensen barn. In checking up sales at a Broken Bow Community auction last week Deputy Sheriff Fox, of Custer County discovered that Arthur Bisher had disposed of property that he was not supposed to have owned, and the Custer County officer, who is said to be pretty keen on running down criminals, got in touch with adjacent counties to see if any harness had been missing recently...Fox then spent the day running down sufficient evidence the result of which resulted in Bisher's arrest...the harness sold in the sale ring at the Bow for five dollars more than comes under a petty larceny charge. Had the goods brought five dollars less the sentence would have been a small fine administered by the

¹⁰⁵⁷ *State of Nebraska v. John Molczyk*, District Court of Wheeler County, Nebraska, Case No. 1625, Wheeler County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹⁰⁵⁸ *State of Nebraska v. John Molczyk*, District Court of Wheeler County, Nebraska, Case No. 1625, Wheeler County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹⁰⁵⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 4, 1931, 1

¹⁰⁶⁰ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 4, 1931, 1

¹⁰⁶¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 18, 1931, 1

county court, but under the grand larceny charge sentence must be imposed by the District Court, where of course it is a penitentiary offense.¹⁰⁶²

Bisher acted alone in committing his crime; however, just as there were “sugar” rings there were also harness stealing rings. One such group operated in McPherson County. *The Tryon Graphic* remarked of the local sheriff’s success in recovering such stolen goods in May 1932 that: “Sheriff Ready was a business visitor in the southern part of the state one day last week where he went to view some harness that had been gathered up at Wanetta. The harness was some of the lot sold at the public sales in that part of the country by the harness stealing ring that recently was rounded up by Sheriff Ready...Some of the harness and a saddle was identified by men from this part of the country and was recovered.”¹⁰⁶³ Stolen items were not always so easily found. In early-February 1933, McPherson County Sheriff Billy Neal was unable to track down a saddle stolen from Earl Miller that thieves had simply driven off with.¹⁰⁶⁴ Sandhills law officers had little chances of recovering stolen goods when these items were transported outside of the Sandhills and especially the state. Ready’s recovery in southern Nebraska was an exception.

Despite the emergence of mechanized farming throughout the Great Plains and the American West, horses and mules still maintained a centrally important presence to agriculture in the region and to the Sandhills specifically, in the 1930s. In 1930 most Sandhills counties in the central hills did not feature an excessive amount of tractor power. For instance, Hooker County had only ten tractors, McPherson- fourteen, Grant- fifteen, Logan- fifty-seven, Loup- seventeen, Thomas- eight, Arthur- seventeen, and Garfield- forty-

¹⁰⁶² *The Burwell Tribune*, March 22, 1934, 1

¹⁰⁶³ *The Tryon Graphic*, May 12, 1933, 1

¹⁰⁶⁴ *The Tryon Graphic*, February 9, 1933, 1

nine.¹⁰⁶⁵ Frank Harding commented on the reason tractors were so few in the hills during the Depression: “One reason is that they were pretty primitive really and they had steel wheels and that didn’t work in the sand, they had narrow steel wheels with cleats on it and you go to pull something...they’d dig down instead of pulling you didn’t have traction you know and, uh, tractors weren’t very practical...”¹⁰⁶⁶ Combines were also limited in great numbers as Arthur, Blaine, Garfield, and Grant counties all only registered three combines per county in 1930.¹⁰⁶⁷ Likewise, the larger Sandhills counties in physical acreage and population of Cherry and Holt both only had eight and thirteen combines respectively.¹⁰⁶⁸ An article in the February 2, 1933, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune* wrote of the resurgence and necessity of horses and mules for Great Plains agriculturalists as the Depression continued:

Reports from all over the country show that animal power is coming back in the rural districts, taking the place of passenger autos, trucks and tractors...At one barn in Fort Smith as high as 600 horses and mules are sold in one day, and police have to regulate the crowd of buyers and traders. Farmers are actually reverting to the good old days and depending on the horse and mule, instead of gas and electricity, for motive power. When hay, grain and other products cannot be produced at a profit, farmers must produce their own power and maintain it. They have plenty of feed, but not as much money as they once had with which to purchase gasoline and oil. So the horse and mule are coming back strong all over the land.¹⁰⁶⁹

By 1935, mechanized farming was asserting itself in the Sandhills in McPherson County.

The Tryon Graphic wrote of the increased use of tractors: “In McPherson County, where feed has always been plentiful and horses raised on the farms, tractor farming has never appealed much to the farmers, but this spring with feed scarce and very high in price, the horses in poor flesh and the better ones high in price, eastern McPherson county farmers are using

¹⁰⁶⁵ 1930 *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics: Autos, Trucks, Tractors, Threshers, and Combines*, Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁰⁶⁶ Taped interview with Frank Harding conducted by the author, October 4, 2014, Mullen, Nebraska

¹⁰⁶⁷ 1930 *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics: Autos, Trucks, Tractors, Threshers, and Combines*, Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁰⁶⁸ 1930 *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics: Autos, Trucks, Tractors, Threshers, and Combines*, Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁰⁶⁹ *Hooker County Tribune*, February 2, 1933, 1

tractors to do their spring work...A few farmers who do not own tractors have contracted with their...neighbor to do the work with machines...Necessity has brought on a new era in farming in McPherson County.”¹⁰⁷⁰ Despite the arrival of tractors in the Sandhills during the Great Depression, horses in the region and the state, in general, were still highly prized by agriculturalists. In early- April 1933, the Omaha market was averaging 500 to 700 horses per week.¹⁰⁷¹ Evidence of the importance of the horse to Sandhills ranchers and farmers was also corroborated by the types of agricultural purchases and mortgages Sandhills ranchers and farmers participated in at the time. On November 1, 1930, in Rock County, Clarence Jones took out chattel mortgage no. 30312 ½ for \$300.00 on 26 cattle, 6 horses, and 7 hogs.¹⁰⁷² According to Rock County chattel mortgage no. 30934, Price Alderman also took out a \$125.00 mortgage for 2 horses and 2 mules in Rock County on August 3, 1931.¹⁰⁷³ In Arthur County, M. E. Herman took out chattel mortgage no. 2-4963 for \$250.00 on February 21, 1939, for 30 cattle, 6 horses, and 4 sows.¹⁰⁷⁴ According to the 1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census, Rock County had a total of 4,457 horses within the county and 192 mules.¹⁰⁷⁵ During this same year, Arthur County totaled 2,708 horses and 69 mules.¹⁰⁷⁶ Thus, the importance of these animals to Sandhills ranchers and farmers led their accessories, such as bridles, saddles, and harnesses to be targeted and stolen by fellow Sandhillers that may not have been able to afford new ones due to declining agricultural prices or by outsiders who knew their worth to agriculturalists and sought to profit from their sale.

¹⁰⁷⁰ *Tryon Graphic* in *Hooker County Tribune*, May 16, 1935, 1

¹⁰⁷¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, April 6, 1933, 1

¹⁰⁷² *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*

¹⁰⁷³ *Rock County General Index to Chattel Mortgages Book E*

¹⁰⁷⁴ *Arthur County Chattel Mortgage Index Book 2*

¹⁰⁷⁵ *1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table II, 338

¹⁰⁷⁶ *1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table II, 335

Horses themselves also became targets for theft and other crimes due to their value. In Brown County, on September 19th, 1931, Stanley Stone stole a brown gelding horse worth \$65.00 from Ralph Cline. Stone was sentenced to two years parole due to being a minor, he was seventeen at the time of the arrest, and had to pay the District Court of Brown County \$21.65 in court costs that were to be paid in \$1.00 monthly installments until the fee was paid off.¹⁰⁷⁷ In neighboring Cherry County, horse stealing was more organized and financially lucrative. However, thieves were soon apprehended when they got too greedy and remained local. Such was the case with R. H. Peters. *The Valentine Republican* described Peters' downfall in its November 1, 1935, issue under an article entitled "Officers Arrest Alleged Thieves Of Ranch Horses" stating:

Officers believe they have solved the theft of fifteen head of horses and mules from the pasture of McMurtrey Bros., south of Cody, earlier in the month by the arrest of R. H. Peters and his two hired men on the H. D. Hamaker ranch near Wood Lake...It was learned that on the 10th of the month Claude Sprague of Ainsworth, generally known as "Tubby" Gorman, had shipped three mares and three mules to Indiana. It was found that they were a part of the McMurtrey herd. Sprague declared that he had bought them of Peters, and had paid a fair price for them, giving a check. He was arrested and charged with receiving stolen property, and gave bond for \$1500, signed by H. E. Schosser of this city. Peters hired men, Frank Williams and Lou Haack, made statements to officials, stating that one of them accompanied Peters to the McMurtrey place, where they took the horses in the evening and drove them all the way to the Hamaker place, about sixty miles, that night. This was on October 7th, they said. Peters himself admits nothing, and will stand trial...Peters has a criminal record, officers say, and was implicated last year in the booze hijacking case at Long Pine.¹⁰⁷⁸

Beyond being stolen by men such as Peters, horses also became targeted for harm when agricultural rivalries between neighbors intensified. On January 21, 1939, in the District Court of Rock County Frank Vybiral was charged with eight counts of intentionally killing or injuring horses valued at \$370.00 on December 13, 1938, that were owned by Walter Vargason.¹⁰⁷⁹ On January 23, 1939, Vybiral was convicted of intentionally killing one of

¹⁰⁷⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Stanley Stone*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3594, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹⁰⁷⁸ *The Valentine Republican*, November 1, 1935, 1

¹⁰⁷⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Frank Vybiral*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3496, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

Vargason's mares and was sentenced to one year hard labor in the Nebraska State Penitentiary.¹⁰⁸⁰ Vybiral, knowing the value and importance of horses in the Sandhills, sought to eliminate Vargason as an agricultural rival by poisoning his horses. If Vargason could not profit from selling his horses or using them to herd cattle or assist with farming then his agricultural products would not be able to go to market. This, in turn, would provide Vybiral with one less rival when it came time to sell his crops or livestock. It also may be the case that Vybiral simply held a significant grudge against Vargason for a past wrong and his hatred finally reached a boiling point.

Through the Stone, Peters, and Vybiral examples it is apparent that horses still retained an important economic status in the Sandhills during the Great Depression as they had in the nineteenth century due to the penalties the aforementioned individuals received for their illegal acts. Thus, the importance of horses to agriculturalists in the Sandhills was symbolic of the society's struggle between frontier and modernity during the Depression. It was only towards the end of the Depression that tractors became more prominent in the hills and the state as a whole. The *Rock County Leader* reported of the growing number of tractors in Nebraska in September 1938: "According to an abstract of county assessor returns as compiled by the state tax commissioner there are 61,637 tractors on Nebraska farms. The same report also shows that Nebraska farmers have 16,515 threshing machines, harvesters and combines."¹⁰⁸¹ Thus, during the Great Depression horse stealing or tampering was a great sin. Individuals who would tamper with a man's horse, tampered with his livelihood. Such activities had harsh penalties and consequences. The same was true for cattle.

¹⁰⁸⁰ *State of Nebraska v. Frank Vybiral*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3496, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹⁰⁸¹ *Rock County Leader*, September 8, 1938, 1

The raising and successful production of cattle have been essential to the prosperity of Sandhills ranchers since the late- 1870s. Even in the 1930s, the ranching industry dominated the region. In 1935, in Brown, Cherry, and Loup counties alone cattle totaled 279, 605 head combined.¹⁰⁸² Due to these large numbers, these counties became targeted by local and non-local cattle thieves alike. In the mid-1930s cattle prices stabilized in part due to the New Deal's implementation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The May 23, 1935, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune* reported on the New Deal's success in Hooker County under a heading "Drouth (sic) Cattle Purchase Was Big Benefit Here" that: "Cattle purchases last fall and winter totaled 2,006 and \$28, 910 for this county...The above figures were taken from reports made up by the Thedford agricultural office and do not include a small number of stock sold at sales unofficially held by other counties."¹⁰⁸³ Later that summer, cattle prices continued to improve. According to an August 1935 issue of the *Hyannis Tribune*: "Hyannis and surrounding towns are full of buyers, and growers are refusing offers of near double last years' prices. Offers of \$30 per head for mixed calves have been made to local ranchers, but none have been sold at this figure. 6 ½ cents per pound is being freely offered for yearling heifers. Last year 4c to 4 ½ c per pound took the big end of the yearling steers."¹⁰⁸⁴ Such prices helped cattle stealing to become a somewhat lucrative enterprise.

Even prior to these price increases, cattle theft was not uncommon in the hills. On October 22, 1932, William Hartgrave was arrested in Brown County for stealing one steer

¹⁰⁸² 1935 *United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table II, 335-337. In 1935, Brown County totaled 27, 645 cattle, Cherry County totaled 239, 938 cattle, and Loup County totaled 12,022 cattle.

¹⁰⁸³ *Hooker County Tribune*, May 23, 1935, 1

¹⁰⁸⁴ *Hyannis Tribune* in *Hooker County Tribune*, August 29, 1935, 1

valued at \$20.00 from Chester and Arnold Fink.¹⁰⁸⁵ Hartgrave plead not guilty and was unrepentant for the act. Hartgrave may have stolen the steer to add to his own herd or possibly to use it as a food source during the tough years of the drought. An example of the latter occurred in Garden County in 1930. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of the plight of Roy Diamond in its March 13th, 1930, issue: “Sentences of from three to ten years in the State prison were pronounced last Thursday by Judge Carter upon Roy Diamond south of Bingham, in district court at Oshkosh. They were found guilty of stealing a cow from the Abbott Company and butchering it.”¹⁰⁸⁶ Another example of stealing cattle for a food source occurred in Logan County two and a half years later. The perpetrators of the case were nothing more than hungry teenage boys who were aided by an out of town guest. According to the *Thedford Herald*:

Another cattle stealing deal turned up in north Logan county recently...The sheriff took the two Nelson boys to town for a hearing and the small one, who is only about 12 years old, stood pat and wouldn't tell anything. They then brought in the older boy, who is around 16 years old, and thinking to use a little strategy, the county attorney was looking at a gun when the boy entered the room. He broke down and told the whole story. The critters butchered belonged to Chas. Linger, a neighbor and uncle of these boys' uncle, man by the name of Peabody, of Colorado, who has been visiting at the Nelson home, helped butcher and dispose of the meat. He took part of it home, and Nelson's getting part, and trading the rest on a car in North Platte.¹⁰⁸⁷

Due to the hardships caused by the drought, the Nelson children had turned to stealing cattle so they could feed their family as well as make a little money on the side. Thus, butchering stolen cattle became a necessity for some if they were not able to profit from their own agricultural produce. This example also raises the question of how successful 1930s era Nebraska Stock Detectives were in tracking the source of cattle or butchered meat being shipped out of large shipping centers, such North Platte, if two Sandhills boys almost

¹⁰⁸⁵ *State of Nebraska v. William Hartgrave*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3663, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹⁰⁸⁶ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, March 13, 1930, 6

¹⁰⁸⁷ *Thedford Herald in Hooker County Tribune*, December 22, 1932, 1

succeeded in shipping this product. Only through the diligence of local tips and law enforcement were they stopped.

As with sugar or horse stealing operations, more cattle hypothetically equated to more profit from such a venture. In March 1936, such a rudimentary cattle stealing syndicate was quashed in its infancy in neighboring Cherry County. According to the March 21, 1936, issue of *The Valentine Republican*:

Three more young men who tried the old, old game of making a living without honest work are reposing in the Cherry county jail, on their way to the Nebraska penitentiary, unless someone weakens. They are Floyd Retzloff, Henry and Harry Malder, the two latter brothers, and they are 17, 19 and 24 years of age, respectively. Saturday morning when Dorsey Kellar, foreman of Edgar Thompson's ranch southeast of Brownlee, went out to look over the cattle feeding around the haystacks in the meadows, he noticed that several cows were bawling for their calves...and was surprised to find signs of an auto truck having been mired in the meadow. As he knew that no ranch truck had been there recently, he followed the tracks which led to Thedford. At Thedford he picked up Sheriff Nick Shriner, and they took the highway to Broken Bow where they thought it likely that the thieves had headed. At Broken Bow they found that a cattle sale was on and upon inquiry found that the three young men had brought in five calves that morning to be sold. The rest was easy as the men lived in that city. Sheriff W. B. Hammon was wired for and drove to the Bow with his son Bob, returning with the prisoners that night. The boys had no story ready to explain the possession of the calves, and so were obliged to admit that they had been caught with the goods. They also confessed to having driven to the Carl Micheel place a week before, taking one calf which they had disposed of at a public sale. This job had so easily been done that they had decided to go stronger the next time, with the results as related above.¹⁰⁸⁸

While the thieves had succeeded in taking the cattle efficiently they were not sneaky enough to outmaneuver the well-interconnected Sandhills law force. The Malders and Retzloff sold the stolen cattle to close to where they lived as they wanted to take advantage of local prices. This mistake helped lead to their downfall. Cattle stealing remained common into the Great Depression's waning years. On February 15th, 1941, Verl Winchester and Dwight Redinger were sentenced to the Nebraska State Penitentiary for three years by the District Court of Loup County for stealing three cows from Mabel Wirsig valued at twenty dollars each.¹⁰⁸⁹

¹⁰⁸⁸ *The Valentine Republican*, March 21, 1936, 1

¹⁰⁸⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Verl Winchester, et.al.*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-215, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

From this it is apparent that cattle theft was a consistent problem faced by Sandhills lawmen throughout the Great Depression, rather thieves were keeping or selling the cows. Better prices after the implementation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act may have further exacerbated the situation, but poor Sandhillers, such as the Nelson boys, were not always concerned about profit when they badly needed to eat as well.

Besides horse and cattle theft, Sandhills ranchers and farmers also had to face turkey and hog theft. Chickens were also stolen out of desperation. As previously stated, the Nebraska Sandhills is well-known for its production of cattle due to its preeminent grazing lands. However, during the late- 1920s and into the 1930s many Sandhills agriculturalists also raised turkeys in significant numbers. In mid- December 1929, over a three day span Morrill County area turkey raisers provided 51,700 pounds of this livestock commodity to Swift and Company rail cars in Bridgeport and for their efforts were paid a combined total of \$12,700.00.¹⁰⁹⁰ Likewise, on a mid- November day in 1933, 15,000 pounds of dressed turkey were prepared to be shipped from Mullen to Chicago by refrigerated train car.¹⁰⁹¹ In 1935, 14,325 turkeys were produced on 1,455 agricultural operations in Garden, Garfield, Grant, Greeley, Custer, Holt and Hooker counties.¹⁰⁹² In the more populated counties of Lincoln and Rock, 6,054 turkeys were produced on 730 local operations alone.¹⁰⁹³ Beyond providing a cash or meat source, turkeys also served a dual purpose as pest killer. Such methodology went back to the earliest days of Euro-American settlement and agricultural development on the Great Plains. Zoology Professor Eugene Fleharty wrote of early-Great Plains' agriculturalists appreciation for birds: "Farmers wanted birds to inhabit their property

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 12, 1929, 1

¹⁰⁹¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, November 16, 1933, 1

¹⁰⁹² *1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table V, 360-361

¹⁰⁹³ *1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table V, 362

primarily to help control insect pests.”¹⁰⁹⁴ In the Sandhills, domesticated birds were also utilized for this function.

Many Sandhillers also profited from renting their turkeys to fellow agriculturalists for grasshopper consumption. Their contemporaries in nearby South Dakota did as well. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of Mrs. Woodrow Fischer’s father’s methods of renting his turkeys for such a purpose in Tripp County, South Dakota: “Mrs. Woodrow Fischer, whose father lives at Winner, and has a thousand or more turkeys, reports that he is making good money renting out his turkeys to hopper-infected farms, the turkeys clearing a quarter section in a short time. It is said that a turkey can eat a gallon of hoppers per day.”¹⁰⁹⁵ Some agriculturalists simply fed their own turkeys with grasshoppers to save on feed costs. Don Lineback wrote of his father’s experience raising a turkey for profit in Box Butte County and the methods he utilized to turn said profit in the late-1930s: “...the Alliance creamery was hatching turkeys in the spring of the year, with the thought of feeding and having them ready for the holidays. They would offer them to farmers and ranchers to raise for a profit. Dad got the idea that if he took the turkeys, we could take them out through the hay fields where they could feed on grasshoppers. It was an ingenious idea because it not only fed the turkeys, but it saved the hay fields.”¹⁰⁹⁶ Such production numbers and multiple agricultural uses for turkeys attracted the attention of thieves.

Two such examples of turkey theft occurred in Rock County and Cherry County. In 1935, Cherry County contained 5,943 domesticated turkeys, while Rock County had 2,297

¹⁰⁹⁴ Eugene D. Fleharty, *Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 132

¹⁰⁹⁵ *The Valentine Republican*, July 17, 1936, 1

¹⁰⁹⁶ Don Lineback, *Fourteen Plus: Homesteading in Nebraska’s Sandhills 1911-1949* (Manchester Center, Vermont: Golden Quill Press, 1996), 46-47

respectively.¹⁰⁹⁷ On November 29, 1935, Glen Campbell was sentenced to one year in the Nebraska State Reformatory by the District Court of Rock County for stealing turkeys belonging to Joy Greenfield that were valued at \$25.00 earlier in the month.¹⁰⁹⁸ In December 1938, in Valentine habitual criminal Floyd Wick was sentenced by the District Court of Cherry County to serve one year in the Nebraska State Penitentiary for stealing turkeys.¹⁰⁹⁹ *The Republican* reported that Wick had stolen the turkeys from the Valentine Hatchery and law officers were tipped off by eyewitnesses that had identified his car at the hatchery at the time of the supposed theft.¹¹⁰⁰ The newspaper further described Wick's arrest stating: "Sheriff Kime continued to question him, showed him a cast of the footprints about the pens, and on Sunday noon took him out and showed him how his shoes exactly fitted the footprints. This was too much for Wick who finally broke down and directed the sheriff to a culvert under Highway 20, near the Doty corner, nearly five miles from town, where eight turkeys were found with their feet bound together."¹¹⁰¹ From the harshness of these penalties for Campbell and Wick one deduces that turkeys were as important as other forms of livestock to Sandhillers and thus it was no small thing to steal them. Besides turkeys, chickens and hogs were also highly sought after by those with kleptomaniac personalities.

Chickens were also sometimes stolen from their owners in the Sandhills when extra food sources were required by their perpetrators and/or, in very extreme cases, income. In Logan County, Everett Rutt stole chickens that were valued at \$2.00 from George D.

¹⁰⁹⁷ *1935 United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table V, 360 & 362

¹⁰⁹⁸ *State of Nebraska v. Glenn Campbell*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3408, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹⁰⁹⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Floyd Wick*, District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 6188, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹⁰⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, December 11, 1938, 1

¹¹⁰¹ *The Valentine Republican*, December 11, 1938, 1

Fablinger on July 3rd, 1933.¹¹⁰² No matter Rutt's plan for the domesticated birds, the price for his capture was undoubtedly steeper than he expected as he was sentenced to the Nebraska State Reformatory for a term of no less than one month and no more than six months on July 7th, 1933.¹¹⁰³ In Morrill County excessive chicken theft was likewise frowned upon three years later. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of the depredations of Glenn Cochran and Norman Robinson against Glenn's brother, Claude: "Glenn Cochran and Norman Robinson were arraigned before District Judge Irwin last Monday charged with stealing two sets of harness and about thirty chickens from Claude Cochran on October 26. Claude Cochran is a brother of Glenn Cochran. They pleaded guilty to the charge and each was sentenced to serve from one to seven years in the state reformatory in Lincoln. The sheriff left with Cochran and Robinson, by train for Lincoln Wednesday evening, where they will immediately begin serving time. Glenn Cochran has more recently lived in Oregon, but he was born and raised in Morrill county, and returned here only a short time ago. Robinson is a brother-in-law of Cochran, and also resided in Oregon until coming here some time ago."¹¹⁰⁴ Thus, the theft of chickens was an offense that local authorities did not trifle with. Their justice came swift to whoever perpetrated the act.

Hog stealing also occurred in the Sandhills from time to time when prices were good. One such incident involved the cooperation of a Burwell man with a Coloradoan in an intrastate hog stealing operation. *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of their arrest in 1937: "At a recent District Court session at Chappell, Nebraska, Lou Payton, of Burwell, and Robert

¹¹⁰² *State of Nebraska v. Everett Rutt*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 276, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁰³ *State of Nebraska v. Everett Rutt*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 276, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁰⁴ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 5, 1936, 1

Schaffer o (sic) Julesburg, Colorado, were sentenced to three years in the state penitentiary after they had plead guilty to stealing two hogs...It is said that Payton and Schaffer used an ordinary touring car for their work. Driving to a location where a number of hogs were in pasture they would slip a noose around the leg of a good fat one, drive him down the road a short distance then lift him into the rear of the car and drive on...It is a supposition that they were marketed through a butcher at North Platte or at some other point along the Nebraska-Colorado line.”¹¹⁰⁵ Payton and Schaffer’s example is interesting as it once again demonstrates the importance of motor vehicles to a livestock heist in the region, but also more significantly that some Sandhillers were capable of cooperating with non-Sandhillers to pilfer their Sandhills brethren’s stock. The Great Depression made for strange bed fellows out of economic necessity.

Beyond livestock theft, Sandhillers, and those passing through the region, attempted to survive the economic downturn by passing off or forging checks to pay for their expenses. Some even committed forgery in order to avoid looking for steady work. The latter was the case of western traveler George Deters. Deters was arrested in Bridgeport in early-February 1931 for forging checks in the name of O. M. Robinson.¹¹⁰⁶ The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of his arrest in Bridgeport and his ineffectual explanation of his actions:

Deters was arrested at a late hour Tuesday night at the depot and placed in the bastille (sic). Wednesday morning when questioned by officers he told many an engaging story as to his identity and exploits...He said that his parents were dead, then that they were living, and gave a half dozen reasons for the variety of names which he seemed to think necessary to his existence. He seemed to have a difficult time in remembering where he had been and when, whether he had ever worked in Scottsbluff, just when he left Portland the last time and whether he had ever been in trouble before. He told the officers that he was preparing to give himself up when he was taken in at the depot...The

¹¹⁰⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, July 29, 1937, 1

¹¹⁰⁶ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, February 5, 1931, 1

officers express themselves as grateful to a number of local men who assisted in the search for the man.¹¹⁰⁷

Forgers with less colorful tales were common throughout the hills as individuals sought extra cash. Carl Taylor was arrested in Holt County for forging the name of Sol Ritts to a check and then paying himself \$3.45.¹¹⁰⁸ Taylor was sentenced to serve hard labor for this crime at the State Penitentiary for not less than one year or more than two on May 21st, 1931.¹¹⁰⁹ In early-July 1933, James Brattis was similarly arrested in Box Butte County for forging a check for \$6.00 off a Guardian State Bank account and was subsequently sentenced to serve one to two years in the State Penitentiary.¹¹¹⁰ In the eastern Sandhills, Lyle Schmidt was arrested for forging a check in the name of John W. Madden in Garfield County for \$60.69 in early-May of 1937.¹¹¹¹ Joe Commeree likewise committed the same offense in the county on the last day of 1937 as he forged a check for \$40.00 to himself in the name of J. C. Bondegard.¹¹¹² Both men received lenient sentences in comparison to the previously mentioned forgery offenders as they were paroled for two years to the Garfield County Sheriff in which they maintained their personal freedom within the county as long as they regularly reported to the county's top law enforcement official.¹¹¹³ Charles Britton was not as fortunate as following an arrest in mid-December 1938 for forging a check of \$10.00 in

¹¹⁰⁷ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, February 5, 1931, 1

¹¹⁰⁸ *State of Nebraska v. Carl Taylor*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12333, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹⁰⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Carl Taylor*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12333, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹¹⁰ *State of Nebraska v. James Brattis*, District Court of Box Butte County, Nebraska, Case No. 4896, Box Butte County, Nebraska, Knight Museum and Sandhills Center

¹¹¹¹ *State of Nebraska v. Lyle Schmidt*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1589, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹¹² *State of Nebraska v. Joe Commeree*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1613, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹¹³ *State of Nebraska v. Lyle Schmidt*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1589, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk; *State of Nebraska v. Joe Commeree*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1613, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

the name of Tom Furman to New Berrys he was sentenced to the normal one to two year sentence in the State Penitentiary by District Court Judge E. L. Meyer on December 19th, 1938.¹¹¹⁴ No matter the sentence, many such forgers risked arrest time and time again because they did not know any other way to make money during the Depression era. Other Sandhillers discovered a different extralegal route to profitability: alcohol.

During the Great Depression many Sandhillers profited and survived drought and economic depression by also bootlegging liquor. One such family was the Nyes of Sheridan County. Fred Leistritz reminisced of the Nyes in his memoir, "Having Enjoyed The Sandhills of Nebraska." "Harry Nye, husband of Lenna and father of the bootlegging sons, was quite well liked but just too meek for the kind of family he had growing up under foot for his own well being. Probably the lack of any but trail roads and the distance over the then existing trail roads to the county seat were factors in keeping them from being caught, as what they were doing was common knowledge in the area."¹¹¹⁵ Despite the successes of bootleggers such as the Nyes who were able to use remoteness to their advantage, many such Sandhillers were arrested for producing or being in possession of alcohol. Just as with the previous crimes discussed, liquor bootlegging could be carried out by an individual or by a team of individuals who had a system in place from which they sought larger profits. A latter example occurred in Logan County in the fall of 1931. According to the December 10, 1931, issue of *The Tryon Graphic*:

Federal and State Prohibition officers made a raid in the northern part of Logan county last week and the result was the arrest of four men believed owners of "hootch plants" discovered at different places. The men taken in custody were the two Tappan brothers and George Philpot. The four charged with

¹¹¹⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Charles Britton*, District Court of Box Butte County, Nebraska, Case No. 5592, Box Butte County, Nebraska, *Office of the Clerk of District Court*

¹¹¹⁵ Fred Leistritz, "Having Enjoyed The Sandhills of Nebraska," (1981), 64, Box 1, Collection No. 8052, Fred A. Leistritz Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

manufacture of liquor was (sic) brought into the district court at Stapleton one day this week and were each fined \$500 plus the costs. No jail sentences were handed out, however. Three small stills were destroyed the largest being of 75 gallon capacity. It is believed by Logan county people that the liquor ring had been in operation for some time and that they had been delivering their wares to North Platte and other large points by truck.¹¹¹⁶

As with the examples of livestock theft, if the Tappons and Philpot had been less greedy their plan may have succeeded. Fewer stills might have equaled more cash.

Most raids of Sandhill alcohol production sites led to the confiscation of large quantities of illegal booze. In 1931 in Morrill County alcohol bootleggers tried to shield their illegal operations by supposedly producing agricultural commodities at their production sites in order to maintain an appearance of legitimacy. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of W. H. Moore's operation in Morrill County: "The 'chicken ranch' of W. H. Moore, north of Bridgeport near the Box Butte county line, was raided Monday forenoon by Sheriff Webb, Deputy Roy Clark, Deputy Sheriff Morgan of Gering, State Deputy Sheriff E. E. Clark, and Chief of Police Jas. Boodry of this city, and 46 gallons of whiskey stored in a Buick car was seized. The liquor, it is presumed, had been placed in the car for delivery. Moore and two men, Willis Hollaway and Orville E. Young, employes (sic) of his, were arrested and brought to Bridgeport."¹¹¹⁷ Two weeks later a similar raid was conducted in the nearby hills of Garden County which also netted copious gallons of illegal hooch. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* again described the successful assault on another bootlegger nest: "One of the largest liquor making outfits believed ever found in western Nebraska was seized Saturday by enforcement officers in a raid 40 miles southeast of Alliance in Garden county when James Ogan and Claude Simpson were taken in custody on a charge of possession of still and mash and possession of liquor. A still of 200 gallons capacity, 1,600 gallons of mash and 120

¹¹¹⁶ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 10, 1931, 1

¹¹¹⁷ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, April 23, 1931, 1

gallons of the finished product were found, it was reported, together with other liquor making equipment.”¹¹¹⁸

Earlier in the year a raid was conducted at the Keith County Fish Hatchery which similarly discovered an ingenious method to produce booze. The *Garden County News* reported of the hatchery bootleggers’ system: “Barrels were located in the loft of the residence and a pipe was run down inside the wall which had as an additional protection a covering of compo board. A concealed faucet near the head of the bed furnished an outlet for the liquid and a jug could be filled in a few seconds time. The location of the still, which had been removed shortly before, was hard to find but the place where it is claimed that the manufacture took place was in a basement beneath the exposed roosts of the chicken coop.”¹¹¹⁹ Such a system was a model of efficient illegality as these bootleggers, hiding behind the noble screen of animal conservation in the Sandhills, provided alcohol quickly to their Sandhills patrons before the law intervened to stop them. Sandhills bootleggers in the eastern hills were equally as innovative in trying to hide their operations. The *Wheeler County Independent* wrote of a bootlegging operation shut down in early- March 1931: “Sheriff Joe Donnelly accompanied by two State Officers brought in a still Monday night. It was located in a hill on an old road that has not been traveled for nearly fifteen years on the south side of the county...A trap door closed the end of the forty foot tunnel which led to the main room where it was built in with brick.”¹¹²⁰ Despite prohibition Sandhillers clearly enjoyed their alcohol and went to any lengths to produce and attain it. Men like Ogan and Moore meant to keep it that way and if they profited somewhat from the venture, so be it.

¹¹¹⁸ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, May 7, 1931, 1

¹¹¹⁹ *Garden County News*, March 26, 1931, 1

¹¹²⁰ *Wheeler County Independent*, March 5, 1931, 1

Whereas men like Moore and Ogan made a significant income from their liquor productions, other individuals supposedly only made enough for their private stock. One such individual was Eugene White. White was arrested in Garfield County on December 22nd, 1931, for possessing fifty gallons of mash fermenting for the purpose of producing alcohol.¹¹²¹ The sixty-year old White pled guilty to the charge but protested the assertion that he planned on distributing the alcohol for profit wherein he actually made it for his personal use.¹¹²² Despite a previous conviction pertaining to a liquor charge, the Garfield County District Court was lenient on White as he was a poor farmer and had no still for production of his booze but was instead fermenting beer in a barrel hidden under a pile of wheat and rye straw.¹¹²³ From this evidence it was apparent to the District Court that he had limited means to distribute the product and, unlike Moore and Ogan, he had no physical help in doing so. Attorney E. M. White testified at White's deposition: "This man can't pay a big fine, he has tried and can't borrow at the bank. There was one or two others at the same time and I understand they were fined \$100.00; he could probably pay a fine of that kind, just be a question of keeping him."¹¹²⁴ The District Court Judge in the end sentenced White to thirty days in jail and a \$500.00 fine on January 23rd, 1932; however, recognizing that "in these times that is a pretty severe thing" the judge allowed White to apply to reduce his fine to \$100.00, as the other White had requested, after he served his thirty days in jail.¹¹²⁵

Following his release from jail in early-1932 his application was successfully granted and his

¹¹²¹ *State of Nebraska v. Eugene White*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1398, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹²² *State of Nebraska v. Eugene White*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1398, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹²³ *State of Nebraska v. Eugene White*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1398, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹²⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Eugene White*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1398, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹²⁵ *State of Nebraska v. Eugene White*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1398, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

fine reduced.¹¹²⁶ White's case was significant as it demonstrated that Sandhills' courts could be somewhat benevolent toward guilty parties when sentencing them as they took into account the financial impact of the Depression on those who had participated in non-violent crimes.

Bootlegging and liquor possession arrests continued in the Sandhills for the rest of the Hoover administration. Most individuals who were arrested on such charges were not as fortunate as Eugene White. James Morrison of Holt County (not to be confused with the similarly named front man for "The Doors" who later also enjoyed hard living) was arrested in late-October 1931 for possessing a still, 100 gallons of mash, and 30 gallons of homemade whiskey.¹¹²⁷ He was convicted of distilling, manufacturing, and attempting to sell his product and, unlike White, was forced to serve a thirty day local jail sentence and pay the full fine of \$500.00.¹¹²⁸ Some producers were not as inventive as the men from the Keith County Fish Hatchery and were immediately arrested. One such obvious individual was Ira Shearer. The *Wheeler County Independent* reported of his failed scheme: "Ira Shearer came over from Burwell Sunday to attend the Wheeler County Fair and Rodeo. He pitched his tent in a shady nook on the south side of the fair grounds. He brought along his equipment for making beer and proceeded to set his home brew. A search warrant was issued out of county court Monday on a complaint filed by county attorney A. L. Bishop and the embryo brewer was seized by sheriff Donnelly and the contents of his keg was dumped onto the ground and 15

¹¹²⁶ *State of Nebraska v. Eugene White*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1398, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹²⁷ *State of Nebraska v. James Morrison*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12437, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹²⁸ *State of Nebraska v. James Morrison*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12437, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

bottles of beer ready for use was taken as evidence.”¹¹²⁹ The ability to be subtle was a key to success for bootleggers. Likewise, individuals who did not produce alcohol, but only had it in their possession also received harsh penalties when they were unable to keep their illegal vices hidden. Blanche Wadum was found guilty of possession in Box Butte County and was sentenced to pay a \$100.00 fine by the Box Butte County District Court on April 4th, 1933.¹¹³⁰ Despite these penalties and the circumstances they brought with them, many Sandhillers still risked prosecution in order to attain what was a necessary vice in a time of high stress. In an era when funds were scarce for Sandhills settlers there was still a market for what many considered non-essential goods. Men such as Philpot, Moore, and Morrison filled this niche rather they were portrayed as malicious or benevolent characters by the press based upon the extent of their operation and their congeniality with their neighbors. In the end, alcohol did pose problems for Sandhillers as it was a leading cause of domestic violence when overused by men who were struggling to lead their spouses and families through the Depression. This problem notwithstanding alcohol production and consumption was a significant component of Sandhills’ daily life during the Depression rather it was illegal or not. Other criminal activities had a more obvious negative and invasive impact on Sandhills residents. Two such crimes were burglaries and bank robberies.

During the Great Depression, burglaries, rather of homes, businesses, and even government buildings became common place throughout the Sandhills on an almost daily basis. Most crooks took cash from their burglary sites, but in many instances goods and personal belongings were taken as well. As with the previous examples of crime, Sandhillers

¹¹²⁹ *Wheeler County Independent*, August 20, 1931, 1

¹¹³⁰ *State of Nebraska v. Blanche Wadum*, District Court of Box Butte County, Nebraska, Case No. 4861, Box Butte County, Nebraska, Knight Museum and Sandhills Center

were perpetrators as well as victims of burglary. Many burglars were never caught. This happened all too often in McPherson County. Rural residents, such as the Bill Jones family, discovered that their distances from Sandhills towns did not make them immune to such predations. *The Tryon Graphic* noted of their plight in December 1930 that: “The Bill Jones home south of Ringold was entered some time Saturday night and the Jones family relieved of nearly \$100.00 worth of clothing and other articles. The Jones farm home is located very near the highway and someone stopping and finding no one at home probably suggested to them the robbing of the place.”¹¹³¹ Contrastingly, in Holt County, Albert Sheldon successfully robbed Zoyd Smith of \$85.00 in early-June 1940; however, his successful raid was short-lived as he was arrested and sentenced on June 13th, 1940, to serve one year hard labor in the Men’s Reformatory at Lincoln.¹¹³² To the west of Holt County, in the northern hills of Cherry County, rural homes were just as vulnerable to pilfering. Alfred Bradley was arrested for breaking into Lizzie Daniels home in the West Half of the Northwest Quarter of Section Ten, Township Twenty-nine, Range Twenty-nine in Cherry County on December 9th, 1940.¹¹³³ On December 24th, Bradley was sentenced to two years and six months hard labor in the Nebraska State Penitentiary for his unwelcomed survey of Daniels’ personal items.¹¹³⁴ Successful ranching families were not immune to burglaries as the Monahan family of Grant and Hooker counties also fell victim to robbery. In late-July 1934, James Monahan, Earl’s father, had a six hundred pound safe stolen from his house in Hyannis.¹¹³⁵ The safe was later

¹¹³¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, December 18, 1930, 1

¹¹³² *State of Nebraska v. Albert D. Sheldon*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 13662, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹³³ *State of Nebraska v. Alfred Bradley*, District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 6338, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹³⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Alfred Bradley*, District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 6338, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹³⁵ *Alliance Times-Herald in Hooker County Tribune*, August 2, 1934, 1

found emptied of \$500.00 worth of jewelry along the highway eighteen miles northwest of Alliance.¹¹³⁶ Thus, burglaries happened at residences at any time or place in the hills.

Everyone was threatened from the most wealthy to the very poorest.

In the very western Sandhills of Box Butte County, thieves also robbed agriculturalists' homesteads but not all of them looked for personal goods or cash. On September 26th, 1936, Ted Wax and Henry Meyers were sentenced to serve no less than one year and no more than two years hard labor in the Nebraska State Penitentiary for stealing two-hundred bushels of wheat valued at \$100.00 from farmer, Lawrence Ford, on August 6th, 1936.¹¹³⁷ In nearby Garden County, a similar crime occurred in early-September 1939. The *Garden County News* wrote of the incident and those who perpetrated it: "Neeley Williams and Mike Dismong, harvest hands from Kansas, were each given a sentence of from one to two years in the state reformatory by Judge Perry Monday, on a charge of stealing wheat from the Ernest Koberstein granary during August. The wheat was sold to a Chappell elevator and the boys collected \$44 for the load. They were apprehended the day after the sale and when brought into court plead guilty to the charge. They returned \$31 of the proceeds, having spent the balance before arrest. Sheriff George Ridenour took the prisoners to Lincoln Tuesday."¹¹³⁸ Thus, during the Great Depression, nearly everything one owned was susceptible to thievery, even the limited grain in one's bin that had somehow survived the harsh environmental elements. If the Sandhills environment failed to relieve individuals of their successful crops, their fellow Sandhillers, as well as outsiders, sometimes did instead.

¹¹³⁶ *Alliance Times-Herald in Hooker County Tribune*, August 2, 1934, 1

¹¹³⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Ted Wax, Henry Meyers, Lowell Nagelschneider*, District Court of Box Butte County, Nebraska, Case No. 5333, Box Butte County, Nebraska, Knight Museum and Sandhills Center

¹¹³⁸ *Garden County News*, September 14, 1939, 1

Burglaries continued in the region throughout the decade and government buildings, such as post offices, were not immune to pilfering. Post offices throughout the state were favorite targets of thieves as, just like banks, they generally contained large sums of money in vaults or safes. In early-September 1932, the post office in the western Nebraska community of Dalton was robbed of \$300.00 cash and \$350.00 worth of stamps.¹¹³⁹ A Sandhills' example of such a crime occurred in McPherson County with the Thune Post Office robbery of 1936. "The Thune Store and Post Office, housed in one building, was entered sometime during the night on Thursday, January 26. The robbers obtained about \$100 in cash and carried off approximately \$30 worth of merchandise. The robbery was discovered Friday morning when manager, Burrell Brown, arrived at the store which is located about a quarter of a mile from the farm house where he resides. The robber or robbers had tried to gain entrance through the door, but being unable to force the door open, pried up a window... Sheriff Neal was called Friday forenoon to investigate the robbery, but few clues could be obtained."¹¹⁴⁰ Thus, crooks went where the money was. No matter who owned an establishment all were fair game for victimization.

During the cold Sandhills winters rail yards were targets for thieves but not for the amount of cash they had on hand. Thieves robbed them for a more basic necessity required for survival: coal. Burning coal in the winter kept many Sandhills families from freezing to death. However, due to the Depression many individuals could not afford to pay for this necessity so they turned to pilfering rail cars for what they needed. Three such extremely poor individuals who resorted to this tactic in Morrill County were Mark Thompson, Ray

¹¹³⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, September 8, 1932, 1

¹¹⁴⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, January 30, 1936, 1

West, and Margaret Thompson. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of their arrest in early-February 1935:

Mark Thompson, 55, and Ray West, 42, were arrested Saturday evening by Special Agent F. W. Patterson of the Burlington railroad on a charge of stealing coal. They were placed in jail pending a hearing. Margaret Thompson, 16 year old daughter of Mark, was also taken in charge by officers. The three were apprehended by Patterson in the act of removing coal from a car near the Burlington coal chutes. The trio appeared in county court before County Judge Harry M. Marquis with County Attorney Bern R. Coulter prosecuting the case. Patterson was the complaining witness. Thompson and West were fined \$10 and costs each and ordered to make restitution to the railroad in double the amount of the coal stolen. The girl was placed under probation and paroled to Mrs. H. D. McWilliams, County Relief Worker and Probation Officer. Patterson has issued a warning that the coal thefts which have been going on for a considerable time are going to be stopped. He stated that in a single night two weeks ago 22 tons of coal were stolen from a single car in the Bridgeport yards. The loss of coal to the road in the year has amounted to many thousands of tons. Theft of the coal in Bridgeport has been going on all winter. After the heavy loss two weeks ago the cars have been shoved into the round house overnight. Children of all ages have been seen going to the coal chute to secure the fuel, some in broad daylight and others at night. It is hoped that the warning issued by Patterson will be heeded. Thompson and West were remanded to jail when they were unable to pay their fines and costs.¹¹⁴¹

Just as with the Nelson boys of Logan County who became cattle thieves to prevent starvation, the Depression forced the Thompsons of Morrill County into a life of crime in order to stave off hypothermia. Such was the sad reality for some in the region during the 1930s.

In the Sandhills businesses were also regularly broken into by unidentified, passing through assailants and locals alike. In mid-July 1930, Robert Chuerpin and Eugene George, both formerly of a Michigan reform school, were arrested in North Platte for robbing businesses in Bridgeport.¹¹⁴² Various stores were broken into; however, at the Manning Hardware store the two stole a shotgun and roughly \$150.00 in silver and cash while from the Garvey store they grabbed a watch and \$10.00 in cash.¹¹⁴³ Likewise, on June 27th, 1931, Tony Kersting committed a similar offense as he broke into the B & C Cash Grocery in

¹¹⁴¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, February 14, 1935, 1

¹¹⁴² *Bridgeport News-Blade*, July 17, 1930, 1

¹¹⁴³ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, July 17, 1930, 1

Stapleton looking to sneak away quietly with needed foodstuffs.¹¹⁴⁴ The Logan County District Court found Kersting guilty of breaking and entering and District Court Judge Bruno Hostetler sentenced him to serve two years in the State Penitentiary for his private after-hours shopping spree.¹¹⁴⁵ Later in the decade two Arthur County hooligans were arrested for similar predilections. On September 4th, 1938, Ed Moody and Erwin “Slim” Fort were arrested for stealing meat, clothing, cash, and cigarettes from a store owned by M. Shaheen in Arthur County.¹¹⁴⁶ Unlike Kersting, William Fort was more fortunate and was found not guilty on May 16th, 1939.¹¹⁴⁷ No verdict record was found for Ed Moody with the case suggesting that he posted bail and skipped town before the trial.¹¹⁴⁸ In early-March 1940, nineteen year old burglar, True Woods, was not as lucky as he was arrested in McPherson County for robbing the Flats store by Sheriff W. E. Neal and State Patrolmen C. C. Brandt and E. O. Grueber.¹¹⁴⁹ Woods, also sought for crimes committed in Logan and Custer counties, resisted arrest and led these lawmen on a spectacular car chase through the hills encompassing parts of Logan, McPherson, and Keith counties.¹¹⁵⁰ He was armed with four guns but fortunately for him he did not shoot at law officials and thus District Court Judge I. J. Nisley only sentenced him to between three to three and half years in the Men’s Reformatory.¹¹⁵¹ As the Flats store operator was not immune to the perils of theft neither

¹¹⁴⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Tony Kersting*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 221, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁴⁵ *State of Nebraska v. Tony Kersting*, District Court of Logan County, Nebraska, Case No. 221, Logan County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁴⁶ *State of Nebraska v. Ed Moody and Erwin Fort*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 459, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁴⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Ed Moody and Erwin Fort*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 459, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁴⁸ *State of Nebraska v. Ed Moody and Erwin Fort*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 459, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁴⁹ *The Tryon Graphic*, March 14, 1940, 1

¹¹⁵⁰ *The Tryon Graphic*, March 14, 1940, 1

¹¹⁵¹ *The Tryon Graphic*, March 14, 1940, 1

was prominent Sandhills businessman and land speculator Theodore Folk. The December 6, 1934, edition of the *Hooker County Tribune* described the extreme lengths that some thieves would go to noting that:

The third burglary within a month in Mullen occurred some time after midnight last Saturday, when the door to the Farmers Elevator Co. office was forced open and the safe blown. Mr. Folk informed us that in the neighborhood of \$400 was obtained by the thieves, several dollars of which was in checks, some of which were found in a roll on the highway east of Seneca this week... The other places entered and merchandise taken some weeks ago were the Senk and Gruenig stores, and in neither case has any clues been obtained. The elevator robbery was reported to the state sheriff's office and an official was to have been here immediately to make investigations, but to date we have not learned of his putting in appearance.¹¹⁵²

A robbery that was also unsolved immediately occurred in Broken Bow in 1932. The June 30th, 1932, issue of the *Custer County Chief* reported: "Another robbery occurred in Broken Bow Saturday night when a typewriter, desk lamp, chains, several tires, electric fan, fountain pen and some tools were taken from the Ford Garage... Officers were called out but no arrests have been made as yet."¹¹⁵³ While many store burglars were never caught, some home invaders in the western and northern Sandhills were captured. Two such assailants who were apprehended in Oshkosh in September 1932 for home burglary were Floyd Rosenback and Polly Armstrong.

Rosenback and Armstrong allegedly broke into the home of Rush and Bernice Snow in Oshkosh and stole various items such as a shotgun, tapestry, a men's suit, two ladies dresses, and a ladies coat worth an estimated value of \$68.00.¹¹⁵⁴ In February 1940 in Ainsworth, thirty-six year old Elmer Schmeichel was sentenced to the Nebraska State Penitentiary for four years for a similar offense against Mary Blakely, claiming at his hearing

¹¹⁵² *Hooker County Tribune*, December 6, 1934, 1

¹¹⁵³ *Custer County Chief*, June 30, 1932, 1

¹¹⁵⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Floyd Rosenback and Polly Armstrong*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 979, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

that he committed the crime because “I just couldn’t see any other way out.”¹¹⁵⁵ Schmeichel, a repeat offender, had broken into Blakely’s home and removed expensive chinaware, a shotgun, revolver, pieces of sterling silver, a men’s suit, a woman’s sheep skinned lined overcoat, an oil heater, a quilt, and a ladies blue coat on December 1, 1939.¹¹⁵⁶ While Rosenback and Armstrong were eventually found not guilty¹¹⁵⁷, both cases demonstrate that house burglars were somewhat discriminating in what they took and were aware of their value, rather they kept the goods or sold them to financially help themselves during the Great Depression. Rather burglaries were business or home related and their perpetrators captured or not, all had the similar disquieting effect on their Sandhills’ victims frames of minds which were already stressed to the limit with concern over drought and depression.

Bank robberies occurred frequently in the Sandhills during the Great Depression, just as they were common in other parts of the United States. Most bank robbers committed their crimes during business hours and were armed in a fashion that would make John Dillinger proud. Unlike many burglars, most bank robbers were captured as their methods made them easily identifiable. In June 1931, the Lemoyne bank in Keith County was robbed of \$900.00 by three such men who made little effort to conceal their identity.¹¹⁵⁸ The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of their crime and methods: “Unmasked two robbers entered the bank while a third waited in a car at the curb. At the point of a gun the officers of the bank were forced into a corner by one of the bandits while the other scooped up loose cash in the counter tills and then entered the vault. After looting the tills and taking a package of currency from the

¹¹⁵⁵ *State of Nebraska v. Elmer Schmeichel*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3970, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁵⁶ *State of Nebraska v. Elmer R. Schmeichel*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3970, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁵⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Floyd Rosenback and Polly Armstrong*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 979, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁵⁸ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 11, 1931, 1

vault, the two backed out of the bank through the front door and jumped into the waiting car. The bandits then headed out of town on the highway leading east from Lemoyne. Their car, an old Hudson, bore a Keith county license, 68-234...Posses of ranchers were organized to join in the search for the bandits.”¹¹⁵⁹ Bank thieves who robbed locally from their own counties were thus stringently hunted for violating the spirit of trust sacredly held amongst people in small, rural communities.

Bank robbers also received stiff sentences depending on how they had treated the bank cashiers during their holdups. One such individual was Harold Westbrooke. Westbrooke, a.k.a. “White River Whitey,” robbed the Anchor Bank in Merriman, Nebraska, on September 12, 1930, carrying away \$6,238.00.¹¹⁶⁰ According to the transcript of Cherry County District Court Case No. 5248, Westbrooke while robbing the bank: “...did then and there unlawfully, feloniously, forcibly and by violence put in fear one Albert H. Metzger, President, one Daniel W. Coffey, Cashier, Frebert O. Wangerin, Assistant Cashier, Elmo Gardiner, Bookkeeper, all of whom were then and there in said Bank and depository...”¹¹⁶¹ The Honorable E. L. Meyer sentenced Westbrooke to twenty years in the Nebraska State Penitentiary undoubtedly due to his penchant for violence and the large sum he took.¹¹⁶² Bank robbers in other parts of the hills also used similarly intimidating tactics in their holdups and likewise found themselves in captivity. In late-December 1935, two employees of the First State Bank in Whitman, were also assaulted as two heavily armed men tied them

¹¹⁵⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 11, 1931, 1

¹¹⁶⁰ *State of Nebraska v. Harold Westbrooke, alias “White River Whitey,”* District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 5248, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹⁶¹ *State of Nebraska v. Harold Westbrooke, alias “White River Whitey,”* District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 5248, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹⁶² *State of Nebraska v. Harold Westbrooke, alias “White River Whitey,”* District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 5248, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

up and placed them in the bank vault before absconding with \$340.00 in cash.¹¹⁶³ The two criminals were not highly skilled, practiced, or smooth at their illegal craft as, according to the *Bridgeport News-Blade*: “After binding two officials of the bank in a vault they took the money, stole and wrecked an automobile, abducted a motorist and escaped.”¹¹⁶⁴ The bandits were not on the run long before they were captured. Max Fiesterman, twenty-seven year old Bingham ranch worker who lived in Oshkosh, confessed to his role in the bungled robbery in late-December.¹¹⁶⁵ The January 2nd, 1936, issue of the *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of his arrest and confession: “Fiesterman was arrested for investigation the middle of last week and was held for questioning when his story did not ring true. After confessing in Alliance he was taken to Omaha by Kenneth Logan, a G-man and a deputy U. S. Marshall from Grand Island.”¹¹⁶⁶ Thus, many Sandhills bank robberies were not “smooth” affairs but rather “smash and grab” jobs that rarely succeeded and almost always left their perpetrators behind bars.

As with the other crimes discussed, many bank robberies were committed by non-Sandhills residents. Many Sandhills banks were also robbed multiple times. In late-December 1930, the Ashby bank in Grant County was robbed by two heavily armed assailants. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of the experiences twenty-four year old cashier, Howard Lichty, had with the robbers: “Lichty walked to the vault, picked up a bundle of bills containing \$1,300, and gave it to the bandit. The man appeared satisfied with this and ignored silver lying in sight on the counter. The man then flashed a gun which Lichty described as ‘having one barrel on top of another.’ Officers say it was undoubtedly a

¹¹⁶³ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 26, 1935, 1

¹¹⁶⁴ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 26, 1935, 1

¹¹⁶⁵ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 26, 1935, 1; *Bridgeport News-Blade*, January 2, 1936, 1

¹¹⁶⁶ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, January 2, 1936, 1

Thompson machine gun.”¹¹⁶⁷ Two non-locals again hit the bank later in the decade. These individuals were Robert Harold and Arthur Collins of Ovid, Colorado. However, unlike Westbrooke, Collins’s situation was somewhat unique in that he received some sympathy from the court due to health concerns. The *Hooker County Tribune* noted of their February 20, 1937, robbery of the bank at Ashby that:

Robert Harold, 18, of Ovid, Colo., was sentenced to five years in a federal reformatory by Judge T. C. Munger at Grand Island Monday afternoon on a charge of armed robbery of the Grant County State Bank at Ashby last February 20. Arthur Collins, 26, also of Ovid, and the alleged leader in the robbery, was brought into court, but Judge Munger ordered further medical examination. Collins is apparently suffering from a nervous disorder.¹¹⁶⁸

Undoubtedly Collins’s nerves were exacerbated by a looming Federal prison sentence. Harold and Collins’s example is significant as it demonstrates that Federal law officers did have a presence in the region when it came to arresting and indicting bank robbers that carried out crimes across state lines just as in other places in the United States.

A final example of bank robbery in the Sandhills that was a direct result of the economic hardships of the Great Depression was the 1941 case of automobile salesman, Pat Stanton. Like Westbrooke, Stanton targeted the Anchor Bank of Merriman and once again forced a transaction on the unfortunate Mr. Wangerin. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of Stanton’s escapades and downfall in its January 10, 1941, issue that:

Stanton has been employed recently at Alliance, in the Black Hills and at Chadron. He has made a number of visits here since last summer, and was thought to be a very nice young man. He left here yesterday morning about 8:30, drove to Merriman, waited until Cashier Warfield Coffey went to dinner at noon, leaving Assistant Cashier F. O. Wangerin alone, and then walked in and pointed a gun at the latter. He was handed about \$480 in cash, then locked Wangerin in the vault and left... Wangerin... opened a vault door from the inside and ran to the front window and took down the numbers of Stanton’s license plates, said to be of Colorado vintage, before the latter’s car got under way. Village Marshal E. W. Ward and two other men jumped into a car and pursued the robber. About two miles north of town they noticed that someone had turned east on a side road at high speed, so followed his tracks. A short distance from there, beyond a sand hill, they found Stanton, in the act

¹¹⁶⁷ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 26, 1930, 1

¹¹⁶⁸ *Hooker County Tribune*, April 1, 1937, 1

of changing to Nebraska license plates and into different clothing. He was arrested without trouble, and the money found in the car. Stanton was not known at Merriman, but as soon as Sheriff Otto Kime, who had rushed to Merriman by car as soon as apprised of the crime, arrived he identified Stanton...The reason for Stanton's rash deed was soon apparent. The sheriff at Alliance had several bad check complaints against him, he had passed one or more here and at other places, and evidently was desperate for money.¹¹⁶⁹

Thus, Stanton was not a John Dillinger or "Baby Face" Nelson who robbed indiscriminately. He robbed out of necessity caused by the Depression and perhaps due to other bad financial decisions. Stanton, a former page in the State Legislature, was well respected in Cherry County, but nonetheless received an eighteen year prison sentence in the Nebraska State Penitentiary.¹¹⁷⁰

Bank robbers in the Sandhills were both local and non-local, but in either case their motivations were economic, whether related to drought or not. Westbrooke may have robbed the Merriman bank out of greed or for notoriety early in the Depression, whereas Harold and Collins came from northeastern Colorado which also suffered from drought. This made it likely that their rural lives were also difficult and their bank accounts close to destitute. Collins was also from Ashby so he was familiar with banks in the area.¹¹⁷¹ *The Tryon Graphic* wrote of their arrest: "G-men arrived at Ashby and took up the trail of the robbers and by a description of the car and knowing the first two numerals of the auto license the hunt led them to Ovid, Colorado where they arrested Harold where he worked at a junk yard and apprehended Collins as he drove into a cabin camp with his wife and two children."¹¹⁷² Thus, they came to Nebraska looking for easy money due to their poor status. *The Hooker County Tribune* wrote of the pairs's financial woes: "Mrs. Collins related that she had worried over her husband's mental and physical condition since three years ago, when he had

¹¹⁶⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, January 10, 1941, 1

¹¹⁷⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, January 17, 1941, 1

¹¹⁷¹ *Hooker County Tribune*, March 4, 1937, 1

¹¹⁷² *The Tryon Graphic*, March 4, 1937, 1

an attack of epilepsy. He worried over debts, often would sit up, or drive in his car all night...Harold said he had worked for Collins in a junk yard at Ovid. 'He needed money bad,' said Harold. 'He told me about the bank at Ashby, and I agreed to go with him. We went there about a week before the robbery, but got cold feet. Then we went back again. After the robbery we drove right back to Ovid.'¹¹⁷³ Like Stanton, they felt they had no other option but to turn to a life of crime. Stanton, due to his occupation as an automobile salesman and possession of a car, was able to get around the region somewhat easily and if he had not been arrested in Merriman he might have gone on a further spree across state lines as evidenced by his possession of a Colorado license plate. Such a practice was common throughout the country during this period. Thus, individual Sandhills bank robbers turned to a life of crime based upon a complexity of personal issues that were directly or indirectly tied to economic depression and agricultural drought.

Sandhills agricultural laborers were also indirectly impacted by the drought as related to their wages. This led some of them to turn to bootlegging or other petty crimes to compensate for their financial woes. However, some were more extreme in their criminal methods. One such individual was Clarence Bobbitt. In August 1935, Bobbitt, a ranch hand, came up with a scheme to kidnap his boss's son and hold him for a steep ransom. Fortunately for the boy, Bobbitt was arrested before he could implement his plan. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of the plot:

Clarence Bobbitt of Texarkana, Texas, is confined in the county bastile (sic) for investigation on a complaint by Ray Cole, ranchman living north of Hyannis, that he had conspired to kidnap Cole's 11 year old son for ransom. While living at the Cole ranch, Bobbitt is said to have made inquiries about Cole's wealth, and then to have made a proposal of kidnapping to another employee, who promptly advised Mr. Cole. The latter complained to the authorities, and Sheriff Kime arrested Bobbitt on

¹¹⁷³ *Hooker County Tribune*, March 4, 1937, 1

Monday at the H. A. Vaughn ranch, where he had gone. Bobbitt, who is about 31, boasts of a prior criminal record, and his fingerprints have been sent to Washington for identification.¹¹⁷⁴

Bobbitt was an extreme example of a career criminal roaming the Great Plains looking for his next scheme in order to survive. If Cole had paid slightly higher wages, perhaps Bobbitt would have been satisfied financially or he may also have not have been depending upon his psychopathic make-up. Other Sandhills residents and agriculturalists followed more violent solutions than Bobbitt had concocted with very tragic results in their efforts to survive economically and agriculturally.

During the Great Depression, some Nebraskans perpetrated horrendously violent crimes on their neighbors in order to make it through this difficult period. Most of these types of crimes ended in murder or, at the best, attempted murder cases or convictions. Some murdered for money while others murdered to keep their lands. Violent robberies were common throughout the Great Plains and the Midwest as people sought income by any means necessary. One particularly gruesome incident occurred in Marion County, Iowa, in late-June 1932. Iowa historian Linda L. Ossian wrote of the horrific robbery and murder of the elderly Keefer sisters by twenty-five year old John Kingrey:

Letitia Keefer, 70, and her younger sister, Jennie, 65, had lived and farmed together on their family homestead two miles northeast of Knoxville, Iowa, for over fifty years. The two sisters had hurried to finish their milking that summer evening, officials theorized, because a terrible thunderstorm threatened, and Kingrey therefore miscalculated his time alone in their house before the sisters finished the evening chores. When the siblings returned home early and discovered their thief, whom they certainly recognized as their young neighbor, Kingrey's perfect plan was exposed. Law enforcement speculated that Kingrey then shot both elderly sisters with his rifle, carried their bodies to the center of the kitchen, and doused them with oil or kerosene to burn the evidence and hopefully the entire house.¹¹⁷⁵

A violent example of murder closer to the hills occurred outside of the Sandhills near the Union Pacific railroad town of Sidney in the southern panhandle of Nebraska in 1937. The

¹¹⁷⁴ *The Valentine Republican*, August 9, 1935, 1

¹¹⁷⁵ Lisa L. Ossian, *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa 1929-1933* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 115-116

November 18th, 1937, issue of the *Bridgeport News-Blade* described the equally gruesome murder of the elderly W. H. Moore: “W. H. ‘Billy’ Moore, 78, a well known Sidney pioneer who came to this section in the 70’s was slain in his home where he lived alone some time Thursday night. Robbery was apparently the motive as the house had been thoroughly ransacked. Investigators believed Moore’s assailants tortured him severely in efforts to force him to tell where his valuables were kept. The aged man had been terribly beaten, and then strangled with a towel, according to Sheriff W. W. Schulz and Dr. R. E. Roche. Moore at one time was well-to-do, but is said to have lost most of his money in bank failures.”¹¹⁷⁶

Such violence was also unfortunately found within the boundaries of the hills and not just on its outskirts. Two individuals that murdered while robbing in the Sandhills were Bernard Oots and William Gowen. The two confessed in 1939 to the similar slaying of elderly Cherry County resident, George Harris, in 1936. The two at first were supposedly aided by Jacque Palmer. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of their arrest and confession in the fall of 1939:

...County Attorney W. B. Quigley, charging each of them with murder in the first degree, and also murder while engaged in a robbery. The youngest of the trio, Jacque Palmer, now only 20, had not heretofore been charged, his story indicating that perhaps he was only an accessory after the fact; but the confessions of both Bernard Oots and Willie Gowen plainly stated that Palmer was with them in the ranch house when Harris was killed, and that he was a full participant in the horrid deed...Oots was brought to Lincoln last week by State Sheriff Flake and County Attorney Quigley...He has a wife and several children at Slater, Mo., his wife being an aunt of Palmer and Gowen, who are cousins.¹¹⁷⁷

Harris suffered terribly at the hands of his attackers. The night of his murder he was roused by them around 10:00 P. M., had a rope placed around his neck, and was then tortured.¹¹⁷⁸

Palmer was employed by the CCC camp at Hackberry Lake in Cherry County.¹¹⁷⁹ He was

¹¹⁷⁶ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, November 18, 1937, 1

¹¹⁷⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, September 15, 1939, 1

¹¹⁷⁸ *The Valentine Republican*, September 22, 1939, 1

¹¹⁷⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, September 22, 1939, 1

not convicted of the crime, but in the end Oots and Gowen were. According to Cherry County historian Marianne Beel: “Willie Gowen confessed that in 1936 he and Bernard Oots had murdered George Harris after obtaining checks for \$40 and \$80 from the elderly Kennedy community man. Judge Meyer sentenced them to life imprisonment in 1939.”¹¹⁸⁰ Oots and Gowen were not the only murderers in the Sandhills during the Great Depression.

Two similar individuals were Lloyd Hammond and Frank Mackey. Hammond and Mackey murdered F. J. Sexsmith in Holt County in 1932. The *Brown County Democrat* wrote of their violent crime and the reason behind it in its December 2, 1932, issue. “Lloyd Hammond, aged 23 and Frank Mackey, 45, were arrested in Knox county last Wednesday, charged with the murder of F. J. Sexsmith, near O’Neill, Saturday, November 19th...Hammond had been visiting in the Sexsmith home, about a week before and had heard Sexsmith tell of money he had coming. When he later went to Niobrara he met Mackey, who is a half breed Indian, whom he had met in the state penitentiary, and they decided to go back and rob Sexsmith. Saturday night they stole a Chevrolet car at Niobrara and drove to the Sexsmith farm. They aroused Sexsmith asked for water, and then for matches and the second time Sexsmith opened the door. Mackey pulled his gun and Sexsmith offered resistance, shot him. When Sexsmith told where his money was they took it, also his pocketbook, and two guns. Later they drove to O’Neill and eventually wound up in Knox County.”¹¹⁸¹ These two examples lead one to wonder if many of the previous burglaries mentioned would have had similar results if someone had been home or at the burglarized businesses after hours. Desperate times led to desperate individuals and, in turn, tragedy.

¹¹⁸⁰ Marianne Brinda Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Henderson, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 258

¹¹⁸¹ *Brown County Democrat*, December 2, 1932, 1

Contrastingly, in 1931 in Brown County an older gentleman was able to pull his gun and aim it at the individual he perceived was robbing him. The older gentleman was August (also known as Byron) Buttner and his would be “robber” was Brown County Sheriff Ira Reed. Buttner was arrested on November 17, 1931, for felonious assault for attempting to shoot and kill Reed with a .38 caliber pistol.¹¹⁸² The *Brown County Democrat* described the incident that led to Buttner’s arrest in vivid detail stating:

Byron Buttner, a rancher residing south of Long Pine created considerable excitement at the Court House on Tuesday morning of this week...he pulled a gun on Sheriff Reed, and was then disarmed by the official, after a scuffle. Mr. Buttner had not paid his taxes since 1926, on a piece of land. The Commercial National Bank has foreclosed on a tax sale and the Sheriff was in the act of selling the land from the front door of the court house when Buttner approached and asked what land he was selling. He was told, whereupon he stated the official could not do that. No attention was paid him whereupon he drew a pistol. The sheriff was very cool under the circumstances. He walked into the office of the county clerk, deposited the papers he had in his hand, and then went out to subdue the unruly Mr. Buttner. The latter in the meantime had entered the corridor of the court house, apparently following the officer. The sheriff grabbed Buttner’s arm, and held on preventing him from doing any shooting, and he was soon disarmed. Buttner was then taken to jail...Buttner is about 50 years old, and a recluse, forbidding any trespassing on his place...Tuesday morning Buttner was almost beside himself with rage, and only for the coolness of Sheriff Reed was a tragedy averted, for Buttner was not bluffing, when he pulled the gun.¹¹⁸³

Surprisingly, due to his instability, Buttner missed significant jail time. Instead, he was committed to the State Hospital for the Insane at Norfolk, Nebraska, on March 31, 1932.¹¹⁸⁴

By attempting to kill Reed on the Brown County Court House steps, he had made it known to the Ainsworth public the depths of his derangement. Undoubtedly much of Buttner’s stress stemmed from agricultural instability brought about by the drought. The impact of the early-1930s drought, coupled with his reclusive and anti-outsider stance, had led Buttner to not pay his taxes, nearly resulting in tragedy. The drought may not have solely led to this foreclosure, but it undoubtedly played a large part in it. From 1931- 1936, 332 cases

¹¹⁸² *State of Nebraska v. August Buttner*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3533, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹¹⁸³ *Brown County Democrat*, November 20, 1931, 1

¹¹⁸⁴ *State of Nebraska v. August Buttner*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3533, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

appeared before the Brown County District Court and 263 of them were tax liens, foreclosures, suits over land, etc., which largely dealt with the lands of agriculturalists in Brown County.¹¹⁸⁵ Thus, Buttner's foreclosure and the stresses associated with it were not uncommon within the county, nor the region, at this time.

Not all incidents ended without bloodshed when Sandhills lawmen attempted to do their jobs regarding foreclosures or warrants. One such story was that of Loup County Sheriff George Brock. Brock was gunned down in Loup County in October 1940 when trying to arrest Richard and John Birkes for an assault charge.¹¹⁸⁶ The Birkes were notorious lawbreakers who had had their run-ins with Brock before. The October 17, 1940, issue of *The Taylor Clarion* described the shootout and the immediate fallout:

The shooting affray occurred at the Little York precinct polling place, where Richard Birkes had just registered under the selective service act. Brock was immediately taken to Crams Hospital at Burwell, but died at about the noon hour from three bullet wounds inflicted by 38-caliber revolvers. The gunmen following the shooting attempted to escape in their car but Reed Maxson fired several shots wounding both. They managed to get away and drove to their home about six miles north, where they were joined by Willard a brother to John. Sheriff Fox of Custer County had arrived on the scene meanwhile... Ted Goos in his plane directed Fox as to their movements, and when they saw they were pursued and capture was unavoidable they surrendered to Sheriff Fox... The tragedy had its beginning last March when a default judgment was entered in Loup County Court against Richard Birkes and John Birkes in an action to obtain possession of real estate, the plaintiff being Amos Grant Investment Company. Later it was discovered that the Birkes retained possession and a writ of Restitution was issued and service had October 5th. Serious difficulty arose when Brock on the same date attempted to arrest the men under a damage complaint and they resisted with threats and gun play. The final chapter of the tragedy was enacted October 16th when Sheriff Brock again attempted their arrest on a complaint charging them with assault.¹¹⁸⁷

Following their arrest John Birkes and Richard Birkes were convicted of Brock's killing. John received a first-degree murder conviction and a life sentence and Richard received a second-degree conviction and a twenty-five year sentence.¹¹⁸⁸ The story of the uncle and nephew tandem of John and Richard Birkes was very similar to Byron Buttner in that they

¹¹⁸⁵ *Brown County District Court Appearance Docket M*, Brown County, Nebraska

¹¹⁸⁶ *The Taylor Clarion*, October 17, 1940, 1

¹¹⁸⁷ *The Taylor Clarion*, October 17, 1940, 1

¹¹⁸⁸ *The Taylor Clarion*, May 8, 1941, 1

physically and violently resisted the seizure of their lands. The difference was they succeeded in killing Brock whereas Buttner had failed in killing Reed. However, in both instances the small agriculturalists faced a symbolic death. Buttner ended up in the state mental institution and the Birkes' lives were effectively over when they were sentenced to long prison sentences. In attempting to defend themselves from the loss of their lands both in the end failed due to their methods. The stresses caused by drought and agricultural failures coupled with their dislike of authority figures led to their demise. Both examples also demonstrate that the financial uncertainties caused by drought and depression led to an overall unstable legal atmosphere in the Sandhills that could lead to fronts that caused possible "storms" on an almost daily basis. Other counties close to the region suffered similar violence. In July 1937 Boone County Sheriff Lawrence Smoyer was killed and his deputy, William Wathen, was seriously wounded in Boone County in a similar incident in one of the county's remote areas.¹¹⁸⁹ In this regard, the 1930s Sandhills and areas close by were more of a wild "frontier" than the 1880s as lawmen's were regularly threatened or in harm's way.

The Nebraska Sandhills was a region of high crime and low precipitation during the drought ridden years of the Great Depression. Law abiding Nebraska Sandhills residents reacted very harshly to those among them, as well as outsiders, who committed felonious crimes. Crimes ranging from bootlegging to livestock theft to burglary to murder resulted in one way tickets to Lincoln and the Nebraska State Penitentiary for the perpetrator. The Sandhills economy was affected by such crimes in that bootleggers attempted to profit from stolen or illegal goods thus creating a market unto themselves. Such a market, coupled with

¹¹⁸⁹ *The Greeley Citizen*, July 22, 1937, 1

the unyielding drought, led to a stagnant economic recovery at times. Even though the drought and the poor economic conditions influenced robberies and other felonious crimes, some illegal incidents took place in the region based upon a variety of factors ranging from jealousy to psychoses. In early-October 1934, George Phillips of Cherry County murdered his wife Violet Mae with a shotgun and was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment in the State Penitentiary.¹¹⁹⁰ Likewise in Morrill County in September 1939, the town of Bridgeport faced a serial killer only this killer sought non-humans and did not discriminate between his victims' species. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* described the town's string of animal murders: "During the past two weeks, several dogs and cats, household pets of Bridgeport families, have died as the result of poisoning. This poison, determined by physicians to be arsenic, has apparently been administered thru food placed out of doors, which the pets have found and eaten. Several animals have been ill as the result of the poisoning but have recovered. Dogs belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Thornton Manning, to the Clarence Randall family and the P. J. Merrell family and a cat belonging to Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Taylor have been among those reported as dying from the poison. The person or persons who have been setting out this poison are warned that if apprehended they will be prosecuted severely."¹¹⁹¹ Nonetheless, the region's high profile incidents of criminal activity generally occurred in response to declining agricultural and thus, in turn, environmental conditions. The incidents of consistent, if not seemingly constant, criminal activity strained Sandhills society as Sandhillers had to worry about robbery and forgery along with rabbits and foreclosure. In comparison to other narratives of the American West, this aspect of Nebraska Sandhills' society during the Great Depression was reminiscent of the romanticized frontier

¹¹⁹⁰ *State of Nebraska v. George Phillips*, District Court of Cherry County, Nebraska, Case No. 5765, Cherry County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹¹⁹¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, September 28, 1939, 1

environment of the nineteenth century. Law men chased thieves and shot it out with murderers seemingly on a weekly basis in comparison with other urban areas of the West. The only difference was the shootouts and bank robberies were not being carried out or prevented by John Wayne on the silver screen, they were happening in real life. Thus, this part of the American West was not as “settled” as Frederick Jackson Turner believed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Beyond drought and crime Sandhillers dealt with another societal issue that had plagued the United States since its earliest days and had made life for many difficult, and at times divisive, during the Great Depression: racial understanding and interaction.

“White” Sands: Drought and Race in the Nebraska Sandhills during the Great Depression.

During the Great Depression, Sandhills demography was comprised mainly of citizens of Euro-American descent. Despite this significant factor, many Euro-American Sandhillers held less than tolerant views of African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans whom were generally considered inferior. African-Americans attempted to farm in the Sandhills just as their white contemporaries did and many Native Americans from South Dakota were present in northern Sandhills communities. Hispanics lived in the southern hills where they were utilized by farmers as beet laborers. Even though they shared the hardships of the Great Depression with their Euro-American Sandhills neighbors, their presence and social acceptance was ambiguous at best. African- Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans were viewed negatively in the period’s public records, such as newspapers, as these groups are generally mentioned only in relation to criminal activity and alcohol violations. By doing this, newspaper editors reinforced their lower status. Not all Sandhillers were prejudiced and many welcomed other races; however, the

region, as most of white America was at the time, was not a bastion of civil rights activists protesting on behalf of minorities. Most Sandhills Caucasians were indifferent to minority issues during this period. Such attitudes were not that dissimilar from their contemporaries on the Great Plains.

Despite these attitudes, the Sandhills were not devoid of minorities during the Great Depression. African-Americans had entered the hills in the early twentieth century searching for agricultural opportunities just as their Euro-American neighbors did. During the new century's infancy farming was in decline in the Sandhills largely due to the effects of the drought of the early 1890s, which coupled with the region's sandy topography made 160-acre homesteads unsustainable for settlers. This changed in 1904 with the implementation of the Kinkaid Act. Historian Nellie Snyder Yost wrote of the Kinkaid Act: "...the Kinkaid Homestead Act was passed in the Spring of 1904, opening to entry 10,000,000 acres of land in thirty-seven western Nebraska counties."¹¹⁹² The act's most significant contribution was that it increased homestead claims from 160 acres to 640 acres.¹¹⁹³ This was done in order to encourage renewed interest in farming as well as discourage the expansion of large ranching empires, such as Bartlett Richards' Spade Ranch in Sheridan and Cherry counties. These agricultural ventures were viewed by eastern politicians, who had no knowledge of the Sandhills' environment and topography, as an impediment to the American ideal of the yeoman farmer. The Kinkaid Act's ratification succeeded in increasing the Sandhills' agricultural population as small farmers once again sought lands. Cherry County Historian Barbara Kime Gale noted the act's effect on her county that: "By 1920 the population in the

¹¹⁹² Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range: The Story of Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 202

¹¹⁹³ Marianne Brinda Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Henderson, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 77

county peaked at 11, 753 (6,758 in 1980).”¹¹⁹⁴ Many of these new farming settlers that came to Cherry County, as well as other Sandhills counties, seeking their fortune were African-American.

From 1904 through the 1930s, African-Americans made their homes in several Sandhills counties such as Cherry, Blaine, and Box Butte. African-Americans who settled in Cherry County during this period homesteaded near Brownlee and formed the community of DeWitty. Yost wrote of these settlers:

Some were descendants of slaves, some were well educated, or skilled in various trades; all were musical and fun loving...The settlement had its own church, school, and store, and its people were welcomed as hired workers on neighboring ranches...The dry ‘30’s drove the last of them out, leaving nothing to mark their sojourn there except a lonely cemetery in Seth Hanna’s pasture.¹¹⁹⁵

Charles S. Reece, 19th century Cherry County pioneer, survivor of the Great Depression, and renowned Cherry County historian further commented on African-Americans and the DeWitty community in his 1945 work, *An Early History of Cherry County*:

Four young men of the settlement served in World War I; they were: W. R. Hayes, Joseph Boyd, McKinley Boyd, and Glenn Hannahs. These boys saw service in England, France, and Germany and all returned to their homes. Mr. Hayes was gassed and never fully recovered from the effects of it. Many of these settlers were from the city and did not like country life, so when they made final proof on their claims they sold their holdings to ranchmen and returned to the city. Many of them gave up and sold out during the depression that followed the first war. At the time this history is written, none of these settlers are living in the community. Mrs. Goldie Walker Hayes and Albert Riley are living in Cherry County. Mrs. Hayes is a teacher in the rural schools. The land in the settlement now belongs to adjoining ranchmen. There are a number of graves in the cemetery which is in Seth Hanna’s pasture. School District No. 110, and the Post Office have been discontinued.¹¹⁹⁶

Reece’s opinion and commentary of African-Americans and their settlement patterns in the Sandhills is significant to note as Reece was a contemporary of these settlers. His view of African-Americans was simultaneously complimentary and condescending. He appreciated African-Americans’s service to their country but also assumed that their agricultural

¹¹⁹⁴ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land*, 77

¹¹⁹⁵ Yost, *The Call of the Range*, 202

¹¹⁹⁶ Charles S. Reece, *An Early History of Cherry County*, 2nd Edition (Valentine, Nebraska: The Plains Trading Company Archives, 1992), 94

struggles were a result of their discomfort and dislike for their rural circumstances. One wonders: if they truly did not like the country, why move to the rural Sandhills where coyotes and deer outnumber people? Reece's condescension was most evident when he wrote of African-Americans near DeWitty that: "By 1912 there were more than 79 claims taken by these people."¹¹⁹⁷ The use of the terminology "these people" carries with it less than favorable connotations that imply at the worst bigotry and at the least that Reece was not on a friendly basis with the county's African-Americans. Others however treated African-Americans more respectfully, at least in person. Glenda Riley wrote of African-American Ava Day's experiences with Euro-Americans growing up in Cherry County at the turn of the twentieth century: "Day spent her childhood in the Nebraska Sandhills, where her family raised cattle, brood mares, and mules, and her adolescence in South Dakota, where she eventually married a black South Dakotan. She later recalled that her grandfather was white and her grandmother black. She explained: 'Color never made a difference to Grandpa. You were a person and a man and a lady.' Day added that the family's neighbors in the Sandhills felt much the same, for they were very friendly and helpful: 'Everybody asked did you need anything from town- & brought it back by your house or left it at your gate.'"¹¹⁹⁸ Thus, personal racial biases were all relative among Euro-American Cherry County residents; many, such as Reece, held certain stereotypical views regarding African-Americans and others could care less.

African-Americans who did not live in the short-lived DeWitty community made a niche for themselves in other places. Two such individuals were Blaine County's William

¹¹⁹⁷ Reece, *An Early History of Cherry County*, 93

¹¹⁹⁸ Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 28

“Billy” Young and Brownlee’s Sam Hood. Clarence Mac Duryea wrote of Young in *The History of Blaine County, Nebraska, Volume I*:

William Alfred Young, son of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Young, was born near Dannebrog, Nebraska, on August 8, 1875, and passed away in Dunning, Nebraska on February 18, 1940, at the age of 64 years, six months and 10 days...In 1901, he was united in marriage to Miss Louella Shores. To this union was born one daughter, Glenora...In 1908 the family moved to a ranch northeast of Halsey, where they lived until they moved to Dunning, about 1918. For these many years he has served the surrounding territory as blacksmith...Brother Young was always interested in civic advancement, community betterment, and moral and religious enlightenment...He was informed, tolerant, and conscientious. As far as possible, he tried to please both God and man.¹¹⁹⁹

Young survived the Great Depression by filling a niche in Blaine County society. It does not appear that he owned any rural lands and thus fortunately did not have to face the perils and hardships that drove so many other Sandhillers from the hills as he remained in the region until his death.

Another African-American who garnered the respect of his Euro-American Sandhills peers was Sam Hood. Hood was a barber in Brownlee, not far from the old DeWitty community, but earned notoriety in 1936 due to his activities as an illegal bootlegger.¹²⁰⁰ An article in *The Valentine Republican* issue of October 2, 1936, under the title, “State Agent’s Buy Finds Aged Negro With Home Brew” detailed Hood’s activities and the Cherry County law enforcement’s overall respect for him as a long-time resident of the county. The article remarked:

When Dan Buckley, state liquor agent, heard rumors that Sam Hood, aged negro barber of Brownlee, was selling liquor illegally, he journeyed to that place Monday, and bought four bottles of home brew at 50 cents per bottle. Then he asked Hood how much of the stuff he had on hand, and was told ‘four cases.’ Buckley informed the surprised negro that he would have to take him into custody, and phoned to Valentine for the sheriff. Sheriff Kime, who knew the old man, suspected that he had engaged in the business because he had had a hard time to make a living at his trade and last winter was very hard up...Taken before Justice of the Peace Paul Fauquet at Brownlee, Hood plead guilty and declared that he sold the home brew to get enough to eat. The sheriff recommended a light penalty, for fear that Hood could not pay a stiff fine and might have to board it out in the county jail at the expense of the

¹¹⁹⁹ The Blaine County History Book Committee, *The History of Blaine County, Nebraska, Volume I* (Curtis Media Corporation, 1988), 531

¹²⁰⁰ *The Valentine Republican*, October 2, 1936, 1

taxpayers, so the J. P. fined the old man \$1 and cost amounting to about \$14. When informed what the total sum was, Hood surprised the officials by bringing out a roll of bills and cheerfully peeling off a five and a ten. Sheriff Kime thinks that Hood must be about 80 years old, or more, and says that he has seen much of the world, and is quite a character.¹²⁰¹

Hood's example is interesting because it demonstrates both the racist attitudes of Sandhills whites as well as their tolerance for those of a different race who served a long-time niche in the hills. Due to his longevity, Hood was now viewed as a local, if not a token, "character" who perhaps shared the libertarian ideals common to the general Euro-American Sandhills populace. This once again demonstrates the conundrum that Cherry County Euro-Americans, such as Reece, had regarding African-Americans. The article also shows the *Republican's* editor's discriminatory attitudes as it infers that Hood is a mischievous African-American who slyly swindled his way out of a larger fine by appearing poor. The author does not mention Euro-Americans who bootlegged and committed burglaries in the region, many of whom sought to escape after captured. It could be argued that their attitudes towards law enforcement were far more heinous than Hood's and that their race had nothing to do with the offense. The editor/writer does not appear concerned with Hood's past criminal record which, if Kime's lenience was an indicator, appears to be minimal or non-existent or that the fifteen dollars may have been all the money Hood had, no matter his bootlegging activities. The article also fails to consider that some of this money may have come from his legitimate job as a barber. On April 11, 1934, Hood also sold property in Brownlee which may have provided some further economic means. According to Cherry County Deed Record 46:

Know all Men by These Presents: That Sam Hood (single man) of Brownlee of the County of Cherry and State of Nebraska for and in consideration of the sum of \$1.00 (One Dollar) and other valuable considerations ...in hand paid do hereby grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto Bessie Swan of Witchata (sic) of the County of Sedgewick (sic) and State of Kansas the following described real estate

¹²⁰¹ *The Valentine Republican*, October 2, 1936, 1

situated in Brownlee in Cherry County, and State of Nebraska to wit: Lot 16; Block 2; Lot Sixteen in Block two.¹²⁰²

While Hood only made a one dollar profit from this sale, the other considerations Swan provided him may have provided further means of profit. While this is conjectural, it should not have been assumed that Hood only had extralegal funds in which to pay his bills, even though he himself allowed Kime and Fauquet to think so. The lack of a criminal record before this incident and during the crime riddled era of the 1930s could have been the basis for an article praising the old barber; however, this was not the case. It could have also been noted that the drought, having negatively impacted Hood's clients economically, led Hood to seek another route, perhaps the only one he had, to make a small amount of income just as his Euro-American equivalents were doing. The author inferred that since Hood was an African-American, no matter his age or poverty level, he was of ill-repute and sought to manipulate hard working Euro-Americans out of their limited funds through illegal means. These writings served to reinforce the commonly held stereotypes of the day among the region's Caucasian population.

In contrast, Kime's response to Hood demonstrated a concern for his well-being despite his race thus showing that his longevity in Cherry County had shifted his status from "Negro" or outsider to fellow Sandhillier. Thus, at least for some Sandhilliers, differences caused by race were not relevant, at least in comparison to greater problems such as the Great Depression and periods of environmental drought. Hooker County resident Frank Harding's attitudes were similar: "there was an African-American community out north of town here, uh, where Big Creek is...down there and they traded in Mullen or Brownlee and one of the men was a mail carrier out of Mullen and Riley I think his name, but they were pretty well

¹²⁰² Cherry County Deed Record 46, 578

liked, you know they didn't have a race problem nobody that I know of ever put 'em down because races because they worked on ranches...but I never heard of any conflicts with 'em..."¹²⁰³ Single individuals, such as Hood and Riley, became accepted by prominent whites, such as Sheriff Kime, throughout the late-1920s and into the 1930s. This was not the case in other parts of the Sandhills.

In 1933, newly elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt began implementing his New Deal policies to stimulate the American economy and reinvigorate American society. Despite its early successes and the hopeful optimism it fostered, one social challenge that the New Deal failed to meet was the issue over African-American civil rights. Historian Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff noted the problems African-Americans faced during the New Deal's implementation in her work, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*:

The newfound promise of the Democratic Party did not prevent black political organizations and individual men and women from immediately decrying discriminatory practices in New Deal agencies. As these agencies were largely decentralized during Roosevelt's first administration, the distribution of relief remained in the hands of local officials. Therefore, African-Americans, who still largely resided in the South, faced widespread discrimination in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and other federal agencies, which reinforced the southern political and racial hierarchy.¹²⁰⁴

African-American civil rights were also of little concern for white Nebraska Sandhills residents, if not wholly non-existent, before and during the New Deal era as many viewed African-Americans with disdain and/or ambivalence. Many of these residents lived in Arthur County. During the 1920s and 1930s, African-American civil rights received little attention here as Arthur County and the community of Arthur maintained a significant Ku Klux Klan

¹²⁰³ Taped interview with Frank Harding conducted by the author, Mullen, Nebraska, October 4, 2014

¹²⁰⁴ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 19

presence. According to Wilton H. Dorris in *Arthur County's 75 Years of History:*

Homesteaders & Homemakers:

The Invisible Empire of the Ku-Klux-Klan No. 106 Realm of Arthur, Nebraska, existed from June 1925, possibly earlier through December 1934. To be a Klan member you had to be a native white male gentile of temperate habits, sound mind, and a believer in the Christian Religion and the Maintenance of White Supremacy and pure Americanism...through the years of its existence there were 171 men of Arthur County either a member or recommended for membership...There were no black people in Arthur County so the Klan really couldn't find much to do, but with some persuasion from State and National Klan offices they were urged to persecute local Catholics. Other activities of the Klan were the appointment of committees within their ranks to investigate wrong doings of various citizens and County Officials...they helped and donated to the needy in the community...Bootlegging was one of the illegal activities they were vigilant on and in June 1927 after much discussion they made and approved a motion to banish any Klan member who helped, assisted or went bond for any suspected bootlegger. They built a two story building on Lots 8 and 9 Block 27 across the street west from the Court House. They usually held meetings and ceremonies in white robes and in some instances burned crosses as a warning to wrong doers or for some reason known only to them.¹²⁰⁵

While the Ku Klux Klan in Arthur County did not have an opportunity to terrorize African-Americans, Dorris infers that they would have given the opportunity. This may or may not have been the case; however, in any regard the Klan succeeded in placing a discriminatory hue over Arthur County as African-Americans did not settle in this county after the formation of a Klan chapter in the county. African-Americans had not come to Arthur County before the 1920s, but now their absence was assured.

In contrast, Cherry County did not have a significant Klan presence as the DeWitty community was accepted for many years as were African-American individuals such as Sam Hood. If there had been such a presence, DeWitty would not have lasted as long as it had nor would Hood's sentence have been so lenient due to the fact that the Euro-American population was greater in Cherry County than the African-American one. While the Arthur chapter of the Ku Klux Klan may not have been overly violent, it did share traits with other Klan groups that were common in the United States during this period. Historian Shawn Lay in his introduction to the edited work, *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New*

¹²⁰⁵ *Arthur County's 75 Years of History: Homesteaders & Homemakers*, 178

Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, argued that the Klan was not solely concerned with race but instead was more focused on pushing forth a WASP agenda. According to Lay: “ If a label is needed... “populist” seems best... The crisis of Prohibition enforcement, in fact, may have been the most powerful catalyst of the Klan movement and during the 1920s the Klan may have been the most popular means of expressing support for the Noble experiment... Their movement spoke to too many social and political concerns to be understood through ideology alone.”¹²⁰⁶ Thus, while the Arthur Klan served society in socially acceptable ways such as enforcing prohibition laws and assisting the needy, they also served the additional purpose of exemplifying the county populace’s discriminatory and exclusionary policies. Their success in this endeavor was never more apparent than in the June 18th, 1931, issue of *The Arthur Enterprise*. The newspaper reprinted an article from a nationally syndicated paper from Washington D. C. entitled, “Negro Citizens Are Few In Nebraska,” which stated: “Not a single negro resides in 28 of Nebraska’s 93 counties and 15 other counties have but a single negro resident, according to a bulletin issued by the census bureau at Washington, D. C. recently... Counties having no negro population are: Arthur, Banner, Cedar, Chase, Cuming, Deuel, Dundy, Franklin, Garfield, Gosper, Hayes, Hooker, Johnson, Kearney, Loup, McPherson, Nance, Pawnee, Perkins, Pierce, Polk, Rock, Saline, Sioux, Thayer, Valley, Webster and Wheeler... Those with a single colored man are: Antelope, Blaine, Boone, Brown, Burt, Clay, Dixon, Furnas, Garden, Howard, Keya Paha, Kimball, Sherman, Thomas.”¹²⁰⁷ This article was reprinted in nearly every Sandhills newspaper. *The Arthur Enterprise* does not post an editorial concerned with investigating why African-Americans did not settle within the county in response to this article, nor does it

¹²⁰⁶ Shawn Lay, Ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 34

¹²⁰⁷ *The Arthur Enterprise*, June 18, 1931, 2

post a celebratory article. The article is a matter of fact posting of statistics that demonstrate the success of one of the key elements of the Klan's agenda within the county.

Other Sandhills counties that appeared on the lists within the above mentioned article in *The Arthur Enterprise's*, June 18, 1931, issue did not have a significant Klan presence within their boundaries or an organized chapter whatsoever. However, many of their newspaper editors and citizens made their prejudices known through their media sources. Three of these counties were Hooker, Thomas, and Box Butte. In Hooker County there appear to have been no incidents of violence against African-Americans (largely due to their absence) or an overriding desire for a Klan presence. Nonetheless, the county's newspaper editor did reveal his or her prejudices in an article appearing in the January 16, 1931, issue of the *Hooker County Tribune* entitled, "Negro pays For Crime Against School Teacher." According to the *Hooker County Tribune*: "That the life of the Negro is a tough one as well as being one of short duration when he attempts to leave the bounds of his own confines and becomes meddlesome with social interests of the white race, was again demonstrated, though in a horrible manner down at Maryville, Mo., a week ago when chained to the roof of the Garrett rural school building in which he was alleged to have assaulted and murdered Miss Velma Colter, 19-year old teacher, Raymond Gunn, was burned to death by a mob which made a funeral pyre of the building last Monday."¹²⁰⁸ The article continues to describe Gunn's lynching by fire in vivid detail with no apparent shock at the Missouri lynch mob's actions. This article was shared by the editor of the county's newspaper and from this one cannot adequately judge the individual thoughts of Hooker County residents regarding violence against African-Americans. However, it does not appear that *Tribune* subscribers

¹²⁰⁸ *Hooker County Tribune*, June 16, 1931, 1

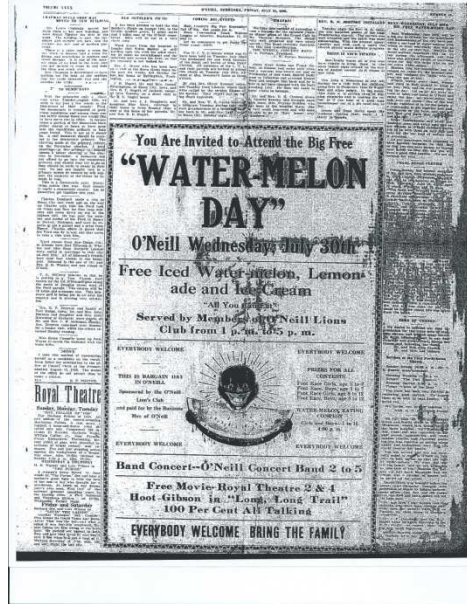
complained about the article's vivid lynching description, or the act itself, as they did not write in in subsequent issues to protest either. This inaction, at best, displayed a degree of apathy towards the country's racial problems even though Sandhillers were accepting of African-Americans on an individual basis.

In neighboring Thomas County, the county's sole newspaper was once again used as a mouthpiece to voice Thomas County citizens' views of African-Americans. In the January 14, 1931, issue of the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, Thedford resident, William Herbaugh wrote in to voice his displeasure with the town's new ordinance regarding the killing of the town's stray dog population in return for a monetary reward of \$1.00 to any citizen who chose to participate.¹²⁰⁹ Herbaugh's pet dog had apparently been taken and intentionally or non-intentionally fell prey to the new ordinance. He wrote that if someone had committed the act because they needed the money to help their family he would have gladly given them money instead if they had just asked him.¹²¹⁰ Herbaugh concluded his editorial letter: "But I wouldn't have let no one kill the dog for \$100.00, let alone \$1 and in my opinion, a man that would do a trick like that for a measily (sic) dollar is worse than a thief or a bank robber, and lower in heart than any negro in the south."¹²¹¹ Herbaugh's letter does not mean that all Thomas County residents shared his low opinion of African-Americans and their character; however, it is significant for once again showing that many Sandhills residents had low opinions of African-Americans even if their county was not heavily populated with them.

¹²⁰⁹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 14, 1931, 1

¹²¹⁰ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 14, 1931, 1

¹²¹¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, January 14, 1931, 1



(*Holt County Independent*, July 25th, 1930, p.1. Watermelon day in O’Neill is advertised featuring stereotypical imagery of African-Americans during the 1930s.)

In the western Sandhills county of Box Butte, newspapers were again used to portray African-Americans from a singularly negative viewpoint. As *The Valentine Republican* had made a point to include Sam Hood’s race in its article on his bootlegging arrest as a means to discredit him, so did the *Alliance Times- Herald* regarding some of Alliance’s African-American residents. In the November 17, 1931, issue of the *Alliance Times- Herald* an article was written about the acquittal of twenty-five year old William Dickinson. Dickinson had been acquitted of the assault of a minor female, Miss Frances Ford in a highly public case. Both parties were African-American as well as another couple that was with Dickinson and Ford the night of the alleged assault. The paper described all the parties as “colored.”¹²¹² It also detailed how Dickinson’s acquittal was based largely on the inconsistency of the testimony of Miss Ford. According to the *Alliance Times-Herald*: “Miss Ford testified that on the evening of August 3 she was walking to her home when a car driven by Dickinson

¹²¹² *Alliance Times Herald*, November 17, 1931, 1

drove up and she accepted a ride. The other couple was in the back seat. Ford took the wheel of the car and drove out into the country. On cross-examination by the defense attorney, Harry Oantz, Miss Ford admitted that she attended a picnic with Dickinson two nights following the alleged assault attempt. In his argument before the jury the defense...emphasized the assertion that the complaining witness did not make any outcries or ask for aid from the other persons in the auto.”¹²¹³ An article in the *Times-Herald* roughly a year later also identified race and criminal activity. The plight of Ernest Graham was detailed in the newspaper’s November 1, 1932, issue: “Ernest Graham, colored horse thief, was sentenced one to three years in the state reformatory for men when he pleaded guilty before District Judge E. L. Meyer in district court Monday afternoon. Graham, used to good clothes and good times, found it difficult to get along without these things when the depression struck and the hard-earned fortune of his brother-in-law, the late Robert Anderson, dwindled away, and took to horse stealing to provide the money he needed.”¹²¹⁴

Despite these examples, most notices of criminal cases or activity in Alliance and Box Butte County did not stipulate the perpetrator’s race. One such instance was the forgery case of Omer Pace. The November 21, 1931, issue of the *Alliance Times-Herald* noted of Mr. Pace’s predicament: “Omer Pace,..., pleaded guilty to a forgery and was sentenced to two years in the penitentiary. He is from Glenwood, Ia, and has been in this vicinity for several months. He has a wife and four children.”¹²¹⁵ Another example was that of Rex Ryan. “Rex Ryan, 29, farm hand who has been employed on farms in the community north of Alliance pleaded guilty this morning upon arraignment in county court on charges

¹²¹³ *Alliance Times Herald*, November 17, 1931, 1

¹²¹⁴ *Alliance Times Herald*, November 1, 1932, 1

¹²¹⁵ *Alliance Times Herald*, November 20, 1931, 1

involving a grave social crime...Details of the case which are being withheld in this instance because of their nature involved the mistreatment of a farmer boy in which Ryan has been employed. The lad's name is withheld for the same reason."¹²¹⁶ Why was it necessary to reveal the race of Dickinson, Graham, and the others and not Pace or Ryan? By noting that Dickinson, Ford, and Graham were African- American the *Times-Herald* sought to demonstrate the nefarious characteristics of African-Americans, just as the *Valentine Republican* had done with Hood. The Alliance examples implies that African-American females were not truthful and that African-American men were philanderers only concerned with fancy clothes and partying. When heinous crimes were committed by Caucasians such as Ryan it was never stipulated in the newspaper that the perpetrator was white.

Such examples were a reflection of American society during the Great Depression era. Euro-Americans who committed crimes in the Sandhills were viewed as either not from there or as rare locals who went astray. African-Americans were portrayed in newspapers as somewhat shifty characters of low standing. Newspapers, in general, do not note if African-Americans contributed positively to the New Deal era such as being employed by the Civilian Conservation Corps or the Public Works Administration. However, African-Americans across the country, in general, struggled to get CCC postings. T. H. Watkins wrote of this form of acceptable institutionalized racism: "An unofficial quota of 10 percent black enrollment had been established, on the theory that this represented, roughly, the percentage of blacks in the general population. In fact, though, only about two hundred thousand African Americans were enrolled during the life of the program, about 6 percent of

¹²¹⁶ *Alliance Times Herald*, May 9, 1933, 1

the total enrollment.”¹²¹⁷ Nevertheless, African-Americans were seen as the “other” by Sandhillers, shiftless vagabonds and child-like criminals who served as impediments to Euro-American agriculturalists and their attempts at recovery during the Great Depression. Unless African-Americans were prominently known and well liked, such as Sam Hood, many Sandhills residents conveniently believed the region’s newspapers stereotypical portrayals of them.

Hispanic Americans were also represented poorly in the region’s newspapers as they were typically portrayed as constant threats to Sandhills society due to their criminal activities. As with African-Americans, their race appeared in the headlines along with their crime while once again Euro-Americans were spared of this “honor” when they committed similar transgressions. The region’s Hispanic population primarily was found on the outskirts of the western and southwestern hills wherein they toiled as hired labor for sugar beet farmers in Box Butte, Garden, and Morrill counties. Due to this factor the *Bridgeport News-Blade* was the primary source of postings of “Mexican” happenings with the *Garden County News* contributing on occasion.¹²¹⁸ The negative news stories began early in the 1930s. A September 25th, 1930, story with the heading, “Mexican Charged With Waste Theft,” informed readers as to the unfortunate plight of Pasqual Volimer.¹²¹⁹ The *News-Blade* reported: “Pasqual Volimer is held in the county jail on a charge of stealing waste from Burlington box cars last March. About the time of the occurrence he left the county and

¹²¹⁷ T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1993), 219

¹²¹⁸ The term “Mexican” is used in this section in the context that it was used during the 1930s era. The

term is placed in quotations in order to note that it is not entirely clear if those categorized as “Mexican” in southwestern Nebraska in the 1930s were actually from Mexico or if it was a general term for any individual of Latino/Latina descent. The use of the term is also not meant derogatorily by the author but only intended to be used in an historical context.

¹²¹⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, September 25, 1930, 1

upon his return to Bayard this week was arrested by Chief of Police Webb. His hearing is set for tomorrow in County Court.”¹²²⁰ Such a story served to reinforce the view of “Mexicans” as lowly individuals as they were so inferior they stooped to steal trash. The paper does not even postulate a question as to what social issues led Volimer to have to result to such acts.

And so the negative imagery of Hispanics continued. In late-December 1930, the *News-Blade* described the murder of forty-six year old Frank Lopez by Nicolas Negrete as “Bayard Mexican is Killed By Gun as a Result of a Feud” and the arrests of Antonio Ramario and Eugenio Orozco for possession of a still and six quarts of alcohol also resulted in a title heading in which their race was emphasized.¹²²¹ The negative imagery of Hispanics continued in the early 1930s as the newspaper emphasized the jailing of a “Mexican” named Bargas on a charge of vagrancy, Gonzalo Borrall and Ben Razo engaged in a dual in Bayard in which Razo was shot in the leg and Borrall ran, and the arrest of twenty-two year old Jesus Talavero in late-February 1935 for his most recent attempt to wreck a train and subsequent two year sentence in Lincoln.¹²²² “Mexican” crimes remained popular news stories in Morrill County as the Depression progressed. In early-May 1935, the *News-Blade* reported of the capture of Max Lucero, Fred Abeyta, and Vivian Bacca from Scottsbluff for robbing lumber yards in both Casper, Wyoming, and Bayard, Nebraska.¹²²³ A month and half later “Mexican” laborers faced legal trouble for fighting in nearby Garden County. The *Garden County News* of Oshkosh reported of the incident: “The five men were charged with fighting and disturbance, and were said to have been putting on a battle royal. The other three men

¹²²⁰ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, September 25, 1930, 1

¹²²¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 25, 1930, 1

¹²²² *Bridgeport News-Blade*, January 1, 1931, 1; *Bridgeport News-Blade*, May 28, 1931, 1; *Bridgeport News-Blade*, February 28, 1935, 1

¹²²³ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, May 2, 1935, 1

were Joe Estrada, Ramon Gomez and Jim Trujilo. They were all beet workers on the farms of Alfred Cheney, Andy Gordon and Jim Orr of the Lewellen community and D. Contratto at this place.”¹²²⁴ In June of 1940, at the same time the Nazis were quickly defeating the ineffectual French Army, the *News-Blade* relayed a story of more effective gun play in western Nebraska. However, once again the news portrayed “Mexicans” only in a negative, lawless light. The *News-Blade* wrote of the shootout between “Mexican” lawbreaker, Ganero Gonzales, and Nebraska State Highway Patrolman J. J. Vavrina under the heading, “Mexican To Pen For Shooting To Kill”:

Ganero Gonzales, 51, Mexican beet worker, in (sic) enroute to the state penitentiary today to begin an eight year sentence for ‘shooting with intent to kill’ J. J. Vavrina, state highway patrolman of Alliance. Gonzales attempted to shoot the officer last Friday evening after Vavrina had arrested him for drunken driving and was bringing him to Bridgeport in the patrol car. . . In a blazing gun battle in which the two stood only a feet apart, Gonzales was shot in the left leg and right shoulder but Vavrina was uninjured. The battle ended when Gonzales’ gun jammed and the officer took advantage of the opportunity leaped at Gonzales and clubbed him over the head with the butt of his gun. The shooting occurred on the Oregon Trail highway about six miles east of Bayard.¹²²⁵

A year later the Morrill County newspaper again highlighted the personal failings of a Hispanic as it told of the arrest of Jose Moreno for intoxication and his subsequent death in the county jail from suffocation caused by inhaling smoke from a burning mattress that apparently in his stupor he set ablaze.¹²²⁶ While it cannot be denied that these Hispanics were engaged in illegal activity, once again the media sources of the era did nothing to find out why so many engaged in this lifestyle. Newspapers also did not highlight positive stories of Hispanics and their culture or their contributions to the southwestern Sandhills counties of Morrill and Garden. It was more popular and easier to cast them in the Old West image of the “Mexican” bandit, the antithesis to the law abiding Sandhills Caucasian’s version of society. In this regard, the example of Gonzales’s and Vavrina’s shootout epitomized the

¹²²⁴ *Garden County News*, June 18, 1936, 8

¹²²⁵ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 20, 1940, 1

¹²²⁶ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 12, 1941, 1

stereotypical image of southwestern Sandhillers struggling against a Mexican menace that seemed unrelenting.

Relationships between southwestern Nebraska Sandhillers and Hispanic laborers were strained in large part due to the environmental and employment conditions of the early-summer of 1932. In this year due to a lack of available work as the Depression deepened, the Scottsbluff County Commissioners, Great Western Sugar Company, and the Burlington Railroad conspired to deport the “Mexican” workers back to their homeland to the south.¹²²⁷ For its part in the scheme the railroad was to be paid one cent per mile for transporting the “Mexicans” to Denver and then on to El Paso.¹²²⁸ It does not appear that locals protested the treatment of their former Hispanic neighbors many of whom they worked closely with. Contributing to the act, the *Bridgeport News-Blade* happily enunciated why “Mexican” deportation was a positive benefit to all involved:

The move will avert the pressing necessity of increased charity to Mexican families which are unemployed and without funds... The Mexican families were brought to the North Platte Valley to work in the beet fields but with labor in the lowest demand in many years hundreds of them were without jobs for the coming summer and it was obvious that they would become a burden on the towns and counties if allowed to remain in Nebraska. One of the peculiar features about the case is the fact that many of those who are being sent to Mexican soil will see that country for the first time when they leave El Paso for the last journey into the interior. Virtually all of the young children- and there are many of them on the train- were born American citizens. However, few if any of those aboard the train seemed dismayed at the thought of the return to Mexico... There were others on the train, younger Mexicans, who looked on the journey as the great adventure. Born and raised in America of Mexican parents, they had not been out of the North Platte valley. All they knew was the hard labor of the summer season, the privation and cold of the winters. No doubt they had been told much of Mexico, the land of their fathers. And so the chance to go somewhere else to start all over again and maybe the chance to rise much higher in the world than would be possible from the beet field, is welcome to them and they seem glad of the opportunity given them. There were others on the train who seemed adverse to the idea of leaving America, the land which had become home to them- but majority seemed to look upon the long journey as the beginning of a great adventure to a new world and a better chance. Probably the move is for the best interests of all concerned- the unemployed families, the employed families who remain, and the North Platte valley.¹²²⁹

¹²²⁷ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, May 26, 1932, 1

¹²²⁸ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, May 26, 1932, 1

¹²²⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, May 26, 1933, 1

From this article it is apparent that the *News-Blade's* editors were writing to the sensibilities of their white readers. The forced deportation of American citizens by local government offices and businesses should have caused legal repercussions and been reported to the Nebraska state government. The newspaper did not investigate this but tried to spin the forced train ride as a “great adventure,” nor did they care or really know what Depression-era Mexico was like in comparison to the United States to really be able to speculate what Hispanics’ new lives and employment opportunities were to be like. Later, an additional seventy “Mexicans” were sent by train from the beet country of southwestern Nebraska in late-May 1932.¹²³⁰ Sadly such actions were common throughout the United States.

Historian T.H. Watkins wrote of the prevalence of this attitude throughout the country:

“...unabashed racism was buttressed by the theory that unemployment among Anglo workers could be blamed on the presence of a labor force willing to work cheap and under conditions that ‘real’ American workers would not tolerate- the Mexican Americans. The answer, some concluded, was deportation- or repatriation, as it was described more benignly.”¹²³¹ Thus, economics was used as an excuse to legitimize thinly veiled prejudiced attitudes against Hispanics. Such actions, as well as the attitudes of the region’s newspapermen, once again only served to enflame and divide Sandhills’ society’s myopic views on racial issues and societal relationships.

During the Great Depression era, African-Americans and Hispanic Americans were not the only groups that held a second-class status in Sandhills newspapers. They shared this unfortunate status with Native Americans. Native Americans generally only appeared in Sandhills newspapers when they were involved in a criminal activity. Merle Monteau, the

¹²³⁰ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 2, 1932, 1

¹²³¹ Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 69

youthful milk thief of Valentine, was described as “having Indian blood.”¹²³² Likewise, Frank Mackey, who helped murder F. J. Sexsmith of Holt County, was described by newspapers as a “half breed Indian.”¹²³³ Such racial descriptions when placed within the context of criminal activity served to cast Native Americans in a negative light just like their African-American contemporaries. As with African-Americans, Sandhillers kept track of the overall Native American population within the state in 1930. The October 30, 1930, issue of the *Rock County Leader* wrote of the declining Native American population: “Like the bison they hunted and the wilderness in which they found refuge from the storms and cold, the first human residents of Nebraska are disappearing from the scene. There were 4,337 Indians in Nebraska in 1929 according to the annual report of the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs. All of those numbered in this counting were wards of the government maintained at one agency for the Winnebagos and Omahas at Winnebago and the subagencies (sic) for the Sioux at Ponca and Santee. Of that motley population that once hunted the plains of this state, most of the tribes have vanished.”¹²³⁴ By tracking such records Sandhillers justified their beliefs that Native Americans were inferior due in large part to their extralegal activity as they were slowly vanishing.

One newspaper that participated in the practice of focusing on crime through racial reinforcement, largely due to a heavy presence of Native Americans in Cherry County communities due to their proximity to the reservations of southern South Dakota, was *The Valentine Republican*. Nearly all Native Americans that appeared in the pages of *The Republican* were depicted as drunks and/or thieves with poor hygiene habits. Two such

¹²³² *The Valentine Republican*, February 19, 1937, 1

¹²³³ *Brown County Democrat*, December 2, 1932, 1

¹²³⁴ *Rock County Leader*, October 30, 1930, 1

individuals were Sam White and William Yellowrobe. The June 9, 1933, issue of *The Valentine Republican* described their situation in a column under the heading “Uses Tear Gas”:

Sam White and William Yellowrobe are serving sentences of thirty and ninety days in the county jail, respectively, commencing last Friday. White was arrested the second time the evening previous, after having been warned to get out of town, for being intoxicated. Yellowrobe gave the chief of police and Chris Schmit quite a tussle, when arrested for the same cause, and the chief finally used tear gas. It was shot so close to his face that his eyes swelled badly, requiring medical attention, but it does not appear that he was treated any worse than a white man would have been under the same circumstances. Local people do not generally believe that intoxicated Indians are entitled to any coddling when they become obstreperous.¹²³⁵

Despite the newspaper’s assertions, Valentine/Cherry County law officials did have a double standard when handling white alcohol offenders or disturbers of the peace compared to their Native American counterparts. There does not appear to be other instances of tear gas used on Euro-Americans, rather for disorderly conduct or for illegal liquor production. Two such Caucasian individuals that participated in the former were Jess Keeler and Mont Bishop. *The Valentine Republican* noted a public fight they had in their August 17, 1934, issue stating: “Jess Keeler, who is a neighbor of Mont Bishop near Cady postoffice, in Todd county, attacked Mr. Bishop on the street here Saturday forenoon, and started a fist fight. It is said that he had previously accused Mr. Bishop of shooting prairie chickens on his farm land. The men were separated by special officer Chris Schmit, who took them before Police Judge Frank Fischer. Keeler plead guilty to assault and was fined \$5 and costs, and Bishop was released.”¹²³⁶ One wonders if these two men had been Native American would they have shared the same fate as White and Yellowrobe?

¹²³⁵ *The Valentine Republican*, June 9, 1933, 1

¹²³⁶ *The Valentine Republican*, August 17, 1934, 1

The latter charge of bootlegging was faced by Earl Carey in April 1940 for selling illegal alcohol to Native Americans on the Rosebud Reservation.¹²³⁷ *The Valentine Republican* notes how his still was raided by Cherry County officials but makes no mention of the use of tear gas. While Carey apparently did not resist arrest like White and Yellowrobe did, it also does raise the question of how fairly a Native American in Carey's position would have been treated. The only use of tear gas on possibly Euro-American criminal offenders was noted in the July 12, 1940, issue of *The Republican*, under the column heading, "Burglars Chased by Tear Gas." In this instance, the tear gas also was not implemented by law officers. "Burglars made an attempt to break into the large safe at the office of the Valentine Lumber Co., last Friday night but were balked by the discharge of tear gas from the inside of the lock. When the burglars broke off the knob, the gas rushed out and evidently discouraged them from further effort. Sheriff Kime says that this kind of safe, with two doors, is hard to break into. He thinks that this work was done by professionals."¹²³⁸ Thus, tear gas could be effectively used as a crime deterrent in the county without injuring assailants, no matter their race, as long as it was not utilized by Cherry County law officials themselves.

Beyond White and Yellowrobe, *The Valentine Republican* posted multiple examples of Native American chicanery or articles that set Native Americans apart as second class citizens. One article noting intoxicated Native Americans in Valentine during a stockmen's convention appeared in the newspaper's, June 21, 1940, issue stating: "Friday afternoon Caretaker Bussick phoned in from Mt. Hope cemetery that five Indians were using the cemetery as a picnic ground, and that they were running around in a state of nudity, which he

¹²³⁷ *The Valentine Republican*, April 12, 1940, 1

¹²³⁸ *The Valentine Republican*, July 12, 1940, 1

declared was very embarrassing. Chief of Police Jones hastened to the place and found that the Indians, three men and two women, were very drunk, but by that time had resumed their clothes; so the incipient nudist colony was nipped in the bud.”¹²³⁹ Such an article served to demonstrate for the county’s Euro-American readership the unruly and childlike status of Native Americans in comparison to their white counterparts. The *Sheridan County Star* posted similar such write-ups. In the July 4th, 1935, issue of the newspaper, the paper sarcastically wrote of an “Indian uprising”: “Police were forced to use tear gas to quell an Indian uprising in Gordon Monday night. With too much fire water under his belt Horse Standing Inside, a deaf and dumb Sioux got himself into a brawl and when officers attempted an arrest the Indian drew his knife and ripped the policeman’s coat. Horse Standing Inside, together with other Indians involved in the fight were brought to Rushville and lodged in the county jail.”¹²⁴⁰ A subsequent article from the *Star* reported in mid-September 1937 that five Indians were regularly breaking beer bottles in Rushville and they were eventually found and forced to sweep up the mess.¹²⁴¹ In short, southern South Dakota and northern Nebraska Native Americans were still “Wild Indians,” who were not productive members of society. For a region that was becoming increasingly more modern, the travails of Native Americans were unacceptable. They were “the other,” an example of who was bringing the United States down during the Great Depression. Such stories only served to frighten Sandhillers and make them leery of Native Americans, similar to the weeks leading up to the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. Mary Hallstead Reed spoke of her fears of Native Americans as a child during the Depression: “My sister for a while lived near the reservation in South Dakota she lived in White Clay at that time and of course the Indians were quite... frequent

¹²³⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, June 21, 1940, 1

¹²⁴⁰ *Sheridan County Star*, July 4, 1935, 1

¹²⁴¹ *Sheridan County Star*, September 16, 1937, 1

there, so I was riding my horse one day and here comes this Indian chief...I get off my horse and ran in the house and got under the bed...and I said to my sister 'He's gonna get me' and she said, 'No, he's a nice fellow...he's not gonna hurt you...'»¹²⁴² Thus, stereotypes shaped Sandhillers images of Native Americans from an early age.

Sometimes Sandhillers were more curious than fearful of Native Americans. Another article from *The Republican* displays a more curious tone into Native American affairs but in the end still denigrates them. *The Valentine Republican* took note in its October 2, 1936, issue that:

Two big buses brought fifty Sioux Indians, from the Pine Ridge reservation, to town Monday evening, and left them here, the buses leaving the next day for Ft. Worth, Texas. The Indians have been employed in a concession at the Texas celebration during the last three months. Just why they were dumped off here was not made plain, but the Indians said that stock trucks would be sent down from the reservation after them. It is a hundred miles or more from the city to Pine Ridge. The Indians said that they had been well treated in Texas, and enjoyed their stay there, although one of them declared that they had to work hard at night, presumably referring to the fact that they had to put on their costumes and perform their native dances both day and night. They were unusually clean and fairly well dressed.¹²⁴³

While the article is more positive than the previous ones noted, it still questions Native motives and implies racist qualities in that it is shocked at their cleanliness and dress. This counters the racist stereotype of the "drunken Indian." The writer does also not take into consideration that the Sioux were perhaps either frugal with their money or had spent a considerable amount of it getting home. This was why they had a bus ticket as far only as Valentine and had to arrange for further transportation from the reservation.

As with the *Alliance Times-Herald* and *The Valentine Republican*, the *Brown County Democrat* found it necessary to post Frank Mackey's race in order to imply that his

¹²⁴² Taped interview conducted by the author with Mary Hallstead Reed, Mullen, Nebraska, October 5, 2014

¹²⁴³ *The Valentine Republican*, October 2, 1936, 1

murderous tendencies were common to his race. The *Hooker County Tribune* also posted an article in order to note the differentiation between whites and Native Americans. In its September 13, 1934, issue the newspaper noted a Sioux celebration honoring Crazy Horse at Fort Robinson, Nebraska; however, the article was more interested with what the Sioux were eating. According to the *Hooker County Tribune*: “Sioux Indians from the Pine Ridge agency, encamped near Crawford for three or four days last week, enjoyed a real Indian feast. Fifty unwanted dogs were rounded up at Alliance and taken to the festival at Crawford in trailers. Arthur “Tubby” Howe, prominent business man, called “Little Crazy Horse” by the Sioux said that even a mutt was worth a pair of moccasins.”¹²⁴⁴ Once again, this subtle joke at the Native Americans expense suggests that they would enjoy eating dogs. Thus, they were beneath the status of Euro-Americans, as to them such an act was more than incredulous. A more useful article could have been written questioning the conditions on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations to discover rather or not the Sioux had anything edible to eat beyond dogs during the Depression.

Other Sandhills newspapers were less racial in their tone and did not post overtly negative comments of Native Americans. These papers instead posted articles concerned with current Native American life on the reservation or articles which discussed Native American history. One such paper was *The Stapleton Enterprise*. *The Enterprise*, reposted an article from the Gordon Journal in its February 27, 1936, issue which described the plight of starving Native Americans in the snow at Red Shirt Table and Chuny Table on the Pine Ridge Reservation. This article went into detail on how Reservation officials brought food to

¹²⁴⁴ *Hooker County Tribune*, September 13, 1934, 1

needy Native Americans by any transportation means necessary, including pack horses.¹²⁴⁵

This was different than the *Hooker County Tribune* and its jocular coverage of Sioux eating habits at the Fort Robinson celebration. Such a publication demonstrated that some Sandhills newspapers were concerned with their Native American neighbors as equal human beings and did not find them to be an easy punch line. Thus, not all Great Depression era newspaper editors or writers were racist.

A final example to note is the *Alliance Times-Herald's* surprisingly evenhanded report on New Deal projects on the reservation. In its December 5, 1933, issue, the newspaper remarked: "The public works administration has announced the allotment of \$1,562,500 to the office of Indian affairs of the department of interior for the construction of hospital facilities for Indians. The project involves new construction for the benefit of Indians now without hospital accommodation or the replacement of facilities unfit for further use."¹²⁴⁶ No denigrating comments of Sioux spiritualism, medicine men, or medicinal practices appear in this article. This once again shows how *The Stapleton Enterprise* and the *Alliance Times-Herald* were different from the *Tribune* and *Republican*, at least in this example. They chose at least to mention the then contemporary hardships faced by Native Americans on the reservations bordering the northern Nebraska Sandhills in comparison to the *Tribune* and *Republican* which did not.

Likewise, many Sandhillers did not view Native Americans as lawless drunks. Hooker County resident Frank Harding spoke of his experiences with Native Americans: "But when we'd get like in Alliance they'd have these signs in the window 'No Indians or

¹²⁴⁵ *Gordon Journal* in *The Stapleton Enterprise*, February 27, 1936, 3

¹²⁴⁶ *Alliance Times-Herald*, December 5, 1933, 4

Dogs Allowed' and stuff and we saw them but really didn't have any, there were a few come down here and got jobs on ranches and I think their alright..."¹²⁴⁷ Native American labor was also beneficial in the western Sandhills counties. During the Depression in Box Butte County, potato farmers appreciated the help that came from Native Americans during harvest season. Historian David R. Christensen wrote of Caucasian and Native American interactions during the mid to late-1930s: "The droughts of 1934 and 1936 nearly destroyed the entire potato crop. Facing drought and low prices, farmers greatly reduced their potato acreage, 50 percent less in 1937 than in 1936. In the fall of 1936, however, the Koester brothers dug two irrigation wells- Box Butte County's first large-scale irrigation project. In 1937 twenty-five local men and twenty-five Lakotas worked the potato harvest on the Koester brothers' farm just east of Alliance. One of the brothers told the *Alliance Times-Herald* that he did not 'know what we'd do if it were not for the men from the reservation.'"¹²⁴⁸ Sadly, this appreciation faded as the 1940s dawned and the signs that Harding had seen in Alliance windows became more frequent. Christensen further wrote: "In contrast, many other residents seem to have forgotten the potato industry's importance and its dependence on Lakota labor. Gone were the town celebrations of Lakota harvesters, as Alliance and Hemingford began harboring anti-Lakota sentiments that would eventually become rampant in the 1940s."¹²⁴⁹ Thus, as with African-Americans and Hispanics, Sandhillers's views of Native Americans in the Great Depression were sometimes tolerant

¹²⁴⁷ Taped interview with Frank Harding conducted by the author, Mullen, Nebraska, October 4, 2014

¹²⁴⁸ David R. Christensen, "I Don't Know What We'd Have Done Without The Indians: Non-Indian and Lakota Racial Relationships in Box Butte County's Potato Industry, 1917-1960," *Nebraska History* 92, No. 3, (Fall 2011): 137

¹²⁴⁹ David R. Christensen, "I Don't Know What We'd Have Done Without The Indians: Non-Indian and Lakota Racial Relationships in Box Butte County's Potato Industry, 1917-1960," *Nebraska History* 92, No. 3 (Fall 2011): 138

but overall were largely negative as stereotypes and economic issues divided individuals from better cooperation and understanding.

Sandhillers' opinions on race were not that dissimilar from their neighbors in other areas of the Great Plains and the American West. Euro-Americans in nearby states, such as Colorado and Kansas, could be equally diverse in their opinions of their non-white neighbors, especially African-Americans. They could likewise be very vitriolic and apathetic or accepting and tolerant of other races. Like Arthur, Nebraska, the bustling metropolis of Denver, Colorado, fomented a significant Ku Klux Klan presence steeped in both prejudice and a desire for public order in the 1920s and early 1930s. Historian Robert A. Goldberg wrote of the Ku Klux Klan's movement and political agenda in Denver that: "The Klan contained a small hard core of true believers eager to save the community from marauding Catholics, Jews, and blacks. An allied bloc, less steeped in the rhetoric of prejudice, reacted to immediate threats to their homes and neighborhoods... The Denver environment proved congenial to Klan mobilization success. City government could not solve a stressful crime problem or suppress what appeared to be a coordinated minority uprising against Protestantism. Denverites who believed that local authorities had abandoned them could only look to the Ku Klux Klan for their salvation."¹²⁵⁰ Thus, many of Denver's residents saw the Klan as a source of progress as Arthur's residents once had. By the early-1930s, the effects of the Great Depression and a resurgent minority population helped curtail the Klan's power over Denver as people began to view the secretive group as more of an irritant than a positive public good. In this instance, a more homogenous public, not just one steeped in white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant values. Goldberg wrote of the declining influence of the

¹²⁵⁰ Lay, Ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West*, 46-47

Klan in Denver civic affairs in the 1930s that: “In December 1933, protests from Jewish and Catholic organizations barred the entry of two Klan floats in an NRA-Blue Eagle parade.”¹²⁵¹ By the mid-1930s, the Klan could no longer exert its power over a parade, let alone the political and civic machinery of Colorado’s capital city. The actions of Denver’s minority organizations are not that dissimilar from the opinions of some Sandhills residents, such as Cherry County Sheriff Kime and some editors of Sandhills newspapers who refused to print the more sensationalized accounts of minorities’ activities in the region, who chose to ignore or counter the more overt racial tones within their states or regions.

In Kansas, residents also exhibited exclusionary racial beliefs as well as views that were more openly accepting, or at least more tolerant, of other races or ethnicities. Renowned Kansas historian Craig Miner wrote of the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Kansas in his work, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940*. As it did in Arthur County, Nebraska, and parts of Colorado, the Ku Klux Klan became popular in western Kansas prior to the 1930s for more than just its racist underpinnings. According to Miner: “Its primary purpose was to develop character, support law enforcement, and through those things to improve communities. It defended the ‘sacred relationship of the sexes’ and supported better pay for teachers and church attendance. In short it was, along with churches and fraternal societies, the bulwark of traditional values against modernism.”¹²⁵² Despite such beliefs, western Kansans never wholly accepted the Klan and its overall prejudiced agenda, nor trusted its motivations. Its existence in the state was short-lived. Miner wrote of its demise and a Kansas resident’s low opinion of the Klan that: “The Klan was barred

¹²⁵¹ Lay, Ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West*, 61

¹²⁵² Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 224-225

from Kansas by legal proceeding in 1925...A woman from Goodland argued in 1924, 'It is a new thing for self-respecting men on errands of helpfulness or generosity to borrow this livery of criminals. It is a new thing for churches to allow their sacred precincts to be invaded by such mummery as sheeted figures and masked faces, and to submit to being patronized by the Lord only knows whom.'"¹²⁵³ While these events occurred slightly prior to the country's plunge into the Great Depression and the large scale droughts that ravaged the Great Plains during the 1930s, these examples are significant for noting that Kansans were not that dissimilar from Nebraska Sandhillers regarding issues of race. Some claimed racism, or racist organizations, as essential for the protection of Euro-American values. Other Caucasian Kansas citizens yet chose not to espouse and support racial stereotyping as such attitudes did not encourage stability within one's community or they simply did not believe in such ideals.

During the Great Depression Euro-American Sandhills residents typically held some opinion about racial issues. Most held a negative opinion of African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and/or Native Americans, but not all. It is difficult to claim that all white Sandhills residents were prejudiced against other ethnicities especially as one will never know the thoughts of every individual Sandhiller during this period. It is also important to note that if a majority of Euro-American Sandhills residents were racist, we cannot judge and condemn them by today's standards. During the 1930s, minority civil rights was not a significant national issue (at least for whites), nor was it organized politically. Veiled currents of racism were as common in the North and the West as they were in the formerly Confederate South. The terms "Negro" and "half-breed Indian" were common in the media

¹²⁵³ Miner, *Next Year Country*, 225

and public vernacular of the period. This brings one back to the question of how drought affected or did not affect Sandhillers' views on race. The drought of the 1930s in and of itself would not likely make a Euro-American Sandhills resident more or less racist, most understanding that the natural event itself was not caused by African-Americans or Native Americans. Nonetheless, race did play a significant role in the lives of Nebraska Sandhillers. This was most apparent in the weekly or semi-weekly newspapers they read. As previously mentioned, many Sandhills newspaper editors included articles on the past week's criminal activity in their newspapers, typically noting the perpetrators race if they were non-white. Beyond demonstrating their own attitudes on race, it can be argued that these editors followed this template in order to pander to their readership base which was largely white. In short, they focused on race in some of their stories as they thought that was what their readers wanted or, perhaps, needed to hear about. In an era of ever continuing economic inferiority that featured the foreclosure of Sandhills' farms and the sale and disposal of cattle and ranchlands caused by unremitting drought, what could white Sandhills residents hold onto when so much was being lost? For many all they had to cling to was their racial superiority. Newspaper editors knew this and appealed to such feelings in their articles. One might be a struggling, small Euro-American farmer or medium-sized rancher in the Nebraska Sandhills but they could take solace in the fact that they were not a "drunken Indian" or a "Negro" out robbing and pillaging the countryside. They were not killers of dogs like the lowly "Negro" was apt to do, nor were they dog eaters like those "half-breed Indians." For one to be compared as such was a grave social insult, as William Herbaugh inferred in his letter to the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*. Euro-American Sandhills settlers were also not white criminals who came into the region from the east or west to rob and loot local businesses as

the newspaper men so commonly noted. In short, racial or class standing was important to many Euro-American Sandhills residents as a means of maintaining some sort of self-esteem and/or self-identity. Rightfully or wrongfully it was used as a crutch to navigate through and survive the perils of drought which Sandhillers too often became accustomed to during the Great Depression.

Racism or racial apathy were concepts that existed on some level amongst Sandhills Euro- American residents long before the droughts of the Great Depression era. The agricultural hardships that were caused by the drought did not make Sandhillers more or less tolerant of others. If anything, the drought served to exacerbate some of their long held prejudices that, when coupled with less than tolerant newspaper articles describing the activities of non-whites in the hills, became more entrenched within the chaotic and turbulent period from 1929-1941. In this regard, drought served as an obstacle to a more homogenous Sandhills culture that receives little historical discussion. While African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native-Americans were not as numerous in the region as their Euro-American brethren in the Great Depression era they were nonetheless still there. Historian Donald Worster wrote of the diversity that was ingrained on the Great Plains during this period: “Women and men, Hispanics and Anglos, Mennonites and other religious groups were all part of prairie life in the 1930s, creating a cultural mosaic that must be understood as a key part of the equation.”¹²⁵⁴ Likewise, interactions between African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Euro-Americans during the Great Depression is key to understanding Nebraska Sandhills society during this period. Some Sandhills residents with different ethnic backgrounds, such as Cherry County Sheriff Kime and barber Sam Hood, shared congenial

¹²⁵⁴ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2004), 247

and respectful relationships while others did not. Sandhills residents were also not that dissimilar from their peers in other parts of the Great Plains and American West as many of them exhibited either racist or tolerant attitudes depending on one's individual view. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Great Depression for many Euro-American Sandhills residents was that they could not see past their skin color to notice that their Native American and African-American contemporaries were suffering just as much as they were. Thus, race and opinions about race were a significant part of Sandhills society during the Great Depression. These concepts were not as easily swept aside as a tumbleweed blowing across a wind-swept, desolate Sandhills field. For many they became as deep and solid as the roots of a Yucca plant searching for water amongst the sand bluestem and prairie sandreed grasses of the eternal Sandhills prairie.

Assault, Adultery, and Absence: Sandhills Gender Issues and the Struggle for Personal Control during the Great Depression.

During the Great Depression, women across the rural Great Plains generally held primarily domestic roles as homemakers, mothers, child rearers, and family gardeners. Married women served as essential family managers ensuring that they properly functioned and worked together during a time of intense and seemingly unremitting strain. Historian Richard White wrote of the significant tasks undertaken by women in the American West during the Great Depression: "For most Americans the family remained the first recourse in the face of economic hardship, and the family's burdens always fell most heavily on women. Most western women did not work outside the home, so they did not experience unemployment directly. They, however, were the ones who had to compensate for reduced income; they had to adjust to the often awkward presence of angry and frustrated men during normal working hours; and they had to console men who felt shame at their inability to

provide for their families. Women had to make sure that food stretched farther, that clothes lasted longer, and that the family did not crack under economic and emotional stress.

Women- black, white, and Hispanic- often found it necessary to move into the work force to obtain jobs when male workers could not find employment. Because of gender segregation in the work force, ‘women’s work’ as secretaries, maids, laundresses, or nurses was sometimes available even when men could not find jobs.’¹²⁵⁵ For some women, the attitude of western men to female autonomy in the workforce was a less than positive experience. Historians Susan E. Gray and Gayle Gullett wrote of the reactions of men to the issue of female autonomy and the workforce: “They also worried about their wives, daughters, and sisters who, individually and in organized movements, were leaving their homes and pushing their way into public arenas. Such worries prompted many white middle-class males to reassess their notion of manhood, to shift from an older standard of moral manliness, which prized self-control and piety, to a new, more physical, aggressive, and sexual manhood...”¹²⁵⁶ Thus, these growing male insecurities made life for women on the drought ravaged and financially depressed Great Plains difficult beyond just occupational challenges.

Many women also struggled against physical abuse from their husbands, sexual assault from perverted deviants, emotional and/or physical abandonment by one’s spouse, and the feelings of personal failure associated with divorce no matter the reason. The prevalence and frequency of these tragic instances, which were also common in years prior to the Great Depression, was exacerbated by the effects of drought and economic malaise which wore heavily on the men in their lives. Due to the harsh realities that shaped their world

¹²⁵⁵ Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own:*” *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 465-466

¹²⁵⁶ Susan E. Gray and Gayle Gullett, Eds., *Contingent Maps: Rethinking Western Women’s History and the North American West* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 5

view, upbringing, and predilections for substance abuse that impaired their judgment, some men had no qualms about treating their significant others in such a brutal manner. In an era of economic emasculation for male bread winners, masculinity was reaffirmed through physically subjugating women. In contrast, men who could not handle the challenges simply left and in so doing verified their emasculation. In a world out of control, some women sought personal stability through other means beyond the domestic sphere and family domicile in order to counter these personal obstacles. Several women reaffirmed their independence and personal control through leaving themselves, seeking new lovers, or participating in criminal acts that they hoped would improve their personal situation. The personal reactions to the challenges of the Depression, instigated by both men and women, when coupled with traditional gendered occupational stereotypes strained male and female relationships on the Great Plains and were thus socially divisive. Relationships between men and women in the Nebraska Sandhills were no less difficult.

In the Sandhills, women had to struggle against being similarly typecast in the familial and clerical positions that Richard White noted were endemic to much of the American West. Some Sandhills women succeeded in deviating from the traditional agrarian model and attained a degree of personal sovereignty through the prominent occupations they held in Sandhills' communities. Many worked in important clerical positions within local Sandhills county governments and for some these occupations served as a source of personal pride. Laura Stockwell served as Rock County Deputy County Clerk throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, affixing her signature to countless county documents such as chattel mortgages and land deeds.¹²⁵⁷ However, in this instance Stockwell's appointment to the

¹²⁵⁷ *Rock County General Indexes to Chattel Mortgages, Book E, Bassett, Nebraska; Rock County Deed*

position was aided by her husband, Chester, who served as Rock County Clerk. Such an appointment reinforced many contemporary stereotypes of the day which believed that women could not attain such positions on their own merits. Despite how she attained the position, Stockwell served more than adequately in this government position for numerous years thus demonstrating that not all Sandhills women were expected to simply stay home nor were they happily content in doing so.

While many Sandhills women did hold clerical positions in communities, others did remain in the hills helping out on ranches or farms. However, they were not submissive entities relegated to a life of household servitude. Many prominently worked with their agriculturalist husbands in building up their holdings as equals and were accepted in doing so. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, Katherine Satterfield and Maud Sarr both worked as partners with their husbands in preserving and building up their ranch holdings in Loup and Rock counties. Their names appeared on various chattel mortgage transactions throughout the Depression, either singularly or alongside their husbands, in efforts or schemes to stave off economic and agricultural ruin. By the end of the Depression, these joint efforts had succeeded as both couples' operations had survived and flourished during this tumultuous time.

Rural women throughout the Great Plains helped their husbands with agricultural operations in various capacities and with various tasks. Beyond serving sometimes as a business partner in a certain capacity, women typically also assisted family agricultural operations by providing another source of physical labor. This was cheaper than paying a hired hand to help out during this financially strained era. Frank Harding spoke of women's

experiences in Hooker County: “Even from the earliest times here in Hooker County they always said that this was, this Sandhills range country was heaven for men and cattle and hell on women and horses and I think in the thirties it was hell on women ‘cause they didn’t have anything to cook with and they had to help you know they’d do anything to try to make a little money and they were isolated because women didn’t drive in the thirties, very few women drove a car ‘cause you see most people didn’t have a car but they could drive a team and wagon...”¹²⁵⁸ Life was similarly difficult for agricultural women on the southern plains. In Texas County, Oklahoma, Caroline Henderson aided her husband Will on many occasions with the physical chores about their farm. Henderson wrote of one such instance in late-1936 when Will had been injured and needed her help and she struggled against unremitting dust storms to complete the farm work herself: “...Will suffered a painful accident which might easily have proved a permanent handicap. While he was unloading a barrel of coal oil, it slipped and fell, bruising one ankle severely and, I still believe, fracturing some of the smaller bones. At that time the dust storms were at their worst. For a while it seemed that perhaps, regardless of desire, we could not go on. There were many days, as I struggled to care for the stock, when I could not see from one of the farm buildings to another through the blinding, choking clouds.”¹²⁵⁹ A year later in Hamilton County, Kansas, Mary Knackstedt Dyck helped her husband Henry with various types of farm chores and encountered similar challenges as Henderson. Knackstedt Dyck, writing in her diary in the third person in broken English and calling herself “Mo,” noted her work experiences on November 6th, 7th, and 10th, 1937: “...Mo washed the north Window also south Window on the outside & cleaned the Puddy off it took her 1 ½ hour to do this it was Paint instead putdy and o boy did I ever work

¹²⁵⁸ Taped interview with Frank Harding conducted by the author, October 4, 2014, Mullen, Nebraska

¹²⁵⁹ Caroline Henderson, *Letters From The Dust Bowl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 160

hard at it. And polished the Stove Pipes by Lamp light and scrubed the kitchen after 6 P.M. Mo Ears are thumping and throbbing in full blast...At 11 dust started continued till 1 P.M....Dust let up at 5:30, sky was a little murky yet at dusk...And to night while Po being absent Mo gets the pleasure, milking in the battered up Bucket that the Rone Cow demolished this morning while my dear Husband, milks her skinned Tet...”¹²⁶⁰ For Kansas and Oklahoma women such daily multi-tasking was routine and a necessary function of daily life.

On the plains of North Dakota, Ann Marie Low also participated in cattle chores as Knackstedt Dyck had; however, hers dealt with herding activities, not only milking cows. She wrote of her experiences in late-October 1933: “Sunday was cold and windy. Bud and I got the yearlings home and cut out the ones to be sold. Then I went riding...Bud and I did chores and he brought me back to Jamestown.”¹²⁶¹ While breaking up the monotony of regular housework, such outdoor chores could in themselves become tedious and personally unfulfilling. Six and a half months later, Low still participated in her family’s cattle chores but also longed for extra income and a life of her own. She lamented her situation on Monday, May 7th, 1934: “The dirt is still blowing. Last weekend Bud and I helped with the cattle and had fun gathering weeds. Weeds give us greens for salad long before anything in the garden is ready. We use dandelions, lamb’s quarter, and sheep sorrel. I like sheep sorrel best. Also, the leaves of sheep sorrel, pounded and boiled down to a paste, make a good salve. Still no job. I’m trying to persuade Dad I should apply for rural school #3 out here where we went to school. I don’t see a chance of getting a job in a high school when so

¹²⁶⁰ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Ed., *Waiting On The Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 92-93

¹²⁶¹ Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 91

many experienced teachers are out of work. He argues that the pay is only \$60.00 a month out here, while even in a grade school in town I might get \$75.00. Extra expenses in town would probably eat up that extra \$15.00.”¹²⁶² Low’s example demonstrated that Great Plains women were multi-faceted individuals who sought and were willing to provide supplemental income for themselves and/or their families through a variety of fiscal avenues. Her desire for her own autonomy as a teacher also serves to challenge White’s assertion that many western women did not work outside of their family’s domestic sphere. Like Stockwell, Low sought employment beyond just the ranch home; however, economics, not gender bias or segregation forced her to remain on the family ranch. Even though her personal professional upward mobility was restricted while on the ranch, she nonetheless was able to break away from the domestic mold by working outside in cattle operations and not just in the home.

Great Plains women faced challenges beyond their occupational or niche status as sometimes their husbands or significant others left them to the whims of the Great Depression. Whereas some men moved across the country, other men had no choice in their departure. For many women who lived on farms or ranches and lost their spouse due to an untimely death there was little option but to sell their buildings and lands to pay off debts ranging from funeral bills to chattel mortgages. Others simply had their properties seized in harsh foreclosure actions. In South Dakota, farm wife Ruth Loriks informed interviewer Studs Terkel about a neighbor’s horrific situation which she heavily empathized with: “This neighbor woman lost her husband, and, of course, he was owing in the bank. So the auctioneers come out there, and she served lunch, and she stood weeping in the windows. ‘There goes our last cow...’ And the horses. She called ’em by names. It just pretty near

¹²⁶² Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*, 95

broke our hearts. They didn't give her a chance to take care of her bills. They never gave her an offer. They just came and cleared it out. She just stood there crying...."¹²⁶³ Women such as Stockwell and Henderson held vital roles key to their family's survival as undoubtedly did Loriks' neighbor. Unfortunately for some women the uncertainty of life itself could instantly render their own contributions and feelings of personal control over their own lives moot.

In Nebraska, women were as essential to the success of their family's agricultural survival as they were in other areas of the Great Plains and faced similar hardships. They helped to sustain their families in a variety of ways. Historians Dorothy Schwieder and Deborah Fink wrote of the methods these women used to obtain excess funds:

Nebraska farm women also wrote *Nebraska Farmer* about the new and creative ways that they earned extra money during the thirties. They reported selling garden plants, baby ducks, salads, canned goods, cottage cheese, and yeast cakes as well as churning butter, raising canaries, and hooking rugs for sale. As before the 1930s, some farm women made approximately \$20 a month by providing room and board for a country school teacher. During the extreme deflation of the 1930s, \$20 was a substantial supplementary income. A major response of farm women to the Depression was to produce more food...During the 1930s, as income from crops and livestock production was curtailed, farm women often thought first of expanding their gardens...Raising larger gardens, canning the produce, and relying more on butchered meat meant the difference between survival and failure for many farm families. Even in the midst of great suffering, farm women not only managed to be extremely thrifty, but many also managed to feel considerable satisfaction from this work.¹²⁶⁴

Despite showing pride in private subsistence skills, like Low in North Dakota, many Nebraska women wanted to do more with their lives than just serve their husbands and fathers. In Boone County, Nebraska, to the east of the Sandhills, the Depression empowered many women through their work and simultaneously inspired them to shape their own destinies. Fink wrote of the evolving goals of these eastern Nebraska women: "As hard as women worked, they could not maintain their production, ease the burdens of the depression,

¹²⁶³ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Illustrated Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 202

¹²⁶⁴ John R. Wunder, Frances W. Kaye, Vernon Carstensen, Eds., *Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience* (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 130-131

and make everyone comfortable, as they were supposed to do. The strains caused a shift in the foundations of Boone County society. Women said ‘no’ to the agrarian pattern in a number of ways: they left the farms in large numbers; more women stayed who remained single; more married women divorced their husbands; and women who stayed married were less tied to the farm economy than they had been previously. Married, single, or divorced, these women who expressed the coming changes found their voices not as dutiful wives, but as women who quietly and subversively insisted on the validity of their own experiences and aspirations.”¹²⁶⁵ From this desire to shape their own autonomous life many northeastern Nebraska women took on yet another non-traditional or domestic role: revolutionaries.

In the summer of 1932, the Farmers’ Holiday Movement swept eastern Nebraska as demonstrators sought a curtailment of farm foreclosures, such as the one that happened to Ruth Loriks’ neighbor in South Dakota, and higher farm prices. The movement culminated with a march on and a protest at the new state capitol building in Lincoln. While the movement did not succeed in permanently ending farm foreclosures on the Great Plains, it played a significant role as a mouthpiece for small agriculturalists to voice their concerns to a nation they felt had largely turned their backs on them. The movement’s song “Solidarity,” sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body,” represented how many Nebraska agriculturalists, particularly in the east, felt. The first verse spoke volumes: “The Farmers learned their lesson now, as everyone can see, The Farmers know the bankers are their greatest enemy. We’ll organize and fight until we gain the victory In one Big Solid Union!...Solidarity Forever! Solidarity Forever! Solidarity Forever! For in Union we are Strong!”¹²⁶⁶ Women

¹²⁶⁵ Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 129-130

¹²⁶⁶ Nebraska Holiday Association Songs, Solidarity (Tune: John Brown’s Body), Farmer’s Holiday

were essential to the movement and many utilized skills which aided in honing the farmer's message. One such individual was Norfolk, Nebraska, newspaper editor Marie Weekes. Weekes held leftist political leanings and thus fit seamlessly into the farmer's revolt. Historian William C. Pratt wrote of Weekes' role in the Farmers' Holiday Movement: "...two strong backers of the insurgency were women newspaper publishers. They were Alice Lorraine Daly, who operated the Aberdeen-based *Dakota Free Press*, and Marie Weekes, who published the *Norfolk [Nebraska] Press*. Both of them had enlisted in the farmer's cause at the time of the Nonpartisan League. In 1920, Weekes was an NPL Congressional candidate...and later provided broad support for the Holiday, there are hints that she was a sympathizer of Father Coughlin, the fiery 'radio priest' who acquired an unsavory reputation as an anti-Semitic demagogue."¹²⁶⁷ Despite Weekes's support for Coughlin, who may have been too radical a role model for northeastern Nebraska farmers, her individual views demonstrated that, as Fink had suggested, rural Nebraska women were able to many times actively shape their own lives and experiences.

Association Collection, RG0986, Folder 1, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska
¹²⁶⁷ Wunder, Kaye, Carstensen, Eds., *Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience*, 331



(Farmer's Holiday Movement marchers on the steps of the Nebraska State Capitol building, February 16th, 1933. Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, Collection RG0986.)

Weekes was not alone in using the farmers' strike as a vehicle for such personal expression. Pratt further wrote of the female participation in the Farmers' Holiday Movement: "Most women participants in the farm struggles of the 1930s, of course, like their male counterparts, were anonymous rank-and-filers. They showed up for 'penny auctions' and 'Sears-Roebuck sales,' fattening the crowd and adding to the volume of the protest. One male observer recently noted that women were often more vocal than men at these sales. While they were not as inclined to direct action, some of them were quite willing to stand up to the sheriff and curse him for his role."¹²⁶⁸ Thus, for women in rural Nebraska the Great Depression was sometimes personally liberating as it afforded many the opportunity for personal expression in the form of tasks participated in on the farm or ranch or in larger social causes such as farm revolts. In many ways the Depression allowed them to privately revolt against the domestic sphere just as farmers held strikes against their deteriorating

¹²⁶⁸ Wunder, Kaye, Carstensen, Eds., *Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience*, 332

situation. Whereas most Sandhills women did not participate in the Farmer's Holiday Movement as their contemporaries did in northeastern Nebraska, they still took pride in their individual tasks and occupations. The Depression ironically gave these women control over their own lives and how they wanted to represent themselves at a time when many rural Nebraska men were feeling emasculated by their agricultural failures. While women had more control over their own lives and, for some at least, their families, they could not control the inner mindsets of those who were their biggest challengers: men.

Many Nebraska Sandhills men, as elsewhere in the Great Plains, took their frustrations for their failures out on women either physically or psychologically. Thus, for Sandhills women the most significant and challenging problems they faced were caused as much by their male peers as the Sandhills environment. Two such issues were domestic violence/sexual assault or abandonment. Husbands, fathers, and step-fathers who were struggling economically vented by beating their wives, sexually assaulting minor females, or by simply fleeing their families and starting new lives elsewhere. The only recourse available to women to fight back against these individuals who had betrayed their trust was the local county or district courts. Fortunately for them Sandhills legal officials overwhelmingly sided with women against men in most instances. Divorce was common throughout the hills, especially in instances of wife abandonment. In Garden County between March 31st, 1931 and December 3rd, 1941, 79 divorce cases appeared before the Garden County District Court.¹²⁶⁹ In Brown County, 89 such cases were tried before the Brown County District Court between November 13th, 1930, and February 3rd, 1942.¹²⁷⁰

¹²⁶⁹ *Garden County District Court Appearance Docket 4*, Oshkosh, Nebraska; *Garden County District Court Appearance Docket 5*, Oshkosh, Nebraska

¹²⁷⁰ *Brown County District Court Appearance Docket M*, Ainsworth, Nebraska; *Brown County District*

Divorces were prevalent amongst other Sandhills' counties as well during the Depression. During the Great Depression, 48 divorce cases were tried in both Garfield and Rock County District Courts between early-November 1929 to late-January 1942.¹²⁷¹ The Loup County District Court subsequently heard 24 divorce cases between January 12th, 1931, and December 15th, 1941.¹²⁷² The Wheeler County District Court also ruled on 15 divorce cases between January 2nd, 1934 and March 21st, 1942.¹²⁷³ The total numbers of divorce cases for these counties appear low in comparison to urban areas but are noteworthy for the less populated rural Sandhills region. Numbers of divorce cases or sexual assault cases could have also been low due to many charges of neglect or abuse going unreported by women. Nonetheless several such cases occurred in the Sandhills region. Such incidents caused strain between genders and further exacerbated societal tensions when uncertainty and strife were common conditions throughout the hills. Like a gallon of lighter fluid being dumped on a simmering fire that required no further stoking, these events only served to enflame disharmonious attitudes. One significant inflammatory issue was sexual assault.

In the Sandhills during the Great Depression, incidents of sexual assault and rape by men against women were common elements of societal distress. Unlike crimes such as bank robberies, burglaries, murder, livestock theft, check forgery, and bridle theft, discussed earlier in the chapter, crimes of sexual perversion and assault are more difficult to classify as being a direct effect of the era's dismal economic and environmental conditions. Assaultants

Court Appearance Docket N, Ainsworth, Nebraska

¹²⁷¹ *Garfield County District Court Appearance Docket 5*, Burwell, Nebraska; *Garfield County District Court Appearance Docket 6*, Burwell, Nebraska; *Garfield County District Court Appearance Docket 7*, Burwell, Nebraska; *Rock County District Court Appearance Docket H*, Bassett, Nebraska; *Rock County District Court Appearance Docket I*, Bassett, Nebraska; *Rock County District Court Appearance Docket J*, Bassett, Nebraska

¹²⁷² *Loup County District Court Appearance Docket 5*, Taylor, Nebraska

¹²⁷³ *Wheeler County District Court Appearance Docket G*, Bartlett, Nebraska

who have predilections for urges that avail themselves to sexual crimes commit such acts even during the best of economic times. Rapists do not have to be broke or starving to submit to their vile and horrific urges. However, the harsh realities of everyday life during the Great Depression did nothing to temper their urges. Such was the case of Dan Mayo. Mayo, a resident of Custer County, was convicted on November 15th, 1933, of committing eight counts of statutory rape against the fourteen year old minor, Gladys Leonard.¹²⁷⁴ Due to the Depression, Mayo was so poor that he filed a Poverty Affidavit with Custer County District Court Judge Bruno O. Hostetler and the Custer County Clerk of the District Court so he could procure a copy of the bill of exceptions and a transcript of proceedings which would allow him to file an appeal of the conviction with the Nebraska State Supreme Court.¹²⁷⁵ Mayo's efforts at securing a new trial were unsuccessful and finally on July 28, 1934, he was ordered to pay the costs of his trial and was committed to the State Penitentiary in Lincoln where he was to serve hard labor for five years.¹²⁷⁶ Thus, when evidence of rape or sexual assault by a perpetrator was sufficiently verified, Nebraska courts acted in the best interest of the female victim and disallowed many such criminals the right to probation or early paroles.

In many instances alcohol and deteriorating agricultural conditions factored into a loosening of a rapist's inhibitions. Unique occupations were also utilized as vehicles for sexual assault in the hills. James Blevins was one such individual who used his job, such as it was, as a means to commit repugnant and despicable predations. The forty-four year old Blevins traveled between Garfield and Valley counties soliciting work as a traveling chimney

¹²⁷⁴ *Custer County District Court Complete Record 107*, Broken Bow, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court, 657-658, 668-670

¹²⁷⁵ *Custer County District Court Complete Record 107*, Broken Bow, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court, 668

¹²⁷⁶ *Custer County District Court Complete Record 107*, Broken Bow, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court, 669-670

sweep in the summer of 1935. This migratory, wandering lifestyle allowed Blevins to easily commit felonious crimes and make a quick escape. In June, due in large part to being black-out drunk (or so he claimed), he was arrested for the sexual assault of a young girl, age five, and on July 23, 1935, he was sentenced to three years hard labor in the Nebraska State Penitentiary by the Garfield County District Court.¹²⁷⁷ Blevins, a divorcee and convicted drunkard in Iowa, claimed the only reason he had committed such an act was that he was drunk and when asked by the District Court Judge how long he had been drunk, Blevins responded, “About a week I guess.”¹²⁷⁸ While alcohol was just an excuse for Blevins, it did play a part in many of the sexual assaults committed against Sandhills women. Due to the economic conditions of the time, alcohol was utilized to eliminate stress and cull emotional hardships. Unfortunately when in the hands of the struggling Blevins, who had no family or home life, was somewhat of a Sandhills vagabond, and literally had nothing to lose, harsh consequences awaited his female victims.

Some struggling Sandhills farmers who were unable to contain their frustrations at their agricultural failures also committed sexual crimes on young women, even if they were married or related to the victim. Less than a year after Blevins was sent to Lincoln for his crime, forty-eight year old Loup County small agriculturalist Gern Ash sexually assaulted his ten year old step-daughter in early-April 1936 in the cedar trees near his family’s farm home.¹²⁷⁹ Ash, a convicted bootlegger and failing farmer, was not arrested until almost three

¹²⁷⁷ *State of Nebraska v. James Blevins*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1522, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁷⁸ *State of Nebraska v. James Blevins*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1522, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁷⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Gern Ash*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-177, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

years later when his wife finally turned him in.¹²⁸⁰ Ash had taken out multiple chattel mortgages prior to his arrest, including chattel mortgages no. 2675 and no. 2676 on March 16th, 1936, for \$1,563.00 which assisted in the purchases of all crops, six horses, seventeen cattle, fifty hens, and machinery, which he had difficulty paying off.¹²⁸¹ Later that year he also took out a chattel mortgage no. 2975 for a 1929 Ford Sedan.¹²⁸² Ash never repaid this debt.¹²⁸³ On January 31st, 1939, Nebraska Eleventh Judicial District Court Judge E. G. Kroger convicted Ash and sentenced him to ten years hard labor in the State Penitentiary.¹²⁸⁴ When questioned by Kroger during his deposition if there was anything he would like to add to his testimony, Ash, annoyed, responded: “Yes, one thing I want to add, they have known this for about fourteen months ago and didn’t do anything and since then this come up and they took it up with an attorney at Broken Bow and they waited until I was getting ready to go to California and was having a sale.”¹²⁸⁵ Ash was more remorseful for not being allowed to migrate to California, as many of his contemporaries were doing, and start his new life than for the egregious act he had committed against his step-daughter. If Ash had been allowed to flee to California he undoubtedly would have left all of his chattel mortgages unpaid. Surprisingly, after he served his ten year sentence Ash returned to Loup County and paid off chattel mortgages no. 2675 and no. 2676 on August 23rd, 1950.¹²⁸⁶ His wife Pearl apparently remained married to him during his incarceration, as no divorce records for the

¹²⁸⁰ *State of Nebraska v. Gern Ash*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-177, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁸¹ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages, Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

¹²⁸² *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages, Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

¹²⁸³ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages, Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

¹²⁸⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Gern Ash*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-177, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁸⁵ *State of Nebraska v. Gern Ash*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-177, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁸⁶ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages, Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

couple were found in Loup County, or Pearl filed for divorce elsewhere. Ash was not alone in his perversions.

In the late-1930s other small agriculturalists committed sexual assault during a time of environmental and agricultural difficulty. In 1937, Garfield County farmer Lester Krause lived a seemingly uneventful life on his farm seven miles west of Burwell with his wife and two children.¹²⁸⁷ Life became more complicated for the twenty-three year old farmer and part-time mail carrier during the course of the year as he raped and impregnated his thirteen year old sister-in-law on February 18th, 1937, and less than six months later on August 5th was sentenced to the Nebraska Reformatory in Lincoln for a period of no less than three years and no more than five by District Court Judge Edwin P. Clements.¹²⁸⁸ Krause when asked by Clements if he lived with his wife responded: “Not now, I did up until a couple of weeks ago.”¹²⁸⁹ Decades later, one can still sense Clements’ incredulous eye roll at this answer. Two and a half months later, on October 22nd, Lester’s separation from his wife became permanent as his wife of three years, Doris, was granted a divorce, sole custody of their two children, and monthly \$20.00 child support payments from Lester by the Garfield County District Court.¹²⁹⁰ In count three of Doris’ petition for divorce it was revealed that the Krause’s led a far from average life as Doris had discovered Lester’s philandering ways with other women and that while he made \$125.00 from his postal job he rarely spent the money on supporting his children, the latter charge suggesting that the funds were probably

¹²⁸⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Lester Krause*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1595, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁸⁸ *State of Nebraska v. Lester Krause*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1595, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk; *Doris Krause v. Lester Krause*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1596, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁸⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Lester Krause*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1595, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁹⁰ *Doris Krause v. Lester Krause*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1596, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

being utilized for his non-family activities.¹²⁹¹ Like Ash two years later, Krause displayed little remorse for the act, beyond admitting his guilt, demonstrating that whereas adult Sandhills women were partaking in greater individuality and control of their own lives, some Sandhills men were still finding females to subjugate and control, in most instances girls or young teenagers as they were perceived as easier victims, when their own lives seemed out of control in an era of agricultural uncertainty. Many Sandhills men were no longer masters of their own fate. Distance from town, available eligible females, education, and intelligence levels also were factors that influenced rural men to commit such acts and/ or to acknowledge that what they were doing to these unwilling young women was wrong. Sandhills' sexual assaults continued as the 1940s dawned and the United States heard the sabers of the world rattling in its ears. On July 3rd, 1940, twenty-one year old Loup County resident James B. Harvey was convicted of sexual assault on a thirteen year old girl and was sentenced to five years hard labor at the State Penitentiary by District Court Judge Clements.¹²⁹² While sexual assaults were not perpetrated in every Sandhills community during the Great Depression nor happened frequently, such events nonetheless occurred and strained the relationships between men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, and brothers and sisters. Sexual assault served to reinforce traditional gender roles of masculinity and femininity as its male perpetrators felt more in control. Another method of control for these failing men was physical violence.

Domestic violence has occurred across the United States during all eras of its history. The Nebraska Sandhills of the 1930s was not immune to this type of personal tragedy and

¹²⁹¹ *Doris Krause v. Lester Krause*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1596, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹²⁹² *State of Nebraska v. James B. Harvey*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-202, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

social disorder. As with incidents of rape and sexual assault, domestic violence towards women could occur at any time and in any economic climate. Nonetheless, the economic failures, stress, and personal depression of the era did nothing to prevent or alleviate the possibility of such violence, rather these factors only made it more likely to occur. When alcohol was included in the mix the potentially negative situation only became more volatile. Such was the case with Rose Anna and Patrick Barrett of Holt County. In the summer of 1932, the Barretts farmed on land between the towns of Emmet and Atkinson, but unfortunately, as with many of their Great Plains contemporaries, they fell upon hard times and their property was being foreclosed upon.¹²⁹³ Such difficulty undoubtedly did not help Patrick's alcoholism and on August 1st, 1932, Rose Anna filed for divorce as, stated in her petition: "the said defendant on divers (sic) occasions (sic) became angry at her, called her vile and vulgar names, swore at her, beat, ill treated and abused her; that the defendant on divers (sic) occasions (sic) accused the plaintiff of consorting with other men, all of which was without foundation, and not justified by the conduct of the plaintiff."¹²⁹⁴ Rose Anna's petition also stipulated that Patrick's abuse was worse when he was drunk and that due to this he was not fit to care for their three children ranging in age from three to nine.¹²⁹⁵ Despite an answer from Patrick in which he accused Rose Anna of being an illegal bootlegger intent on supporting herself, the Holt County District Court sided with Rose Anna, contending that Patrick had been neglectful of her and the children for two years, and granted her a divorce

¹²⁹³ *Rose Anna Barrett v. Patrick Barrett*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12578, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹²⁹⁴ *Rose Anna Barrett v. Patrick Barrett*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12578, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹²⁹⁵ *Rose Anna Barrett v. Patrick Barrett*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12578, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

on May 27th, 1933.¹²⁹⁶ Despite ruling in her favor the court requested that she pay the \$17.70 court costs.¹²⁹⁷

In May 1935, George and Lena Copper of Loup County divorced for similar reasons. Lena filed for divorce in February 1935 petitioning for divorce on the count that George had been physically violent and abusive for the past five years.¹²⁹⁸ The couple had farmed in Loup County and when they divorced their property and lands had to be divided amongst them including but not limited to two red heifers, one red cow, two mules, one red bull, one disc, one two row lister, one feed bunk, one cook stove, one-half of millet seed, one 1928 Model A. Ford car, two dressers, two rugs, etc.¹²⁹⁹ The Coppers' divorce was a long, strung out affair that had them squabbling over the dinner plates, but in the end the Loup County District Court granted Lena a divorce on November 9th, 1935, as well as custody of the couple's two minor children.¹³⁰⁰ Unlike Mrs. Barrett, Mrs. Copper was not forced to pay the court costs as the \$17.33 fee was charged to George.¹³⁰¹ The demise of their marriage over the first five years of the Great Depression coincided with declining agricultural conditions in the region. While George Copper's abusive episodes could have been instigated by numerous untold or unknown reasons and the Copper's marriage could have likewise dissolved due to a variety of causes, it is likely that the stress of farming in Loup County

¹²⁹⁶ *Rose Anna Barrett v. Patrick Barrett*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12578, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹²⁹⁷ *Rose Anna Barrett v. Patrick Barrett*, District Court of Holt County, Nebraska, Case No. 12578, Holt County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹²⁹⁸ *Lena Copper v. George Copper*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-106, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹²⁹⁹ *Lena Copper v. George Copper*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-106, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰⁰ *Lena Copper v. George Copper*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-106, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰¹ *Lena Copper v. George Copper*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-106, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

during a drought influenced George's violent tendencies. The divorce case did not list alcohol as a factor in the collapse of the Copper's twenty-seven year marriage. A similar case occurred in Rock County in the late summer of 1931. Jennie Fisher filed for divorce from her husband, Isaac, on the grounds that he had physically abused her, tried to keep her away from their children, and he had shot at her and attempted to kill her.¹³⁰² The family lived on a 240 acre homestead in Rock County which, following the Rock County District Court's granting of a divorce to Jennie on February 26th, 1932, was sold by Rock County Sheriff Frank Diehl to Earl Fisher five years later, in part to cover Isaac's alimony owed to Jennie.¹³⁰³ Thus, the harsh Sandhills environment begat harsh men found in all parts of the hills.

Despite environmental factors that when mixed with personal inadequacies led to violent and abusive outbreaks, many men were aggressive towards women for non-easily identifiable reasons that were no less brutal. While men such as Barrett, Copper, and Fisher became more violent due to alcohol and their failed agricultural situations, many men, as is the case during many eras and places, abused women simply because they were mean, aggressive, uncaring individuals. One such individual was Thomas Ellis of Garfield County. Ellis labored in Garfield County in the early-1930s, making \$100.00 per month; however, he wholly refused to use any of his salary to help sustain his wife, Idell and their five children ranging in age from six to sixteen.¹³⁰⁴ The Garfield County District Court granted Idell a divorce on March 17th, 1931, due to Thomas's unwillingness to support his family and due to

¹³⁰² *Jennie M. Fisher v. Isaac Fisher*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3243, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰³ *Jennie M. Fisher v. Isaac Fisher*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3243, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰⁴ *Idell A. Ellis v. Thomas W. Ellis*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1358, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

the physical beatings he gave Idell.¹³⁰⁵ Three and a half months later, the Garfield County Sheriff arrested Thomas Ellis in Kearney, Nebraska, for his refusal to pay child support to his ex-wife as was ordered in their divorce decree.¹³⁰⁶ In comparison to the Ellis' situation, some women left their husbands due to verbal and psychological abuse. Rock County resident, Leota May Sybrant was granted a divorce from her husband, Elton, on March 24th, 1941, for such a reason.¹³⁰⁷ Elton, a jealous and short-tempered man, berated Leota and accused her of being unfaithful with other men.¹³⁰⁸ When this was proven to be unfounded, Leota received custody of their eleven year old son and monthly \$8.00 child support payments while Elton was awarded a set of silverware and a one string guitar.¹³⁰⁹ As with perpetrators of sexual assault, Sandhills men who abused their wives did so in large part to feel in control during a powerless time. Women did not remain subjugated or victimized as they utilized the courts in their appeals for autonomy and the courts almost always agreed with their appeals. While most wife batterers were not charged with assault and battery, the Sandhills' courts recognized that to leave women in these abusive relationships would be unsafe and morally reprehensible. The courts likewise ruled against another category of male transgressors: the deadbeat.

During the Great Depression, Sandhills courts ruled harshly against men who refused to share their incomes with their families or did not work. They did not have to be abusers

¹³⁰⁵ *Idell A. Ellis v. Thomas W. Ellis*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1358, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰⁶ *Idell A. Ellis v. Thomas W. Ellis*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1358, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰⁷ *Leota May Sybrant v. Elton Sybrant*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3538, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰⁸ *Leota May Sybrant v. Elton Sybrant*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3538, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁰⁹ *Leota May Sybrant v. Elton Sybrant*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3538, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

like Thomas Ellis. Ted Borders of Sheridan County was one such man who was not an abuser, but still was a poor and uncaring husband. As with Barrett, Copper, and Fisher, agricultural failures influenced Borders' attitudes. His wife Zoe filed for divorce on May 17th, 1933, as following his termination as a farm laborer in the fall of 1932 Borders had become physically and emotionally distant and financially unsupportive of his family.¹³¹⁰

The fourth count of her petition for divorce stipulated:

That the defendant wholly regardless of his duties and obligations as a husband has been guilty of extreme cruelty toward that plaintiff in that ever since said marriage he has willfully failed, neglected and refused to properly support and house his family; that he has neglected to provide the necessities of life for them a part of said time; that since the birth of said baby, he has never bought an article of clothing for it; that he is a man that frequently drinks intoxicating liquor, spending money for that which should be used for his family's comforts and necessities; that he is dilatory about his work when he has any; that during the summer of 1932 the defendant was employed on a farm and his employment terminated on October 12, 1932; that he made no preparation for a home for the family except to take his family and move in with his parents and into the house where they were living, and which another family was also occupying; that at that time it was necessary that the plaintiff go home to her own folks and procure what work she could to support herself and her child; that since that time the defendant has not contributed a cent of money or any other thing toward the support of said plaintiff and her minor child; that he has not even come to see them during that time, although he has been living less than twenty miles away from where the plaintiff has been, that the plaintiff is obliged to work at manual labor or whatever she can find to do to support herself and minor child... The plaintiff further alleges that the defendant is a man of limited financial means, but that ordinarily he should be able to work and earn a fair wage; that said defendant has always squandered his earnings and that he is without means except what he earns from his labor, and that he is unreliable and not a proper man to have the supervision of said minor child.¹³¹¹

While Borders was not physically abusive to his wife, his inability or refusal to support her when he was not physically handicapped and could work, coupled with the fact that they were separated, did not endear him to the court. Zoe Borders was granted a divorce on September 21st, 1933, and Ted was ordered to pay her \$10.00 child support per month until ordered not to.¹³¹² Through this court action Zoe Borders reclaimed control of her own life

¹³¹⁰ *Zoe Borders v. Ted Borders*, District Court of Sheridan County, Nebraska, Case No. 4250, Sheridan County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹³¹¹ *Zoe Borders v. Ted Borders*, District Court of Sheridan County, Nebraska, Case No. 4250, Sheridan County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

¹³¹² *Zoe Borders v. Ted Borders*, District Court of Sheridan County, Nebraska, Case No. 4250, Sheridan County, Nebraska, Office of the Clerk of District Court

instead of allowing her husband to drag her down into his emotional and economical abyss. Other Sandhills women acted accordingly to save themselves from similar fates.

On April 16th, 1934, Brown County resident Mae Butler was granted a divorce from her employment-allergic husband, Clyde, by the Brown County District Court.¹³¹³ Unlike men like Borders, who became unemployed during the Depression, Butler, who eventually abandoned his wife, had been unemployed since 1928 and apparently not sought work since then as Mae was forced to support the couple as she alone paid the rent and purchased the household goods.¹³¹⁴ Mae even had purchased his clothes.¹³¹⁵ Nine days prior to Mae Butler's victory, Sylvia Taylor had been granted a divorce from her similarly unsupportive husband, Carlton, in Alliance.¹³¹⁶ Carlton had not sought employment for three years, at least according to the charge, and due to such ineptitude the Box Butte County District Court ruled in favor of Sylvia and granted her custody of their two minor children.¹³¹⁷ While the nation's economic situation undoubtedly hindered Carlton Taylor's inability to find employment, it is doubtful that he could not have found some kind of temporary employment in Box Butte County, especially in the years when Roosevelt's New Deal policies were first being implemented, if he had seriously sought work. For this reason, Sandhills' courts came down strongly against idle men like Clyde Butler and Carlton Taylor and supported their wives who were working hard to survive. Through their individual determinism and hard

¹³¹³ *Mae Butler v. Clyde E. Butler*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3664, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³¹⁴ *Mae Butler v. Clyde E. Butler*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3664, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³¹⁵ *Mae Butler v. Clyde E. Butler*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3664, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³¹⁶ *Sylvia Iona Taylor v. Carlton W. Taylor*, District Court of Box Butte County, Nebraska, Case No. 5005, Box Butte County, Nebraska, Knight Museum and Sandhills Center

¹³¹⁷ *Sylvia Iona Taylor v. Carlton W. Taylor*, District Court of Box Butte County, Nebraska, Case No. 5005, Box Butte County, Nebraska, Knight Museum and Sandhills Center

work, Sandhills women who were mistreated by their husbands or partners gained the respect of the courts.

Beyond supporting women who wanted out of unproductive and financially one sided marriages wherein the husband may still live in the immediate area, the Sandhills courts also supported women who pleaded for autonomy when their husbands simply abandoned them with little notice due to the economic uncertainty and societal whims of the Great Depression. Wife and familial abandonment was common throughout the United States during the Depression when former male breadwinners felt they had little options. Men like Clyde Butler cut and ran to save themselves. Despite its common occurrence, lawyers and judges did not see the benefit in forcing women to be forever tied to these sad, destitute, and absent figures. Sandhills' courts ruled no differently. Numerous divorces were granted to Sandhills' women who had simply been left by their spouses. As with the Butler case, several spousal abandonments had their origins in the years before October 1929. One such case appeared before the Wheeler County District Court on August 11th, 1931. On this date, Ethel Tiede petitioned the court for a divorce from her husband of eleven years, Emrel, who had abandoned her and the couple's two children nearly three years earlier on August 21st, 1928.¹³¹⁸ No divorce decree was found with this case; however, it was still highly unlikely that the couple reconciled when the economic effects of the Great Depression would have made it less likely that Emrel would have returned. A month prior to the nation's economic collapse Esther Koch suffered a similar hardship as Ethel Tiede. On the date of her marriage, September 29th, 1929, to George Koch, Esther's new husband simply abandoned her and

¹³¹⁸ *Ethel Tiede v. Emrel Tiede*, District Court of Wheeler County, Nebraska, Case No. 1457, Wheeler County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

their unborn child.¹³¹⁹ Forced to live with her parents near Johnstown in Brown County, the Brown County District Court finally granted Esther a divorce and sole custody of the child on September 8th, 1933, nearly a year after she had filed a petition.¹³²⁰ After the Great Crash, such abandonments became even more commonplace.

In some instances when wife and family abandoners could be found, many Sandhills counties prosecuted them for their negligence even though it was difficult to convict them. One county that succeeded in bringing one of these perpetrators to justice was Morrill. In early-June 1931, the southwestern Sandhills county's law officials were able to apprehend one such wayward individual. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* wrote of the marital transgression committed by John Bath and his arrest: "Deputy Sheriff Roy Clark went to Greeley, Colo., yesterday to bring back John Bath under arrest there on the charge of wife abandonment. Bath lived in this county and last fall disappeared, leaving his wife without support and giving no reason for leaving. The county authorities have been on his trail and a week ago located him in the neighborhood of Greeley and his arrest followed. Deputy Clark is expected back with his prisoner today."¹³²¹ Morrill County was not alone in punishing wayward husbands. In late-November 1933, the Brown County District Court brought charges against Isaac White for the abandonment of his wife, Leila, and their child, Betty Louis in March of that year.¹³²² White was so destitute that he was not able to hire his own attorney and thus filed an affidavit for appointment of counsel, which the court approved, as

¹³¹⁹ *Esther M. Koch v. George D. Koch*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3595, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²⁰ *Esther M. Koch v. George D. Koch*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3595, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, June 4, 1931, 1

¹³²² *State of Nebraska v. Isaac White*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3595, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

he was charged with a felony.¹³²³ No judgment appears with this case as White instead had been prosecuted for and convicted of another crime around the same time. White's situation had become so dire following the abandonment of his family that he had been arrested for assaulting and robbing R. C. Demmon and W. J. Alfson of \$1.15 in mid-June and the Brown County District Court subsequently sentenced him to three years hard labor in the State Penitentiary on November 17th, 1933.¹³²⁴ Whereas, no sentence was passed down on White for abandoning his family, his conviction for assault and robbery was viewed as sufficient. In one fell swoop, the county's judicial officials had removed a societal leper from Brown County.

In many similar cases, Sandhills women could take solace in the fact that they had regained their individual autonomy from these social pariahs even though most actions resulted in little gain besides one's own sense of personal freedom and satisfaction. Many perpetrators were never found so no damages could be awarded. Nonetheless, women who were granted divorces welcomed being free of their abandoning husbands and the stigma that surrounded such a non-existent and one sided marriage. Such legal actions continued throughout the remainder of the Depression. The Garden County District Court granted Josie Snoke a divorce from her husband of twelve years, Guy, on July 16th, 1935, as he had abandoned her and moved to Tripp County, South Dakota, with the couple's three children.¹³²⁵ Unfortunately, due to the distance and Guy's out of state residence, the court

¹³²³ *State of Nebraska v. Isaac White*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3595, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²⁴ *State of Nebraska v. Isaac White*, District Court of Brown County, Nebraska, Case No. 3666, Brown County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²⁵ *Josie Snoke v. Guy Snoke*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 1112, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

could not rule on whether or not Josie should have joint or sole custody of the children.¹³²⁶ Cora Carlson's husband, Albert, likewise left her awkwardly as he moved the couple from Garden County to nearby Colorado in February 1936 where he rented two rooms and then left her on her own never to return.¹³²⁷ On May 3rd, 1937, the Garden County District Court granted Cora a divorce as well as \$1,200.00 that Albert agreed to pay in damages for the cross state abandonment.¹³²⁸ The latter was a rare instance of financial compensation being successfully awarded to a female victim for the psychological damages inflicted by a male abandoner and the said abandoner being successfully contacted by the court system.

And so the abandonments and divorce settlements continued. On March 27th, 1936, Mary S. Pollock petitioned for a divorce from her husband of two years, Arthur, in Garfield County as roughly two months after their marriage he had left their home in Burwell and not returned.¹³²⁹ In nearby Blaine County, Ruby Turnbull was granted a divorce from her husband of twenty-two years, Basil, and the custody of their four minor children, on December 2nd, 1936.¹³³⁰ Like so many others, Basil had abandoned his wife years before the suit was brought (September 1930) and after all affidavits, newspaper publications of the suit, and attempts at contact had failed was it finally accepted that his abandonment was permanent.¹³³¹ On February 13th, 1940, Ferne Meyers was granted a divorce from her

¹³²⁶ *Josie Snoke v. Guy Snoke*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 1112, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²⁷ *Cora Carlson v. Albert Carlson*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 1152, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²⁸ *Cora Carlson v. Albert Carlson*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 1152, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³²⁹ *Mary S. Pollock v. Arthur M. Pollock*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1557, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³⁰ *Ruby Clara Turnbull v. Basil Logan Turnbull*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 964, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³¹ *Ruby Clara Turnbull v. Basil Logan Turnbull*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 964, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

drunken and physically abusive husband of seven years, Wayne, who had left Ferne and their children unsupported to the whims of the Depression one and a half years earlier in late-September 1938.¹³³² Similar efforts were made by the Arthur County Clerk of District Court in the summer of 1938 in rounding up one of the county's absent husbands. On June 1st, the Arthur County Clerk of District Court sent a notice to the Boone County, Nebraska, Sheriff's office desiring the whereabouts of one Huey R. White, whose wife was petitioning for divorce, as it was believed he may have been living in that county.¹³³³ These efforts were unsuccessful and on September 12th, 1938, Eva White was granted a divorce from her absent husband of two years and custody of their three year old son.¹³³⁴ Four months later, in Greeley County, Doris Eisenhauer was similarly granted a divorce from her husband of two and a half years, George, as he had joined the migrant exodus to California in June of 1937 and had coincidentally forgotten to inform her about his wandering intentions.¹³³⁵ In 1940, Claude Lagant of Loup County similarly was guilty of leaving his wife but in the opposite direction. Originally from Shickley, Nebraska, Lagant, thinking he was cleverly covering his marital betrayal, filed a petition for divorce from his wife of twenty-eight years, Averil, in late-December 1940 on the grounds that they argued frequently, Averil was promiscuous with other men, and that she no longer wanted to live with him.¹³³⁶ While this seems like good grounds for a divorce, it was far from the whole story or the truth. In late-January 1941, Averil filed an application for temporary alimony and suit for money from California,

¹³³² *Ferne G. Meyers v. Wayne F. Meyers*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1665, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³³ *Eva L. White v. Huey R. White*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 456, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³⁴ *Eva L. White v. Huey R. White*, District Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 456, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³⁵ *Doris Eisenhauer v. George Eisenhauer*, District Court of Greeley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3953, Greeley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³⁶ *Claude C. Lagant v. Averil L. Lagant*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-211, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

where she stated the Claude had left her with no funds and no means to support herself.¹³³⁷

Men like Lagant knew no qualms. In an attempt to make his wife look like an unfaithful deserter he was uncovered as a wife abandoner. Abandonments, such as these discussed, followed no template but had one certain outcome: the destruction of a marriage and the emotional degradation of the wife left to fend for herself, and in many instances, her family.

Unlike the examples of California explorers Eisenhower and Lagant, some, albeit rare, instances of husband desertion did have happy endings. In the summer of 1941, Katie Sheldon of Loup County began divorce proceedings against her husband, Milton, as he had left the hills without communicating to her his desire to relocate in Arkansas in hope of finding new economic opportunities.¹³³⁸ Milton had struggled as a farmer in Loup County during the 1930s. On April 13, 1935, M. H. Sheldon took out a chattel mortgage and received a \$50.00 loan from Ernest Reynolds to be applied to 1/3 of all of Sheldon's crops.¹³³⁹ The mortgage was never cancelled, thus alluding to Sheldon's agricultural shortcomings.¹³⁴⁰ Economic problems such as these led to his desire to start over in the 1940s. Sheldon so strongly sought a new beginning that he was willing to sacrifice his marriage in order to attain it. Fortunately, due to bureaucratic issues or the slowness of the Loup County court system, time passed and the couple reconciled. Milton Sheldon mailed a letter to Alder Att, possibly his attorney, of Taylor, dated June 2nd, 1944, in which he wrote: "My Mrs. Came down & has made some promises so if you haven't started anything yet just let it stand til I let you know. She left here 2 days ago for taylor to make arrangements to

¹³³⁷ *Claude C. Lagant v. Averil L. Lagant*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-211, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³⁸ *Katie Sheldon v. Milton H. Sheldon*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-218, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³³⁹ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages, Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

¹³⁴⁰ *Loup County General Index to Chattel Mortgages, Book 3*, Taylor, Nebraska

move down... I have a fine patch of melons & may get a good crop.”¹³⁴¹ While Milton was still somewhat cautious about his wife’s intentions in 1944, her intent to move to Arkansas and his apparent acceptance of this act demonstrated that some wife abandoners were willing to return to their previous lives. Undoubtedly, Sheldon’s improved agricultural status in the South encouraged his willingness to return to coupledness. In rare instances such as this, wives were sometimes able to find husbands and, more rarely, husbands sometimes let them. While it may not have occurred on a daily or weekly basis, from these many examples it is apparent that wife abandonment was a problem in the Sandhills during the Depression. Nonetheless, due to the help of the court system women were able to attain some remedy from these deeply personal betrayals during this era.

Beyond being victimized, abused, or abandoned, some women divorced their husbands for unique and different, but still acceptable, reasons. One was Zelma Peacock of Rock County. Zelma was married to her husband, Walter, for six years before he started displaying odd behavior that led her to petition for divorce on August 13th, 1934.¹³⁴² To Zelma’s great consternation, Walter quit working two years prior to the divorce petition and shortly thereafter gave away many of the couples’ hard earned necessities at no cost to friends and relatives.¹³⁴³ Count Five of Zelma’s divorce petition stipulated:

That the defendant is an able-bodied man, thirty-five years of age and of sufficient ability to provide suitable maintenance for plaintiff and said children, but defendant has grossly and cruelly refused and neglected so to do; that during the first two years of said marriage defendant and plaintiff worked together on the farm and in the fields and earned sufficient money to maintain the home. But during the past three years defendant has become disinterested in his family and the plaintiff, and has refused and neglected to to (sic) work for their interests. He has refused to work in the fields, although he was

¹³⁴¹ Sheldon to Att, June 2, 1944, *Katie Sheldon v. Milton H. Sheldon*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-218, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁴² *Zelma Peacock v. Walter Peacock*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3363, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁴³ *Zelma Peacock v. Walter Peacock*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3363, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

physically able since he had worked for his brother in August, 1932, and has required and insisted that the plaintiff do the farming, and that plaintiff has worked in the fields during this time and has been required by the defendant to so work in the fields even up until a few weeks prior to the time of the birth of her last (sic) two children. That the last child born to this union died within a year after it was born, its death being due largely to the overexertion of the mother prior to its birth. These events indicate that the defendant had very little interest in the welfare of his wife and family. That the defendant has become interested in religion and has become a preacher or traveling missionary. That the defendant, without the knowledge of the plaintiff and against her wishes, gave away about 75 bushels of potatoes out of a supply of some 150 bushels which the parties had raised for their own use and for selling. That the defendant had canned about 160 quarts of assorted fruits for the use of the family, and that the defendant, against the wishes and knowledge of the plaintiff took some 75 quarts or 80 quarts of said fruit from the home and gave it to his friends, thereby robbing the plaintiff, her children, and the children of the defendant by former marriage, of necessary food and sustenance. That defendant gave a horse to his brother, which the plaintiff recovered only after much trouble and difficulty. That defendant in January, 1934, left the plaintiff and their children and departed on a preaching tour and has never returned to them. That the defendant failed to provide the plaintiff and the children with suitable food, money, and clothing, and has contributed no money, food, or clothing to this plaintiff nor said children since about December 20, 1933, although she and said children have been in need of money, food, and clothing since that time. That the defendant has repeatedly said to the plaintiff that he would not furnish them any money, food, or clothing at all, and told the plaintiff that the Lord would look out for them, and said that he did not care what happened to them. That the children of the plaintiff became seriously ill with scarlet fever, chicken pox, and measles during the months of March and April 1934, and that one of the children had both chicken pox and scarlet fever at the same time. That said children were in great need of medicine and medical care. That the plaintiff repeatedly wrote letters to the defendant asking him to provide money for the necessary doctor bills and medical care, but that the defendant refused to supply any money or care toward assisting these children in regaining their health, and only wrote that the Lord had told him that the children would get well. But that one of the children has not yet fully recovered from the effects of these diseases and still has a constant cough as a result. That the defendant cruelly refused to see these children during their sickness although he passed within a few miles of where they were staying on his way from Johnstown Nebr. to Butte Nebr.¹³⁴⁴

Walter's claims that his negligence was based on religious piety fell on deaf ears. The Rock County District Court granted Zelma a divorce on October 25th, 1934.¹³⁴⁵ The divorce was partially granted due to Walter's failure to appear before the Rock County District Court on September 25th, 1934, thus earning him a contempt of court charge.¹³⁴⁶ Eventually the court sided with Zelma's belief that he was acting erratically and his behavior was unusual. Walter was ordered to appear before the Rock County board of insanity on March 12th, 1935, as a

¹³⁴⁴ *Zelma Peacock v. Walter Peacock*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3363, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁴⁵ *Zelma Peacock v. Walter Peacock*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3363, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁴⁶ *State of Nebraska v. Walter Peacock*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3375, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

sentence for his contempt of court charge.¹³⁴⁷ Peacock's attempts at using benevolence towards his neighbors as an excuse for neglecting his familial obligations when coupled with ignoring a court order warranted a closer look at his mental state. Whereas the Great Depression turned several Sandhills men into monsters, the emotional travails of the national economic chasm drove Peacock to the verge of mental instability and seemingly beyond.

In comparison to Zelma Peacock, Mary Samla of Garfield County divorced her husband, James for a more common reason than that her husband had turned into a crazed religious zealot who neglected his family obligations. Like Doris Krause, Mary parted ways with James after he was convicted of a felonious crime. In late-October 1933, Samla was arrested for breaking and entering into one of the farm homes of Kingsberry Hoff in adjacent Valley County and absconding with multiple items from the home including a ten gauge shotgun, a twenty-two caliber Czar revolver, two sheep skin coats and other various clothing items, a razor, and a horse blanket.¹³⁴⁸ The forty-three year old Samla, who had been arrested and sentenced nine years earlier to thirty days in jail for operating a liquor still by the Valley County District Court, was accompanied on this burglary and others he conducted in the vicinity by accomplice and former Nebraska State Penitentiary inmate, Elbert Hurlbert.¹³⁴⁹ Hurlbert, who was a convicted chicken thief, aided Samla in ransacking his targeted homes looking for cash and when the crime was complete both split the illegal bounty between them.¹³⁵⁰ Unlike Oshkosh burglars, Rosenback and Armstrong, Samla's

¹³⁴⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Walter Peacock*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3375, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁴⁸ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁴⁹ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵⁰ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

crimes were largely necessitated by agricultural failings. During his deposition by District Court Judge Edwin P. Clements at his November 10th, 1933, District Court trial, Samla admitted to stealing and reselling onions and potatoes, with Hurlbert's assistance, and that when asked if he farmed his own place responded: "Farm is being foreclosed."¹³⁵¹ Clements further pressed Samla about his dwindling agricultural prospects and asked: "What kind of a crop did you raise last year?"¹³⁵² Samla in turn responded: "Not much to talk about. Small grain this year was a total failure."¹³⁵³ Such failings caused by environmental difficulty undoubtedly influenced Samla to steal in order to survive and provide something for his family. The Samla's agricultural struggles also took their toll on Mary's mental, emotional, and physical state. Samla, when pressed by Clements about Mary's condition, informed the court that she had been to the insane asylum twice and had returned from her most recent institutionalization in July.¹³⁵⁴ While it is unclear if Mary's psychosis was due only to environmental factors or if her husband's nocturnal criminal activities also played a role in her mental instability, in any regard neither issue helped calm her frazzled mind in a time of economic discord. The Sandhills were indeed hell on women.

Despite his wife's difficulties, Samla was sentenced to serve three to five years hard labor in the Nebraska State Penitentiary and to pay his court costs on that early-November day in 1933.¹³⁵⁵ Less than a year later, Mary petitioned for a divorce from her husband of

¹³⁵¹ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵² *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵³ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵⁴ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵⁵ *State of Nebraska v. James Samla*, District Court of Valley County, Nebraska, Case No. 3620, Valley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

twenty years based upon not only George's absence due to incarceration but also because he was abusive to her and their three children with or without the influence of alcohol.¹³⁵⁶ Such abuse had a negative effect on Mary's mindset; however, by late-1934 she had recovered enough to take back control of her life and her children's. On October 15th, 1934, Judge Clements granted her divorce, custody of the couple's three children, and awarded her monthly \$10.00 child support payments once George was freed from the State Penitentiary.¹³⁵⁷ The Samla's tale was significant as a multi-faceted example of tragedy ripe with betrayal, physical and emotional abuse, and economic collapse. In this instance, Mary would have been better off if George had simply left instead of continually compounding their problems with inept criminal schemes. Mary eventually regained control of her life with the help of the criminal justice system; however, her shattered emotional state and weakened mental health were an expensive price to pay for such personal stability. Such were the obstacles Sandhills women faced during the depths of the Great Depression.

Throughout the 1930s, Sandhills courts sided with women when they were victimized; however, they could be as equally punitive and critical when women fell on the wrong side of the law or engaged in behavior that was considered socially unacceptable. One such behavior which held negative consequences for marriage and in which both genders participated and were equally chastised was adultery. Participants faced criminal charges in some Sandhills counties whereas in others such an accusation only led to the burden of social stigma. In October 1935, Blaine County farmer Clarence Leep was charged with adultery by

¹³⁵⁶ *Mary Samla v. James Samla*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1494, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵⁷ *Mary Samla v. James Samla*, District Court of Garfield County, Nebraska, Case No. 1494, Garfield County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

the county's legal officials as he was living with Maxine Clark and not his wife Mary.¹³⁵⁸ Instead of sentencing him to the penitentiary, Eleventh Judicial District Court Judge E. G. Kroger paroled Leep to Blaine County Sheriff Fred Schipporeit for two years instead of confining him to an extended stay in the county jail as it was less expensive for the county.¹³⁵⁹

Men were not alone in their unfaithfulness as women were equally culpable in engaging in affairs of the heart and/or following their primal urges. Affairs took place throughout the hills but sometimes participants sought new love or comfort miles from the familiarity of the blowing sand and dry junegrass. On January 11th, 1935, Robert McCormick of Garden County petitioned for divorce from his wife of twelve years, Josephine, due to his belief that she initiated an affair with Prosper Naviaux of Laramie, Wyoming, on Christmas Day 1934.¹³⁶⁰ While no divorce decree for this case was found, suggesting that the two McCormick's reconciled, Josephine had to live with the stigma of being a woman of low morals undoubtedly for an extended period in the local community. Nonetheless, the consequences of adultery paled in contrast to the benefits it held for those Sandhills women who participated in it. Sandhills women who engaged in the socially unacceptable practice possibly did so to protest against the burdens cast on them by the Great Depression. Abusive husbands, unfulfilling domestic roles, and failing agricultural operations disappeared when offered new opportunities at love and happiness. Undoubtedly many engaged in sexual affairs with men who could not grant them new opportunities out of

¹³⁵⁸ *State of Nebraska v. Clarence J. Leep*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 950, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁵⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Clarence J. Leep*, District Court of Blaine County, Nebraska, Case No. 950, Blaine County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁶⁰ *Robert McCormick v. Josephine McCormick*, District Court of Garden County, Nebraska, Case No. 1089, Garden County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

simple lust, desire for someone new, or out of loneliness; however, in so doing such an act once again offered them a chance at asserting their individuality and control over their own destiny. Escaping from their harsh and unforgiving lives through the quest for a new partner was not the only means Sandhills women had at personal revitalization. Many could care less if they found another mate they simply desired a fresh start and sought to accomplish this with the only weapon at their disposal: their feet.

In the Sandhills during the Great Depression, not all spousal abandoners were men. Some wives left their husbands and their families when they were unhappy. Many did so in an effort to gain or regain control over their own lives or because they sought new economic opportunities on their own away from their husbands. Regardless of the reason, many Sandhills men were then put in the reverse role of divorcing their wives for leaving them when it was more commonly the other way around. Despite the numbers, wandering feet did not discriminate between genders. Like vagabond husbands, many absent wives left before the Depression. The ramifications of their disappearances were still felt many years later when their divorces were finally legal. One such individual was Kathryn Kirkwood. Kirkwood's husband of six years, James, petitioned the Rock County District Court for divorce on December 8th, 1930, charging that on New Year's Eve 1926, Kathryn left their Lincoln home and never came back.¹³⁶¹ The Rock County District Court granted James Kirkwood a divorce on September 8th, 1931, as he had been abandoned for more than two years at the time of his petition.¹³⁶² Kathryn had moved to Los Angeles as her voluntary

¹³⁶¹ *James M. Kirkwood v. Kathryn Kirkwood*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3211, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁶² *James M. Kirkwood v. Kathryn Kirkwood*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3211, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

appearance form was signed and notarized there.¹³⁶³ Kirkwood himself returned to Rock County, where the couple had first lived after their marriage, and moved out of Nebraska's capitol city and the negative memories of abandonment it contained.¹³⁶⁴

Sandhills wives continued to leave their hills and husbands throughout the remainder of the Depression. Unlike Averil Lagant, Marydaye Hawley of Loup County liked California. Hawley was so fond of California, that she left her husband of eight years, George, and moved there in late-August 1931.¹³⁶⁵ George was granted a divorce by the Loup County District Court on May 9th, 1935.¹³⁶⁶ Like so many other Nebraska Sandhillers, Maggie May Clark of Greeley County was also attracted to the Sunshine State. A complaint was filed against her for child abandonment for leaving her husband and four children behind for another man by the Greeley County District Court on September 16th, 1941.¹³⁶⁷ For women such as Clark, they utilized the only option available to them at the time for a new life. Abandonment offered some Sandhills women a chance at a fresh start and if they had a new significant other, such as Clark had, these individuals were used as motivation to jump start and revitalize their new life in their new locale. Unfortunately all abandonment cases always had someone, such as Clark's children, who were emotionally damaged by being forever cast aside for someone or something else. No one was spared the travails and hardships of the Great Depression in the Sandhills.

¹³⁶³ *James M. Kirkwood v. Kathryn Kirkwood*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3211, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁶⁴ *James M. Kirkwood v. Kathryn Kirkwood*, District Court of Rock County, Nebraska, Case No. 3211, Rock County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁶⁵ *George W. Hawley v. Marydaye Hawley*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-104, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁶⁶ *George W. Hawley v. Marydaye Hawley*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Case No. 5-104, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁶⁷ *State of Nebraska v. Maggie May Clark*, District Court of Greeley County, Nebraska, Case No. 4076, Greeley County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

Beyond trying women for abandonment, Sandhills' courts were particularly hard upon women and young girls who were promiscuous or insinuated that they were. Notwithstanding the attitudes and characteristics of the nation's flapper girls of the 1920s, utilizing one's sexuality to assert their individuality was still considered as socially unacceptable as adultery, not only in the Sandhills but in much of the country as a whole. Joshua Zeitz wrote of the national view of this kind of feminine expression during the era: "In a world where female sexuality was increasingly discussed- but still feared and misapprehended- the vamp was a tantalizing yet sufficiently dark and distant figure for public consumption."¹³⁶⁸ One such Sandhills individual who was viewed as oversexed was Eileen Todd. In the spring of 1929, prior to the outset of the nation's financial collapse, the twelve-year old Todd lived with her father, Harry, and stepmother, Sophia, in Arthur County.¹³⁶⁹ The young juvenile was charged with displaying overt sexual tendencies and immoral characteristics as count four of the complaint filed against her stated: "That said defendant Eileen Todd is a delinquent female child under the age of 18 years, to-wit: of the age of 12 years; that said defendant Eileen Todd is a delinquent in that she is growing up in vice and immorality, by reason of an apparent unusual sex passion, the cause of which is unknown to complainant; because of immoral habits and tendencies; and by reason of lack of parental discipline and control, and conditions unfavorable to discipline and control."¹³⁷⁰ It is uncertain what characteristics Todd displayed or activities she participated in order to be categorized as displaying an unusual "sex passion" in 1929 Arthur County. Did she wear too

¹³⁶⁸ Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 231

¹³⁶⁹ *State of Nebraska v. Eileen Todd, et al*, County Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 492, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁷⁰ *State of Nebraska v. Eileen Todd, et al*, County Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 492, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

short a dress, apply too much make-up, or hang around street corners? The case is ambiguous as to what violation she actually committed. The absence of proper role models in her life and a stable domestic environment influenced the court's decision just as much as what activities she was engaging in. From the case's petition and complaint against Todd, it is clear that her family was not considered to be part of Arthur County's elite or respected members of society. Her parents, apparently considered to be unfit as the younger Todd was "growing up in vice and immorality," did not protest when the Arthur County Court sentenced her to an indeterminate stay at the Girls Industrial School at Geneva, Nebraska, on May 16th, 1929.¹³⁷¹ Instead of providing Todd with a better home life in the hills it was easier to send her away. All the girls of the Sandhills were wholesome church goers, not streetwalkers. This image had to be protected and there was no easier way to accomplish this than to simply remove the violator from the region. Such was the case of Rachel Leggett of Thomas County. On November 10th, 1933, Leggett admitted in open court that she was unmarried, pregnant and could not support herself, so Thomas County Judge Chester Paxton sentenced her to the Women's Industrial Home not far from Milford.¹³⁷² If these youthful perpetrators were out of sight, they were most definitely out of mind. Sandhills adult women could be similarly ostracized if the court of public opinion charged them with sexual malfeasance.

In the Depression-era Sandhills women who were far older than Eileen Todd and who had a greater range of life experiences used their sexual promiscuity to control their own lives and the men around them. Nellie Loghry of Loup County was one such woman.

¹³⁷¹ *State of Nebraska v. Eileen Todd, et al*, County Court of Arthur County, Nebraska, Case No. 492, Arthur County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁷² *State of Nebraska v. Rachel Leggett*, County Court of Thomas County, Nebraska, Thomas County Court Docket No. 4, Case No. 794, Thomas County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

Loghry's tale is one worthy of the modern-day Maury Povich show. Nellie's husband Harry filed for divorce from his wife of six months on December 17th, 1930, claiming he had been forced and extorted to marry Nellie as she claimed to be pregnant with his child.¹³⁷³ Harry claimed that in January 1930 Nellie left Loup County for Colorado and when she returned she was pregnant with his child.¹³⁷⁴ He had reason to believe that this was not the case. The petition for divorce outlined the fraudulent behavior of his wife:

That the defendant left the State of Nebraska sometime in the latter part of January, 1930 and went to the State of Colorado; that she returned from the State of Colorado sometime during the summer of 1930; that upon her return to Loup County, Nebraska she called upon the plaintiff and informed him that she was pregnant and that he was the guilty party and would be the father of the child; that the plaintiff denied any liability by reason of her condition at that time and upon her request for him to marry her this plaintiff refused to do so denying any liability; that the defendant then endeavored by threats, intimidation and duress to compel him to marry her and at other times in the presence of her brother and other parties threatened this plaintiff with criminal action if he would not consent to their marriage and informed him that he would be sorry for his action if he did not do something and while this plaintiff knew he was not liable for the praternity (sic) of the child and so informed the defendant and her relatives and that it would be impossible for him to be the father of the child by reason of the lapse of time notwithstanding the said denial the plaintiff was threatened as foresaid and against his will and wishes finally consented to go before the County Judge of Loup County, Nebraska and there and then become united in marriage which was done as aforesaid. That the defendant and her brothers and friends whom did threaten this plaintiff with criminal action or other means knew at the time of making such threats, demands and coercion that the plaintiff was not guilty as accused but that the defendant had previously been unable to attach the blame to any other person of the praternity (sic) of the child; that the plaintiff later learned that the defendant had endeavored to place guilt upon another party and by force and threats had endeavored to intimidate said party to marry this defendant but that said party did not and would not consent to marriage. That since the date of said marriage this plaintiff has learned and been informed that the defendant was unchaste and had had sexual intercourse with other men; that the plaintiff was not acquainted with these facts prior to the date of said marriage.¹³⁷⁵

From this accusation it is apparent that not all women were victims and that sometimes men were. Loghry's actions were just as immoral or amoral as any husband that beat his wife and controlled her with fear. In the end, Harry dismissed the case as perhaps the child looked too much like him to continue deny his parental role or Nellie's brothers finally put enough

¹³⁷³ *Harry F. Loghry v. Nellie Loghry*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Docket 4, p. 316, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁷⁴ *Harry F. Loghry v. Nellie Loghry*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Docket 4, p. 316, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

¹³⁷⁵ *Harry F. Loghry v. Nellie Loghry*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Docket 4, p. 316, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

pressure on him to stay in the loveless marriage.¹³⁷⁶ In a time of economic travail, some women tried to get help anyway they could even if it meant destroying someone else's life in the process.

During the Great Depression, gender issues played a significant role in the everyday lives of Sandhillers, whether on the farm or ranch or in the court room. Unlike criminal incidents of robbery and burglary which were more apparent threats to a stable society, issues revolving around the masculine and feminine roles were more subtle as women did not protest on a daily basis for equal pay or greater leadership roles in local government. Economic issues led to personal reassessments of the masculine and feminine roles in each Sandhills home as many men who were no longer able to adequately provide for their families due to a combination of drought and economic depression felt emasculated and took such shortcomings out on their wives in the form of physical and sexual abuse. Thus, personal control became a central theme of gender struggles in the Sandhills. Many women took pride in the feelings of self-sovereignty certain occupations or tasks, whether undertaken in town or in the agricultural setting, provided them. Women who were victimized or had no one else turned to the region's court systems to regain control during times of personal uncertainty and generally always received favorable rulings. Others sought to assert or reassert their personal goals and ambitions through simply leaving the region and their families, if they had any, or through extralegal means, such as Loghry's blackmail scheme. Women were far more than victims in the Sandhills social structure. They were individuals who shaped society through their influence on familial agricultural operations as well as combatants in the struggle against environmental hardship. Thus, gender issues

¹³⁷⁶ *Harry F. Loghry v. Nellie Loghry*, District Court of Loup County, Nebraska, Docket 4, p. 316, Loup County, Nebraska, Office of the County Clerk

posed challenges to the stability of Sandhills society that were just as complex and diverse as widespread criminality and a lack of racial understanding. Between criminal acts, varying racial attitudes, and struggles between genders, Sandhills society was a swirling tempest that at times seemed to be spinning out of control with no answers to these inner tensions.

Despite these challenges Sandhillers were able to stabilize their regional society during the divisive days of the Great Depression through the diligent application of two methods which sought to restore their faith and renew their community ties: religion and social gatherings.

Rebuilding, Retention, and Revivals: Religion's Challenges and Role in Stabilizing Sandhills Society

During the Great Depression, life on the Great Plains seemed apocryphal as animal and insect plagues devoured what was left of drought ridden crops and pastures, heat baked the earth, and unremitting dust storms darkened the skies. Such events seemed directly pulled from the Christian Bible's Book of Revelations. Unsurprisingly many Great Plains residents turned (or returned) to their religious faith for answers and salvation when man and his earthly governments seemed unable to stop the seemingly routine environmental curses. Historian R. Douglas Hurt wrote of the religious mindset of individuals who lived on the Great Plains: "Theologically, Great Plains men and women lived in an Old Testament world where reality was often harsh and unforgiving, but they prayed with hope and expectation to a New Testament God."¹³⁷⁷ No time challenged their faith more than the darkest days of the Great Depression. Historian Donald Worster wrote of Kansans' religious reactions to the region's environmental desolation of the 1930s: "...conditions had become so unrelenting that many Kansans had begun to chew their nails. 'Watch for the Second Coming of Christ,'

¹³⁷⁷ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011), 259

warned one of Topeka's unhinged, 'God is wrathful.' Street-corner sects in Hill City and other towns warned pedestrians to heed the signs of the times. A slightly less frenetic Concordian jotted in her log: 'This is ultimate darkness. So must come the end of the world.' The mood of the people had begun to change, if not to apocalyptic dread in every case, at least to a fear that this was a nightmare that might never end."¹³⁷⁸ Such conditions led to a renewed interest in church attendance and the potential salvation that such theological participation could bring. Dust Bowl survivor Lawrence Svobida wrote of the prayers emanating from Kansas churches during the era: "Do you wonder that week after week during the blow season, the congregations in the churches devote much of their time to imploring the Higher Power to bring to an end the dreaded dust menace?"¹³⁷⁹

While the outcome of their prayers could be uncertain, the denominations where individuals attended services were not. During the early-20th century specific Christian sects held sway over others on the Great Plains, and in the American West as a whole, even during times of economic uncertainty. Discussing the religious make-up of the region during the twentieth-century, historians Michael Malone and Richard Etulain wrote: "In only two states of the early-twentieth-century West, Kansas and Oklahoma, did Methodists outnumber Catholics; but in about half of the other states, they placed second behind Catholics. In Texas the Baptists led all other denominations; and in many other states, they rivaled the Presbyterians as the next largest Protestant grouping behind the Methodists."¹³⁸⁰ Further to the west on the Pacific Coast, the effects of decreased economic status led some individuals

¹³⁷⁸ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 17

¹³⁷⁹ Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 144

¹³⁸⁰ Michael P. Malone and Richard W. Etulain, *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 197

to switch denominational loyalty. Earl Pomeroy wrote of the burgeoning popularity of Pentecostalism on the West Coast during the 1930s: “During and after the Depression of the 1930s, it appealed to migrant farmworkers in the Yakima Valley of Washington and the San Joaquin Valley of California, many of whom seemed hungry for psychological moorings and more comfortable in the shabby storefront meetinghouses of the Pentecostals than in the more conventional Methodist and Baptist churches they had attended in better times.”¹³⁸¹

In the Nebraska Sandhills, residents similarly attended Protestant and Catholic churches as their fellow contemporaries of the Great Plains did. Those who followed the Jewish and Muslim faith were not to be found in the hills. During the stratifying days of the Great Depression which caused rifts in Sandhills society due to crime, race, and gender issues, religion served as a salve to heal these wounds for those who believed in its ability to provide comfort and aid to those who needed it as well as personal salvation. While religious institutions in the Sandhills did not specifically address the region’s crime problem, racial concerns, or domestic violence, they served as a unifying entity for Sandhills residents when many of their neighbors were leaving and their crops and pastures were withering. As in other parts of the Great Plains, they came to God when they had nowhere else to turn. Individuals came together for services to pray over these issues and the region’s environmental ailments as well as to preserve and maintain their churches during a time when they were just as economically threatened as family agricultural operations. Many Sandhills congregations experienced monetary challenges due to the Depression and also struggled to retain ministers. Local churches welcomed visiting ministers when permanent ones could not be found immediately to fill vacancies. Dwindling finances during the period

¹³⁸¹ Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the 20th Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), 256

led to increased reliance on congregation members' participation in keeping Sandhills churches solvent when they themselves were strapped for cash. Church members also assisted with basic maintenance and construction efforts if new churches or additions were needed. Such local philanthropic efforts when combined with regular church service attendance and participation in other church gatherings, such as youth group functions, provided a social cohesion and stability amongst individual congregations. When these individual efforts were combined with the similar efforts of other churches the result was an overall beneficial effect on Sandhills society. Crime, violence, and drought came and went but through the efforts of the region's Christians, their churches remained. Many revivals were also held in the hills during the Depression which also served to reinforce the faith of locals and differentiate them from those who succumbed to the sins of drink and adultery. Attending religious gatherings also was beneficial in that sermons conducted at services generally spoke to larger social ills in the nation or the world as a whole. In this regard sermons were informative and served as a news source, even if they were biased towards one viewpoint, for some rural Sandhillers. By the end of the Depression, the spiritual core of Sandhills residents remained strong due in large part to a regional community effort in keeping it so. Religion served as a rallying point for Sandhillers to come together for reasons varying from spiritual growth to building maintenance and in this regard played a significant role in guiding Sandhills society through the Great Depression.

Religious institutions were established during the earliest period of Euro-American settlement in Nebraska and were an important part of everyday life as taking part in church activities aided in solidifying community bonds. Two of the most prominent Christian faiths to first appear on the Nebraska plains were Methodism and Catholicism. Methodists (or

rather Methodist Episcopalians) first came to the land of flat water in the early-1850s when tensions revolving around sectionalism caused by slavery threatened to rip the nation asunder. Historian and former United Methodist Bishop Don Holter wrote of the early Nebraska Methodists: “Probably the first sermon preached by any Protestant within Nebraska Territory was delivered by the Reverend Harrison Presson on April 2, 1850, near what is now Omaha. This Methodist Episcopal pastor preached to fellow members of a wagon train...Nebraska City rightly claims that, even before the first official appointments by the Missouri Conference...Methodist Episcopal services were held by the Reverend W. D. Gage in old Fort Kearny, now Nebraska City. The next year Gage was duly appointed to the Nebraska City Mission- which included a number of other settlements. The organization of the church occurred a year later.”¹³⁸² Methodism appealed to many early Euro-American settlers in Nebraska due to its focus on faith as a means to salvation. Theological scholars Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White wrote of the basic tenets of Methodist belief: “Along with all Protestant churches, Methodists affirm that salvation is by faith alone, that scripture is the sole principle upon which faith is based, that the priesthood of Christ has been entrusted to all believers, and that Christ alone is the head of the church.”¹³⁸³ For Euro-Americans building a new life on the Nebraska prairie in the mid to late-nineteenth century, nothing came easy and nothing was assured. The future was not certain nor guaranteed. Thus, many followed Methodism as its teachings paralleled and were similar to how they lived their daily lives: on faith.

¹³⁸² Don W. Holter, *Flames on the Plains: A History of United Methodism in Nebraska* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1983), 38-39

¹³⁸³ Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction To World Methodism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92

The origins of Catholicism in Nebraska pre-dated Methodism by nearly thirty years as Catholic missionaries made in-roads into the early forts and trading posts along the Missouri River when fur trappers and mountain men began making their way west into the Rocky Mountains in the 1820s. Catholic Historian Henry W. Casper wrote of Catholicism's first appearance in Nebraska: "The earliest period to which the history of organized Catholicism in Nebraska can be traced is that between 1819 and 1827 when the government maintained a military post at Fort Atkinson, about sixteen miles north of the present city of Omaha. The first piece of documentary evidence for the period is a plea of Bishop DuBourg, the second bishop of Louisiana and the Floridas, 'for the establishment of an Indian Mission at Council Bluffs [sic] where there is a military post made up mostly of Catholics.' DuBourg was referring to Fort Atkinson, the original Council Bluff of Lewis and Clark, near the present site of Fort Calhoun in Nebraska."¹³⁸⁴ Over thirty years later in the late-1850s, Catholic leaders in Nebraska Territory still struggled to establish churches, largely due to funding problems, whereas Methodist Episcopalian ministers, such as Gage, were more successful in doing so, if only on a rudimentary level. Casper wrote of the early challenges to Catholic church building in Nebraska Territory in 1859: "There were only two church edifices in the entire vicariate when Bishop O'Gorman came to Nebraska, one in Omaha and a second at St. John's City which was never completed. The structure in Omaha was only crudely finished. Its walls were unplastered, and it possessed few vestments fit for sanctuary service. The single altar vessel was a chalice which had not been fully paid for."¹³⁸⁵ Only a few years later, Catholics had more success in establishing churches in eastern Nebraska. One of the

¹³⁸⁴ Henry W. Casper, S. J., *History of The Catholic Church in Nebraska, Volume I: The Church on the Northern Plains 1838-1874* (Milwaukee: Bruce Press, 1960), 3

¹³⁸⁵ Casper, S. J., *History of The Catholic Church in Nebraska, Volume I: The Church on the Northern Plains 1838-1874*, 118-119

early churches was at Forest City. Casper noted this church's founding and its early priests: "In 1863 the settlers constructed their first church at Forest City, a log structure twenty by thirty feet, which, because the logs and labor were donated cost only seventy dollars. The structure continued to serve the people's needs until 1874, when it was replaced...The first resident pastor at Forest City was Father Patrick Keenan who made his home with Thomas Connor. Father Keenan, was succeeded by Father John Bernard in July, 1875. All of the priests who attended this mission were said to have been especially deserving of commendation by reason of self-denials and sacrifices which they were called upon to make. At the time of Father Bernard the pastor lived in a dwelling which was a small room ten by twelve feet, cut off from the church."¹³⁸⁶ By the 1870s and 1880s, through the efforts of pastors and priests, both Protestant denominations and Catholicism had sufficiently rooted their congregations in eastern Nebraska as Euro-American settlers finally began to make homes to the west in the Sandhills.

As settlers moved into the hills, the churches came with them. One of the first Sandhills' settlements to have a significant religious presence was O'Neill. Casper wrote of the early Catholic presence in what became Holt County: "...the first Catholic service conducted by a priest at O'Neill was the mass offered by Father Bedard at the lodging of John Hannigan in the O'Neill colony in the summer of 1875...The first church edifice in O'Neill City was started in Bedard's time...Measuring eighteen by thirty-six feet, it was a frame structure which stood at the south corner of block four somewhat in front of the present convent and down the hillside. It was used from 1877 to 1884. There were no pews

¹³⁸⁶ Casper, S. J., *History of The Catholic Church in Nebraska, Volume I: The Church on the Northern Plains 1838-1874*, 149

or seats of any kind...The structure cost \$535...”¹³⁸⁷ The Catholic Church dominated O’Neill religious circles until the 1930s when Protestant churches were finally formed to give O’Neill’s citizens other spiritual options during the dark days of the Depression. Contrastingly in Brown County, Protestant congregations were some of the first to be created by early Euro-American pioneers as the St. Pius X Catholic Church was not built until 1955.¹³⁸⁸ The Brown County Historical Society noted the establishment of several Protestant churches in the county: “The Congregational Church of Ainsworth was the first religious edifice in the county, built in the spring of 1884...F. K. Thomas held the first Methodist services in Ainsworth as a part of the Long Pine circuit in the fall of 1881...In 1883, the Lutherans living in Brown county gathered together and in 1884 a ministerial candidate, Herman Westphal, accepted their call as pastor. Pastor Westphal took out a claim for a 40 acre homestead northwest of Ainsworth. In the following year, the congregation organized under the name of the Evangelical Zion’s Church...Long Pine was located as a town site June 1881, before the arrival of the railroad in October 1881. The First Methodist Church was organized in late 1881 or early 1882. They met in the Skinner Hall, a room over the Charles Clift Café, a building just north of the Strelow Drug Store. The Methodist Church used the building in the morning and the Congregational Church used it in the afternoon.”¹³⁸⁹

In the 1880s, protestant churches were also some of the first created in Cherry County. St. John’s Episcopal Church was established in Valentine in 1886, the Presbyterian Church was founded a year later, and in 1888 the Methodist Episcopal Church followed

¹³⁸⁷ Henry W. Casper, S. J., *History of The Catholic Church in Nebraska, Volume Three: Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration 1870-1900* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1960), 17-18

¹³⁸⁸ The Brown County Historical Society, *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska* (Mt. Vernon, Indiana: Windmill Publications, Inc., 1997), 132

¹³⁸⁹ The Brown County Historical Society, *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska*, 134-141

suit.¹³⁹⁰ Catholics also found their way to what became Cherry County in the 1880s; however, they were not able to complete their church until the following decade. Theresa White and Carole Wakefield described the early Catholic presence in the county and the reasons for the delayed construction of St. Nicholas Catholic Church: “During the summer of 1882, before the organization of Cherry County, the first Holy Mass was offered by Father John T. Smith of O’Neill at the railroad construction camp known as Big Cut...A movement was started in 1891 to raise funds to build. It was slow uphill work but ground was broken the following year. The church, 20 by 40 feet, included living quarters and was completed in 1896. It was accomplished largely by the work of Father Lechleitner’s own hands and paid for by the people of his own parish.”¹³⁹¹ To the south, in the central Sandhills, religion continued to play a significant role in Euro-American settlement. Robert L. Conger wrote of the first churches in Blaine County: “The first church in Pleasant Valley was the Methodist Episcopal established in the 1890s. In March 1899 the G. W. Brewster Memorial Congregational Church was established in Brewster and Pleasant Valley.”¹³⁹² In the earliest days of Euro-American settlement, Sandhills churches brought stability to the region’s young society as besides offering spiritual enlightenment, church construction also provided a cause for locals to rally around, support, and participate in. By the 1930s, Sandhills churches continued to play this role during the worst drought plagued days as Sandhillers struggled to maintain their congregations through grit and hard work. Many Sandhills churches and their congregations were also still being established during this time suggesting once again that Frederick Jackson Turner’s argument that the frontier ended in 1893 was incorrect and had limitations especially regarding the Sandhills region.

¹³⁹⁰ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land*, 325-327

¹³⁹¹ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land*, 323

¹³⁹² The Blaine County History Book Committee, *The History of Blaine County, Nebraska*, 51

The fiery and dusty days of the 1930s tested church congregations throughout the hills as money tightened and some church members left forever. The lessons of congregational unity, responsibility, and patience learned by many early Sandhillers when their congregations were first created in the latter years of the nineteenth century, reemerged to teach new lessons to a new generation during the Great Depression. Certain Christian faiths championed this attitude more than others. Historian Anthony Burke Smith wrote of Catholic perspectives on the nation's economic decline: "The Depression appeared to Catholics to vindicate their opposition to traditional liberalism. A nation prostrate because of industrial capitalism looked to a number of Catholics like evidence that they had been correct all along about the bankruptcy of modernity. Many Catholics construed the Depression as more than an economic catastrophe; they saw it as a moral and cultural indictment of individualism and free markets as well."¹³⁹³ For Sandhills Christians many tasks needed tended that the individual could indeed not handle alone.

During the Depression church buildings still required repair or construction and congregations were born to meet the new environmental challenges facing those who remained in the hills. Such necessary tasks united Sandhillers when the stresses of daily life threatened to divide them. In the early-1930s, construction efforts not only brought Sandhillers together to create something from nothing in a land brought barren by drought, but such a task, when completed, also presented an opportunity to worship God together with one's friends and neighbors. An example of the latter occurred in 1932 in Rock County as the Pine Creek Holiness Camp tabernacle was constructed. The *Rock County Leader* described the celebration of the new tabernacle in mid-August 1932: "Large crowds are

¹³⁹³ Anthony Burke Smith, *The Look of Catholics: Portrayals in Popular Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 18-19

attending the Pine Creek Holiness camp meeting, on Pine Creek, northwest of Bassett. Quite a large number of campers are on the grounds and the meetings are attracting considerable attention from people of the surrounding territory. The new tabernacle, a permanent structure for these annual meetings, was dedicated Sunday afternoon.”¹³⁹⁴ Despite the pleasantness and positivity fostered at dedication celebrations, the building of new churches was not inexpensive. Holter, describing the downturn in individual Methodist members’ personal donations in 1934, wrote: “...the Evangelical Church conference superintendents reported that average giving per member had shrunk to \$13.45 from a former high of \$50.01.”¹³⁹⁵ Some congregations were fortunate to be blessed with members who had some excess cash reserves, church leaders with superior soliciting skills that garnered extra offerings from their followers, or both in their efforts to quickly and efficiently complete infrastructure improvements which were deemed necessary even in the most difficult of times. The Methodist congregation of Rushville accepted the financially straining challenge in the mid-1930s. The *Sheridan County Star* wrote of the project’s origin and early support: “An announcement of much importance to the future development of this city was made this week by the building committee that has had charge of the important task of raising money with which to match the trust fund left by the late H. O. Morse to build a Methodist Church. Through Reverend Shepard we are informed the necessary local money has been subscribed and much of it already paid in. In face of all the drouth (sic) it would seem Reverend Shepard and other members of the committee had accomplished an impossible task and their efforts are to be highly commended.”¹³⁹⁶ While it is unclear how much each individual

¹³⁹⁴ *Rock County Leader*, August 18, 1932, 1

¹³⁹⁵ Holter, *Flames on the Plains*, 299

¹³⁹⁶ *Sheridan County Star*, August 27, 1936, 1

member paid in to support the project, it was nonetheless successful as the new Rushville Methodist Church was dedicated less than a year later on Sunday, July 25th, 1937.¹³⁹⁷

In contrast to the Rushville Methodist Church, which had a sufficient trust fund at its disposal, most organized congregations saved and scrimped for years in order to have adequate funds for new structures. Many churches relied significantly on their church members for funds and/or labor and petitioned regularly for aid. Without the help of congregation members the Dunning Open Bible Church in Blaine County would have died in its infancy. Bill Webb wrote of the congregation's communal progress on building their house of worship in the mid-1930s:

In 1936 Church services and Sunday School was held in the Anderson house in south Dunning, the house later purchased by the Harry Bramer family. Early in 1937 Harry Bramer went to Custer, South Dakota and purchased lumber and hauled it to Dunning to build a church on the property where the present church now stands. This property was purchased from the city of Dunning for the sum of one-dollar. The first families responsible for getting the church started were: Chris Anderson family which consisted of nine sons and one daughter. Harry Bramer family, Jasper and Paul Thompson, D. B. Pearson family, Mr. and Mrs. Harrison McClement, Mrs. Viola Jennings, Billy Young and wife, and Carl Bramer, who also drilled the first well for the church.¹³⁹⁸

To the west in Grant County, churches also survived thanks to membership assistance. The July 12th, 1939, issue of the *Grant County Tribune* wrote of the Congregational Church's plan for paying for necessary repairs: "At the business meeting of the Congregational church it was voted that the trustees be authorized to make arrangements for raising funds to paint and repair the church building. According to estimates, made by mechanics, this will be approximately \$1,000."¹³⁹⁹ Building or repair efforts such as these were not without sacrifice, some of it extreme, on the part of their already burdened congregation members.

¹³⁹⁷ *Sheridan County Star*, July 20, 1937, 1

¹³⁹⁸ The Blaine County History Book Committee, *The History of Blaine County, Nebraska*, 53

¹³⁹⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, July 12, 1939, 1

Historian Nellie Snyder Yost wrote of the drawn out process to establish a Methodist Church in Holt County in the mid-1930s:

The Wesleyan Methodist Church of O'Neill had its beginning in 1936, following a revival meeting held in a large tent near Venus by a returned missionary, J. M. Zook. The new church services were held in a school house about eight miles northeast of O'Neill, with Elton Clyde, a local man, as the first pastor. After a few weeks in the school house the congregation, on August 9, 1936, found a note on the blackboard informing them they could no longer use the building for worship. They then held services in the Herman farm house for awhile, and then in Grandma Bowens home in O'Neill...Then an old house at Gross was given to the church. Some of the Methodist men 'bached' in the house for a week while they took it apart into sections that could be moved to O'Neill, where it was used as a parsonage. By this time the congregation had outgrown the homes and services were held in the little O'Neill Episcopal church, which was then empty. In 1938 the members undertook to rebuild the old house. Most of them were farmers and times were very hard. A widow in the group who had succeeded in getting welfare for her six small children then loaned the church money for materials to build the basement. Another woman got a refund on her engagement ring to make a loan for the installation of electric lights. When the work was done Rev. Elton Clyde and his family came back to live in the basement and hold services on the upper floor.¹⁴⁰⁰

Establishing a church in the Sandhills required hard work, patience, guile, and personal dedication in order for it to be successful and prosper. Sandhills church members donated their precious commodities of time and money to ensure their proper establishment. Sharing these common sacrifices bound Sandhillers together at local levels in the completion of a goal: creating a place for worship.

The O'Neill Methodists were not the only Sandhills Christians to recycle buildings during the thrifty 1930s. Other Sandhills churches of the Depression had their origins from somewhere, or as something, else. Historian Marianne Beel wrote of the unique origins of the Zion Lutheran Church of Valentine and its congregation: "The congregation was organized Oct. 7, 1934, with the help of Pastor Hugo Fritze of the Calvary congregation north of Valentine...By spring the congregation had increased to 105. A site was purchased at the corner of 3rd and Ray streets in 1935 and the building, constructed in 1902 at Stanton, was moved to Valentine. The foundation was of cement blocks from a Crookston store and

¹⁴⁰⁰ Nellie Snyder Yost, *Before Today: The History of Holt County, Nebraska* (O'Neill, Nebraska: Miles Publishing Co., 1976), 159

the bell and pews came from an old church in Webster, S. D. The building was dedicated Aug. 25, 1940, with Pastor Hugo Fritzi the first resident pastor.”¹⁴⁰¹ The Ainsworth Apostolic Church had very similar beginnings. The Brown County Historical Society wrote of the 1905 congregation’s development and need for a church building during the 1930s: “As the congregation grew and more members were added to the little flock, a church building was needed. When the Apostle Erb visited in November of 1933, he authorized the purchase of land in Norden, Nebraska on which stood an old hotel. This was razed, and with the material and help from the members, friends and neighbors, the new church was built and dedicated on June 17, 1934.”¹⁴⁰² The establishment of the Ringgold Methodist Church in McPherson County followed a similar template; however, residents of two communities were impacted by the church’s creation. Mary Schmidt wrote of the Methodist Church’s arrival in Ringgold:

In the fall of 1937 the Free Methodist Nebraska Conference was held in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Conference appointed a young man, D. V. Smith and his wife, Bernice, to Ringgold. They moved here in October... with a big job ahead of them as there was neither church or parsonage yet at that time. The Nebraska Free Methodist Conference owned a building in Stapleton that was being used as a residence. It was decided to buy land and move that building to Ringgold for a church. Bud and Bertha Danker donated an acre of land and the building was moved on December 14 and 15, 1937, from Lots 5 and 6 in Block 20 in Stapleton (the lots were later sold to Harold Hubbard). The first services (sic) in the church was held on February 4, 1938, with Rev. G. B. Ingram, District Superintendent, in charge. On June 19, 1938, a dedication service was held with A. C. Archar, former District Superintendent preaching to a full house.¹⁴⁰³

From this example it is apparent that church and congregation building took hard work in an era when there was little to spare as most put such efforts into finding or holding jobs to sustain themselves and their families.

¹⁴⁰¹ Beel, Ed., *A Sandhill Century, Book I, The Land*, 329

¹⁴⁰² The Brown County Historical Society, *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska*, 131

¹⁴⁰³ Betty Neal Rodewald Schroeder, *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction* (Callaway, Nebraska: Loup Valley Queen, 1986), 116

Congregations that did not move buildings or reuse their materials took longer in constructing new churches due to financial and material limitations. The Halsey United Church of Christ faced this obstacle during the Depression. Melva Marting wrote of the congregation's efforts to build a new church: "In January of 1939, a building committee was appointed to begin drawing up the plans for the new building and devising the means for paying for it. On May 17, 1940, construction began! The original plan calling for volunteer labor, but with the advent of...World War II, had to be altered...because of wartime and material and labor shortages...on May 31, 1942 the building was dedicated."¹⁴⁰⁴ Some congregations were so small and financially limited during the Depression that construction or repairs were not practical and had to wait until years later to be initiated and completed. Thus, temporary worship locations became commonplace for some. Nellie Snyder Yost wrote of the rudimentary meeting conditions for Lutherans in O'Neill in the late-1930s: "Eighteen people attended the first worship service held in the Court House in October, 1938. From there they moved into the Episcopal church building for a yearly rental of \$100. On January 8, 1941, with Rev. Frickel of Chambers officiating, Christ Lutheran became a legal organization."¹⁴⁰⁵ Congregations that experienced monetary or construction restrictions remained just as united as groups that were less limited as they rallied around their goals or visions for a better future just as their contemporaries rallied around their construction projects. Thus, for Sandhillers, faith remained a cornerstone of Sandhills society during the Depression just as it had during the late-19th century.

During the Depression, individual members of Sandhills' congregations were sometimes charged with contributing funds to church expenses that were non-construction or

¹⁴⁰⁴ The Blaine County History Book Committee, *The History of Blaine County, Nebraska*, 53

¹⁴⁰⁵ Yost, *Before Today*, 167

repair related. In the late-1930s, Episcopalians in Hooker and Grant Counties had to partially contribute funds for the purchase of a car to be used throughout the rural area by Reverend J. N. MacKenzie at the bequest of Nebraska Episcopalian Bishop George Allen Beecher. Beecher wrote Mrs. Marion Huffman of the Dumbell Ranch at Hyannis, Nebraska, on February 15th, 1938, detailing the situation:

Here is your check for \$100.00 toward the District Car for the Mullen field to be used only under the personal supervision of Rev. J. N. MacKenzie, who is now living in the rectory at Mullen. I am certainly delighted and grateful for this prompt action on the part of you and Mrs. Weeks. I am sending to Jim Haney by today's mail a check for \$202.00 to apply on the \$450.00, leaving a balance of \$248.00. You will, of course, know that the \$202.00 is my donation as Bishop toward the purchase of this car. I am also sending to Jim Haney a demand note for the balance of the money advanced by him for the purchase of this car in the sum of \$248.00. I am hoping that we will be able by making a careful canvass of our friends in the hills to pay the balance of this note in the near future. Jim has been mighty generous and I can never forget his kindness and help in this matter. I hope we can make an earnest effort to raise the balance of this note, therefore, in the near future. I am pleased to know that you found our church people and friends of the church and friends of Mr. MacKenzie glad to contribute to this fund. I am sure you and all the rest who are trying to collect money for it, will realize that we will appreciate any donation from five cents to five dollars or any amount that they see fit to give. Every little helps you know, and the more the people give, the more interest they will feel in our efforts to carry on the work of the Church in that section of my great missionary field.¹⁴⁰⁶

Beecher informed Haney in a similar letter that the automobile was to be used by MacKenzie in his missionary efforts to spread the word of God to the people of Sandhills beyond just the community of Mullen, inferring that it would not be utilized for his personal use.¹⁴⁰⁷ By May, the car's debt alleviated somewhat. Beecher wrote to Haney updating him on the parishioners' progress:

The story of the car in figures is as follows: On February 15th you paid in advance the sum of \$450.00 for the purchase of this Chevrolet car. On the same date, February 15, 1938, I received from Mrs. Marion Huffman and Sadie Haney, a check for \$100.00. To this amount I added on the same day, as Bishop, a check for \$102.00, making a total of \$202.00 which I sent you immediately to apply on the \$450.00. This left a balance of \$248.00. On April 19, 1938 I received from the Whitman field, \$25.00 which I immediately sent you on April 19, 1938. This left a balance of \$223.00. Today, May 9, 1938, I have received from Mrs. Marion Huffman, treasurer of the car Fund, a check for \$40.75, which I have deposited and am sending you my check as Bishop in the same amount, which leaves a balance of \$182.25. I am taking it for granted that you have endorsed these payments on the demand note, which

¹⁴⁰⁶ George Allen Beecher to Marion Huffman, February 15, 1938, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 21, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴⁰⁷ George Allen Beecher to Jim Haney, February 17, 1938, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 21, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

I sent you on the 15th of February, 1938, in the sum of \$248.00. I earnestly hope that the delay in payments of the balance will not inconvenience you, but if it does I know you will be perfectly frank to let me know. I would have to borrow the money at the bank with interest, but I will do this any time you find it in the least inconvenient for you to extend the time. I appreciate so much your kindness and generous help in this matter.¹⁴⁰⁸

Beecher also wrote Huffman in early-May 1938 of his gratitude for Sandhillers who were able to donate: "I think it is mighty fine that the people of the hills have responded so generously to the car fund."¹⁴⁰⁹ Parishioners in Mullen, Whitman, and Hyannis contributed when and what they could; however, just as with church construction or repair debts that faced most congregations, the Episcopalian car fund debt was not quickly paid off. Such an example also demonstrated that larger religious entities, such as the Nebraska Episcopal Bishop's Office, were not immune to the financial travails of the Depression as Beecher was ready to take out a loan to pay off the debt if necessary. Nonetheless, Sandhillers once again dug deep into their pockets to help out their churches. Eventually for some Sandhills churches this benevolent source was tapped out.

Whereas many Sandhills congregations relied on funds from their congregations out of a spirit of Hooverian volunteerism and social togetherness to pay off their debts, many others had to eventually accept certain cutbacks or restrictions due to financial and personal limitations. Two areas that were most affected by these challenges were church attendance and minister/pastor retention. The former posed a challenge throughout the Great Plains. Historians W. David Baird and Danney Goble wrote of church attendance issues in Oklahoma: "In Oklahoma between 1926 and 1936, twenty-eight mainline denominations suffered membership loss- Methodists lost 293 churches and 13, 512 members- but the

¹⁴⁰⁸ George Allen Beecher to Jim Haney, May 9, 1938, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 21, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴⁰⁹ George Allen Beecher to Marion Huffman, May 9, 1938, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 21, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

Oklahoma Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal group, increased its number thirty-four times during the same period.”¹⁴¹⁰ Many rural churches across the country struggled to survive due to a lack of a permanent minister. Historian Dixon Wecter wrote of ministerial challenges that plagued the United States: “Financially the Depression put the majority of Protestant churches ‘in the most desperate plight in their history’...Urban ministers’ salaries were pared to the bone, while in rural areas and villages many flocks dispensed with a ‘regular’ preacher.”¹⁴¹¹ The latter became commonplace across the Sandhills as various churches had to deal with ministerial absences at different times due to financial cutbacks, departures for better opportunities elsewhere, and a lack of being able to attract replacements. Congregational size influenced the latter as ministers or church bishops or elders had to decide if God was really calling them to some of the most remote and rural reaches of Nebraska if there was hardly anyone there to preach God’s word to. The First Congregational Church of Taylor faced these challenges in the late-1930s as the church struggled to survive in the latter years of drought and economic depression. In 1937, the Congregational Church had no minister, only eleven members, and was \$250.00 in debt.¹⁴¹² A year later, in late-October 1938, the church hired Shelby J. Sight from Burwell to be their pastor for an annual salary of \$100.00.¹⁴¹³ Average weekly church attendance averaged ten people, which was roughly the membership total from the year before; however, the church debt increased to \$900.00 in large part from the new minister’s salary and home expenses

¹⁴¹⁰ W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 275

¹⁴¹¹ Dixon Wecter, *The Age of the Great Depression 1929-1941* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 212

¹⁴¹² Year Book, Congregational and Christian Churches, Local Church Report, Year Ending December 31, 1937, First Congregational Church Taylor, Loup County, Nebraska, Records 1893-1968, RG 3051.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴¹³ Year Book, Congregational and Christian Churches, Local Church Report, Year Ending December 31, 1938, First Congregational Church Taylor, Loup County, Nebraska, Records 1893-1968, RG 3051.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

(categorized as including building repairs) of \$300.00.¹⁴¹⁴ The church continued to struggle to attract new members and a permanent minister into the next decade. Examples such as this suggest again that the 1930s Sandhills was just as difficult for its residents as it had been on the 1880s frontier.

Other Sandhills churches faced similar problems as ministers came and went in the 1930s. The Kilgore Baptist Church in northern Cherry County dealt with frequent turnover behind the pulpit as ministers left for more attractive positions within and outside of Nebraska. Baptist ministers in Kilgore typically averaged a two-year stint before they sought positions elsewhere. While such a term may be considered long for some congregations, in comparison to other churches this average was rather short. For instance, Reverend T. C. Osborne of the Alliance Presbyterian Church served in his position for almost fifteen years from November 27th, 1927, to April 15th, 1942.¹⁴¹⁵ In comparison, Reverend E. W. Milner led the Kilgore congregation from September 5th, 1929 to August 23rd, 1931, wherein the pulpit remained vacant for four months until late-December when John Barnett took over the ministry.¹⁴¹⁶ Barnett remained in Kilgore until September 1933 when he resigned to accept a church position in Ansley, Nebraska.¹⁴¹⁷ After Barnett left, the position remained open until November 1934 when Reverend Niederhuth assumed charge of the church.¹⁴¹⁸ Niederhuth

¹⁴¹⁴ Year Book, Congregational and Christian Churches, Local Church Report, Year Ending December 31, 1938, First Congregational Church Taylor, Loup County, Nebraska, Records 1893-1968, RG 3051.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴¹⁵ Roll of Pastors, Series I, Church Registers, Volume 2, 1915-1943, Alliance, Nebraska, First Presbyterian Church Records, 1887-1975, MS 0249, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴¹⁶ Official Register- Pastors, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴¹⁷ Official Register- Pastors, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴¹⁸ Official Register- Pastors, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

remained the seemingly prerequisite two years before he likewise resigned to preach in Mead, Nebraska, on January 15th, 1936.¹⁴¹⁹ Niederhuth's successor arrived three months later, in April 1936, and stayed less than two years, resigning on February 1st, 1938, to move to Mason City, Nebraska.¹⁴²⁰ Reverend Raymond Hill followed, only lasting five months before he abandoned the position to Reverend J. Clyde Clark who remained the longest of these individuals, lasting for the next five years before resigning to take another ecclesiastical posting in Bradley, South Dakota, in December 1943.¹⁴²¹ Unlike the Taylor First Congregational Church, membership numbers for the Kilgore Baptist Church remained consistently high for the 1930s, so it is doubtful that these ministers kept resigning due to weak or poor attendance. On May 1st, 1938, the church claimed ninety-seven members just as it had six years earlier on April 30th, 1932.¹⁴²² Membership numbers peaked on May 1st, 1935, with one-hundred twenty-six members and bottomed out two years later with a total of sixty-nine.¹⁴²³ Church records listed ministers' departures as resignations rather than reassignments to new posts by church elders suggesting that income and/or personal subsistence may have played a factor in their decisions to remain or leave.

Ministerial departures and long-term vacancies plagued other Sandhills congregations for similar reasons throughout the era, primarily due to inconsistent salaries. Like Shelby J. Sight in Taylor, R. W. Morton of the Ringgold Methodist Church earned a salary of \$100.00

¹⁴¹⁹ Official Register- Pastors, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴²⁰ Official Register- Pastors, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴²¹ Official Register- Pastors, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴²² Annual Summaries of Membership, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴²³ Annual Summaries of Membership, Kilgore, Nebraska, Baptist Church Records, 1913-1980, MS 4080, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

or more in the early-1930s. Mary Schmidt noted: “In 1934 his yearly salary was \$156.00.”¹⁴²⁴ In comparison to these two individuals, who had somewhat stable salaries, some Sandhills ministers did not receive a cash wage of any kind. The Purdum United Church of Christ Congregational in Blaine County had to offset income shortcomings by feeding their pastor. Mary Jackson Arnold wrote of the dismal situation the Purdum congregation found themselves in: “Financing has at times been difficult, especially in the 1930s when the pastor’s salary was sometimes augmented by garden produce and canned goods. In order to spread the benefits and ease the financial burdens, a group of churches, namely, Dunning, Brewster, Purdum, Dry Valley, and West Union, decided to form a larger parish. This was done under the leadership of the Rev. Edgar Shaw in 1932.”¹⁴²⁵ Times were somewhat better by the late-1930s in the large, northern Sandhills town of Valentine; however, this did not prevent Reverend Rorke of St. John’s Church from migrating from the hills. Bishop George Beecher was left to handle Rorke’s dismayed and saddened church members. Beecher wrote Mrs. Queen Dowden of Valentine on February 26th, 1939, to assure her that the church’s pulpit would not remain vacant for long:

I feel heart-sick over the situation that has developed in Valentine. I did not think Mr. Rorke would leave after my conference with him. In fact I had sent my appointments the day before he had accepted the call to Grand Island over the telephone. I will, of course, carry out the appointments for Valentine and the adjacent missions beginning at Valentine April 30th for the morning service, and at Cody for the evening service. On Monday, May 1st, I go to Bassett, Tuesday to O’Neill and Wednesday to Ewing. I shall try to secure a man for Valentine at the earliest possible moment, but at this writing I have no one definitely in mind. I agree with you and all the people in Valentine that we really want a young married man if we can get him. I will keep you posted from time to time as to what I find it possible to do for the services through the unexpected period of vacancy.¹⁴²⁶

The position remained open a month later when Beecher himself temporarily preached. He wrote R. R. Brosius on March 25th, 1939, to inform him of his brief appearance behind

¹⁴²⁴ Schroeder, Ed., *McPherson County: Facts, Families, Fiction*, 116

¹⁴²⁵ Dorothea Wiese Rogers, Ed., *Pictorial History Of The Sandhills*, 137

¹⁴²⁶ George Allen Beecher to Queen M. Dowden, February 24, 1939, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 22, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

Valentine's pulpit: "I want to make sure that it is understood by all our church people and friends in Valentine that I am planning to hold services in St. John's Church, Valentine on the Third Sunday after Easter, April 30th...I hope the services will be thoroughly advertised and that I may be able to report favorable progress at least in an effort to secure a suitable successor to Rev. Mr. Rorke."¹⁴²⁷

Unlike smaller, poorer churches in the Sandhills, the opening at St. John's in Valentine did not remain vacant for long especially when Beecher offered a significant pay raise to his primary candidate. Beecher wrote Brosius again on May 12th, 1939, outlining the arrival of the new reverend, his qualifications, and Beecher's salary offer:

Rev. and Mrs. John Neal of Trinity Church, Rock Island, Illinois, expect to arrive in Valentine by automobile sometime Saturday afternoon or evening. I doubt whether it would be possible to hold a service on a Sunday under these circumstances for I have only received a message from him a few minutes ago telling me of his plans to look over the field. I have been in correspondence with Rev. Mr. Neal for sometime. He was present at our annual Convocation in North Platte two weeks ago, and everybody seemed to think very highly of him. He went up to Sidney to look that field over, but I do not think he intends to go there...I feel that Rev. Mr. Neal is a very desirable man to have in my field, and I know our people in Valentine and the adjacent missions would like him very much. I have not met Mrs. Neal. They were both born in England, I believe. Mr. Neal is a Cambridge, England man, a fine scholar, a very pleasing personality, and I am convinced he is a consecrated priest. I have offered him a salary of \$1800 a house at Valentine, with his moving expenses. I did this because of my belief in the value of this man if he decides to come. I think more depends upon Mrs. Neal's attitude of mind, and I feel some doubt about her being willing to give (sic) out West. Please get in touch immediately with as many as possible and plan to have a conference with Mr. Neal sometime Sunday...I feel confident that in my pledge of \$1800 and moving expenses, the Valentine group will stand by the Bishop on the basis of what they were planning to pay Mr. Rorke.¹⁴²⁸

The following day Beecher wrote Mrs. Dowden to inform her of Reverend Neal's arrival and to make sure that Neal's living quarters were prepared.¹⁴²⁹ Since Rorke's defection, Beecher and Dowden had considered renting the rectory of St. John's to make extra income for the

¹⁴²⁷ George Allen Beecher to R. R. Brosius, March 25, 1939, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 23, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴²⁸ George Allen Beecher to R. R. Brosius, May 12, 1939, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 23, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴²⁹ George Allen Beecher to Queen Dowden, May 13, 1939, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 23, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

congregation, but with Neal's arrival these plans were put on hold.¹⁴³⁰ Beecher wrote

Dowden on May 13, 1939, stressing the rectory situation:

...I recommend that we postpone the rental of the rectory for a few weeks yet. I realize how much in need we are of the money for the necessary repairs on the rectory furnace. I want to be a partner with all of our good church people and friends of the church in Valentine in all these matters. You can see that if we are successful in getting a married priest how necessary it will be for him to live in the rectory. It may be we will lose this one opportunity to rent the rectory by the postponement of the time it will be available, but I feel we should stress every nerve to secure a resident priest...It has been my experience in renting church property that the cost of the rent does not usually amount to more than the necessary repairs. Of course a matter of getting a new furnace would be more than rent. I will try to help about the furnace too...¹⁴³¹

Beecher did not want to lose another Episcopalian priest in Valentine due to inadequate heating or salary and was willing to pay almost anything to ensure that this did not happen. Undoubtedly his church members questioned the high salary they would have to contribute to the man from Cambridge which was almost twenty times higher than what Sight, a local Sandhiller, received from his Taylor congregation. Nonetheless, the quest for pastors also served as a unifying rallying cry for Sandhills congregations to come together especially when, like St. John's Church, members had to find ways to pay their salary. Sandhills church's which did not have outside help or, once again, whose church members were broke, had to find another way to hear the word of God in lieu of a permanent pastor. Many chose the next best option: guest/visiting pastors.

During the Depression, Sandhills Christians throughout the region periodically attended services at their churches that were led by guest or visiting pastors when it took longer than expected to procure a permanent church leader. Some also listened to guest speakers who were invited by whole Sandhills communities to share their

¹⁴³⁰ George Allen Beecher to Queen Dowden, May 13, 1939, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 23, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴³¹ George Allen Beecher to Queen Dowden, May 13, 1939, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 23, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

evangelical/missionary experiences, thus leading to further fellowship amongst Sandhillers. Guest pastors could also appear before congregations even if they were not absent a permanent minister as these outsiders were welcomed to further enlighten Sandhillers about God's word through these other spiritual vessels. Once again, such occasions were excuses for social unity and interactions, which in times of environmental strife were a welcome respite for Sandhills agriculturalists from the dusty and mundane drudgery of everyday life. Guest pastors spoke to Sandhills congregations in the days immediately following the Great Crash. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of the appearance of a Reverend Stark in Halsey on Sunday, October 27th, 1929: "The people of Halsey were glad to have the privilege of listening to a sermon at the Congregational church last Sunday evening by Rev. Stark of Minneapolis. Rev. Stark is here visiting his daughter and family, Supervisor and Mrs. Nelson."¹⁴³² Not all other guest speakers had families they were visiting as excuses for their sojourn into the hills. Others came to dedicate new church structures. The August 18th, 1932, issue of the *Rock County Leader*, described the visiting pastors who came to speak at the dedication of the aforementioned Pine Creek Holiness Camp tabernacle: "Rev. Ray Hollenback of Lowell, Mass., and Rev. Paul Berg of Norfolk, Nebr., are delivering the messages each day and they are more than meeting the expectations of the people. The messages in song are also bringing results. The song services are in charge of Miss Clara Christensen of Moorehead, Minn., with Mrs. Blanche Bloedorn of Norfolk as pianist."¹⁴³³

During the Depression many churches and their communities also did not miss opportunities to host missionaries who told of their adventures crusading for Christ in lands

¹⁴³² *Blaine County Booster*, October 31, 1929, 1

¹⁴³³ *Rock County Leader*, August 18, 1932, 1

far from the hills. One such individual was Africa missionary William C. Bell. The *Blaine County Booster* discussed Bell's appearances in Purdum and Seneca in late-September 1937:

Sunday evening some of Thedford and vicinity drove over to Seneca, where they heard a splendid address on Africa, delivered by Rev. William C. Bell. Mr. Bell as was announced in this paper last week was one of the keynote speakers at the Loup Valley Association meeting held at Purdum, Monday and Tuesday of this week. Due to his extensive travels he is a most interesting speaker and one of the Christian educators of the day. Europe has changed the face of Africa, but it takes Christ to change the face of the African,' he said. He was the first graduate agriculturalist ever sent into the foreign field, going to Lobito West Africa from Cornell University in 1897. In listening to him Sunday evening, we learned he was well fitted to interpret Africans to Americans and to tell the thrilling story of an emerging Africa. Through the years it has been his lot to do pioneer work, opening up new fields, encouraging infant schools and churches, developing leadership, so that his stories of the life, customs, ambitions and potentialities of the African people are based on rich experiences and sound psychology.¹⁴³⁴

Through missionary visits Sandhillers were also informed of the deteriorating conditions in the totalitarian states of Europe. Father Justin, who was actually newly assigned to the St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Broken Bow but until recently had been doing Christian work in Russia, spoke to citizens of Custer County in mid-November 1932 on that country's deplorable hardships.¹⁴³⁵ The *Custer County Chief* reported on the highlights of his message: "Father Justin painted a doleful picture of the conditions in Russia. Individual rights have been swept away and the people and the industrial activities are absolutely controlled by the government. The Russian people must work at whatever occupation they are assigned to...He stated that the farm situation was pitiful. Each farmer is given one acre of ground for his own use and the balance of the property is controlled by the government. The people have no hope beyond what food, clothing and shelter the government can and will provide."¹⁴³⁶ Seven years later, the people of Morrill County were also similarly informed of what was happening in Hitler's Germany by Mormon missionary Elder Myron Seamons.¹⁴³⁷

¹⁴³⁴ *Blaine County Booster*, September 23, 1937, 1

¹⁴³⁵ *Custer County Chief*, November 17, 1932, 1

¹⁴³⁶ *Custer County Chief*, November 17, 1932, 1

¹⁴³⁷ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, October 12, 1939, 1

The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported on Seamons' intended message in mid-October 1939: "Elder Myron I. Seamons...who recently returned from Germany along with approximately 600 fellow missionaries to finish their labors in the United States because of war conditions which arose in Europe will address the general public tomorrow night, October 13th, at 7:00 p. m....He will speak on conditions in Germany as well as tell of the general habits and customs of the German people."¹⁴³⁸ By opening themselves to such informative talks, Sandhillers demonstrated a willingness to be informed and not cut off or isolated from larger issues related to United States foreign policy concerns.

Guest pastors continued to appear in the Sandhills as the Depression wound down and the United States prepared for entry into World War II. A Salem, Oregon, minister preached at the Congregational churches in Hyannis and Ashby on Sunday, August 17th, 1941.¹⁴³⁹ In the late-summer of 1941, Sandhillers sought reassurance to calm their fervent concern over a world gone mad. Many visiting pastors spoke to these concerns and what God's role was during these troubled times. Three such individuals traveled to Halsey and Thedford in early-September 1941. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of their upcoming visit and message:

Rev. Dr. John Phillips, Omaha; Rev. W. C. Rundin, Wahoo; and E. Merle Adams, Lincoln, will be here September 8-9-10. The plans now are that they will hold a joint meeting for Parish officers at Halsey, Sept. 9 and a meeting at Thedford, Sept. 10 all in the evening of each date. These men are well known over the state and all should make it a point to hear them. The church is the institution with a great opportunity at the present time. The world is in turmoil, and we do not know what the outcome is to be, or what will be the cure for the ills of our times. Democracy, the outgrowth of Christian principles, is on trial. What forces can save these traditions of a free life and equal opportunity for all men is the question of the hour. The teachings of Jesus about good will and generosity have been ignored. The world suffers for it today. Selfishness and narrow nationalism are taking their toll among the nations. The church is the one national and international organization to

¹⁴³⁸ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, October 12, 1939, 1

¹⁴³⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, August 20, 1941, 1

call men to the way of life set forth by the world's greatest benefactor. The Gospel of Jesus is the power of salvation for a needy world.¹⁴⁴⁰

By listening to guest/visiting pastors, Sandhills Christians received the spiritual sustenance they craved when they lacked their own pastors. Those who were members of congregations whose pulpits were full attended such presentations in order to supplement the messages of their own ministers. Attending these sermons and community presentations provided opportunities for social interaction amongst Sandhillers and to feel relief from crime, domestic violence, and, later, impending war. On the southern plains church functions likewise were a source of social unity. Historian Tash Smith wrote of this important aspect of Oklahoma religious society: "The importance of camp meetings as communal events extended throughout many of Oklahoma's Indian communities. Simon Atohka, a full-blood Choctaw and deacon in the Indian Mission's Salem church, stated that his church originally had a one-room building, but as the crowds grew, the congregation built more facilities, such as corrals for horses as well as bathrooms and kitchens for families. In terms of social interaction, young men sent to keep an eye on the horses in the corrals, Atohka described, courted women free from adult interference."¹⁴⁴¹ Thus, socialization through church groups, no matter what their specific function, was a vital component of a congregation's survival and success during the difficult period of environmental and economic calamity, no matter where one's church was located on the Great Plains. During the tumultuous days of the Depression, Sandhills Christians found another way to socialize and come together in the face of the aforementioned regional and national challenges and quite literally became immersed in the word of the Lord: revivals.

¹⁴⁴⁰ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 3, 1941, 1

¹⁴⁴¹ Tash Smith, *Capture These Indians For The Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 166

Sandhills Christians attended revivals throughout the Depression as they searched together for answers to their environmental and economic problems. Many believed that if their spirits were renewed their personal plights would be erased. The chance at a fresh start made attending such meetings imperative. Such attitudes were commonplace throughout the Great Plains and the United States during this period as people sought a new relationship with Christ. Revivals occurred in every corner of the country during the Great Depression and attracted significant crowds. It was no different in the Nebraska Sandhills. As previously stated, such gatherings provided opportunities to stabilize Sandhills society as people mingled and discussed their faith, common interests, and shared environmental problems. Revivals also allowed Sandhillers to participate in services instead of just listening to stories of faraway peoples and theological arguments as many were born again or converted in baptismal ceremonies. One of the early revivals occurred in Blaine County. The *Blaine County Booster* described the meeting's message and function in late-August 1931: "The tent meeting which is being conducted by the White evangelistic party is still going strong. The Evangelist says the old time gospel is winning and weaning. He thinks people will either get mad at the preacher or get right with God. These have been great services not only because Christians have been blessed, sinners saved, believers baptized in the Holy Ghost, but because of the Christian fellowship of all true Christians. Services each evening this week at 7:45. Christians are known by their fruits."¹⁴⁴²

During the Hoover years revival meetings appealed to many Sandhillers who were wearied of vice. Many were particularly annoyed with bootleggers, their illicit activities, and the sins of drink (i.e. domestic violence) that accompanied their influence. In the August

¹⁴⁴² *Blaine County Booster*, August 13, 1931, 1

17th, 1932, issue of the *Grant County Tribune* a notice for a revival at the Whitman Methodist Church four days later was placed on the same page as an editorial against ending prohibition, which read as follows:

‘Beer and Prosperity’ stickers are appearing on the automobile windshields. Both sound mighty desirable. But the implications that they are related is both false and dangerous. It has become a favorite argument of the wets, this idea that restoring beer would bring back prosperity, but the experience both of our country and other nations indicates that it is as silly an argument as ever was brought forward. Business went bad and came back again several times before the advent of prohibitionists. There have been hard times in England, with the pubs wide open, much longer than there have been in America. Germany, where the beer is reputedly the best, is where the depression is allegedly worst. And France, where beer and wine are easier to obtain than decent drinking water, is beginning to be troubled as sorely as these United States.¹⁴⁴³

In Thomas County nearly a year earlier, Thedford Congregational Church members, Mrs. George Osborn, Mrs. P. T. Lewellen, and T. P. Steen had similar viewpoints as they led a service in which they voiced their support for temperance not only in the United States, but across the globe.¹⁴⁴⁴ Beyond alcohol, Sandhills congregations and their panhandle neighbors abhorred the vice of gambling due the wastefulness it fostered in a time of want. The *Garden County News* reported on a ruling of the Lodgepole Ministerial Association in late-October 1938, criticizing a proposed amendment to the Nebraska State Constitution allowing for slot machines that:

The Lodgepole Ministerial association passed the following resolution at a recent meeting of Panhandle ministers: ‘The Lodgepole Ministerial association records its agreement with many other groups of public spirited people in opposition to the amendment to the State Constitution to legalize slot machines as a source of revenue for old age assistance and public school needs. The measure being submitted is a subterfuge because it places the emphasis on old age pensions whereas in reality, the reason for its passage is the desire on the part of some gambling syndicate to create a monopoly on such gambling devices...There is hardly any device that takes so much and returns so little as the slot machine. It is a mechanical bandit, stealing nickles (sic) from the children and dollars from the wage earners. This is a shocking program. Its passage will be a smear on the White Spot.’¹⁴⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴³ *Grant County Tribune*, August 17, 1932, 4

¹⁴⁴⁴ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 4, 1931, 1

¹⁴⁴⁵ *Garden County News*, October 27, 1938, 1

Due to these concerns over rampant crime and vice and its further implementation, Sandhills Christians on a basic, fundamental level were very open to allowing and participating in revival movements.

Revival services in the Sandhills attracted and were led by individuals from all throughout the United States. The *Garden County News* wrote of the revival held at the Pilgrim Holiness Church in early-October 1933: “A series of revival meeting will be held at the Pilgrim Holiness church starting today. Rev. John A. Butler and wife, prominent Evangelists from Kingswood, Ky., will have charge of the services and all are cordially invited to come out and listen to the gospel preached by these people. Splendid song services are assured at all of the meetings and good preaching will be heard.”¹⁴⁴⁶ In late-January 1934, radio personality Rev. R. R. Brown spoke at the Gospel Crusade in O’Neill, which attracted people from various Nebraska towns including the Sandhills communities of Bassett and Ainsworth.¹⁴⁴⁷ Later in the decade, the Pilgrim Holiness Church of Garden County again played host to eastern speakers as Rev. and Mrs. V. G. Story of North Carolina were invited to preach at the church on Sunday, October 16th, 1938.¹⁴⁴⁸ At roughly the same time that Reverend and Mrs. Story were to preach in Garden County, Reverend Don Throne was spreading God’s message in Valentine. *The Valentine Republican* wrote of Throne’s impending revival in late-October 1938: “Evangelist Don Throne of Lincoln, assisted by his wife, will begin a revival meeting Sunday...at the Valentine Gospel Tabernacle and continue for at least two weeks. Rev. Throne is an able minister of God’s word and comes to us highly recommended. He preaches the old time gospel salvation for the soul healing for the

¹⁴⁴⁶ *Garden County News*, October 5, 1933, 1

¹⁴⁴⁷ *Holt County Independent*, January 26, 1934, 1

¹⁴⁴⁸ *Garden County News*, October 6, 1938, 1

body, the second coming of the Lord and the baptism in the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁴⁹ By being exposed to these non-Sandhills individuals, Sandhills Christians were reminded that they were part of a larger national community and that their views were not that dissimilar even though they lived miles apart. In this regard, Sandhills society was reinforced as part of a larger American society.

Revivals were held throughout the hills during the mid-1930s, with or without prominent guest evangelists. In 1935, revivals were conducted at the Methodist and Assembly of God churches in Bassett and the Bethel Church in Thedford.¹⁴⁵⁰ Less than a year later in Seneca, a revival was held to appeal directly to Sandhillers' who worked in the region's cattle industry. The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* wrote of this revival held in late-September 1936:

Good interest and large crowds attended the revival services as they continue each night except Monday at the Bible Standard Church in Seneca with Rev. and Mrs. Willard S. Hall, in charge. A good portion of each service is taken up with the singing of lively choruses, and with special gospel solos, duets, Negro spirituals and instrumental selections by the young evangelists... Due to the fine attendance and appreciation of last week's special Cowboy night, another such service is being planned for this Friday night with more cowboy songs featured, and the sermon subject, 'Where are the Broncs?' or 'A Long-legged Puncher Gets Converted.'¹⁴⁵¹

The revival at Seneca was also significant for exposing Sandhillers to other types of cultural expression, such as African-American spirituals. There does not appear to have been any type of racial reaction to this music, nor to the presence of an African-American singer at the Bethel revival in Thedford the previous year, suggesting that Sandhills religious groups played a significant role in promoting tolerance in the region.¹⁴⁵²

¹⁴⁴⁹ *The Valentine Republican*, October 21, 1938, 1

¹⁴⁵⁰ *Rock County Leader*, February 28, 1935, 1; *Rock County Leader*, May 23, 1935, 1; *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 13, 1935, 1

¹⁴⁵¹ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 23, 1936, 4

¹⁴⁵² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, November 13, 1935, 1

By the end of the decade, revival religious services were still commonly practiced in the Sandhills. Evangelical ministers continued to reiterate to their listeners the horrors of sin and vice in their sermons. Reverend Creech held a four day revival at the Arthur Baptist Church in early-April 1937, in which his five sermon titles were: “Be sure your sin will find you out,” “Weighed and Wanting,” “Halting Between Two Opinions,” “The Accessibility of God,” and “Ephraim is Joined to His Idols let him Alone.”¹⁴⁵³ The Bethel Church in Thedford also remained a revival staple as the 1930s came to a close and the new decade dawned. As its contemporaries had done in previous years, the church attracted evangelists from near and far to speak in the Sandhills. In mid-April 1939, Reverend Klinsky of Ansley, Nebraska, was the guest revival leader whereas a year and a half later in late-December 1940, Reverend and Mrs. Earnest Phillips of Craig, Colorado, led the services.¹⁴⁵⁴ Revivals were important to Sandhills spirituality during the Depression as they provided Sandhillers a means to worship without being a member of a congregation and congregations who hosted such revivals also got some much needed attention and support from their peers. Beyond revivals, Sandhills Christians solidified their communal bonds through more regular and local channels: traditional church groups and functions.

In the 1930s, participation in regular weekly church services and functions associated with church groups further strengthened the bonds between Sandhills Christians. Annual events such as Christmas programs usually drew large numbers at churches as people came to support their family participants. These programs were advertised in local newspapers days in advance so church members would have no excuse for forgetting when they were and

¹⁴⁵³ *The Arthur Enterprise*, April 8, 1937, 4

¹⁴⁵⁴ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 12, 1939, 1; *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, December 25, 1940, 1

not attending. For instance, the *Garden County News* informed its readers that on Christmas Eve 1935 the Oshkosh Methodist Church would be performing the Christmas Cantata, “Holy Night,” by E. L. Ashford, the Lutheran Church’s Christmas Pageant was entitled, “In Old Judea,” and St. Elizabeth Catholic Church would be holding its traditional midnight mass.¹⁴⁵⁵ Spiritual functions, such as baptisms, could turn into large social gatherings dependent upon how many people were being welcomed into the church. *The Rushville Recorder* described a large baptism in the Rushville Methodist Episcopal Church in mid-February 1930 that provided a substantial chance for community/social bonding: “Last Sunday was a memorable day for the M. E. Church in Rushville when eleven were admitted to the Church either by baptism or letter. The community that grows spiritually will grow in other directions. Let the good work continue.”¹⁴⁵⁶ One of the other ways that Sandhills congregations grew was through their young people.

Youth embedded themselves into the spiritual foundation of their churches through participation in group/club functions with their peers. These groups fostered further opportunities for socialization but also allowed Sandhills young people a chance to discuss larger issues of the day and what God’s role and theirs should be in resolving said issues.

The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of a Christian youth conference held in Dunning in mid-November 1932:

Under ideal weather conditions Sunday afternoon, November 13, cars began arriving at Dunning Church with loads of young people for the District Young People Conference. The registration record showed 66 present- Seneca 8, Thedford 15, Halsey 8, Purdum 6, West Union 3, Brewster 2, 20 Mile Schoolhouse 2, Dunning 22. The conference theme, ‘Forward Together, Youth Seeks the Truth about the Economic Problem In Its Relation to Christian Living,’ was taken up under two headings, ‘Evidences of the Economic Problem’ was dealt with first...The second part of the afternoon session centered thought on ‘Keeping and Even Keel in our Economic Ship’ and concluded with a discussion

¹⁴⁵⁵ *Garden County News*, December 19, 1935, 1

¹⁴⁵⁶ *The Rushville Recorder*, February 13, 1930, 1

on ‘Whither Bound? What are our goals in economic living?’ It fell the lot of the local pastor Mr. Shaw to lead in the forums, owing to the announced leader, the Rev. Earnest Larsen of Bingham having to be absent due to a funeral.¹⁴⁵⁷

Youth groups met regularly at the local levels and discussed scripture as well as how to apply spiritual matters to one’s daily life. In mid-July 1933, Christ’s Ambassadors of Halsey, a youth group of the Halsey Full Gospel Church deliberated on a subject that was not unfamiliar to Sandhillers: faith.¹⁴⁵⁸ Adult groups were also common in Sandhills congregations. Many tried to discuss secular and Christian topics simultaneously just as the youth conference at Dunning had. One such group was the Oshkosh Methodist Church Open Forum. The *Garden County News* wrote of its first meeting in late-October 1935: “Beginning with Sunday evening, October 27th, there will be a series of special speaking programs presented at the Methodist church on Sunday evenings. Each evening service will be marked with one of these talks, the pastor occupying the pulpit in the mornings each Sunday as usual. The purpose of this arrangement is to create broader interest in matters of the community pertaining to both church and business or professional people. While the talks will not always be along church matters entirely, or of laymen viewpoints entirely, but the subjects of each talk will be pretty much as the speaker finds the situation.”¹⁴⁵⁹ Through various church groups and special services Sandhills society further strengthened itself against the larger issues of crime, race, and gender struggles which threatened to destabilize society.

Sandhills churches were also beneficial to Sandhills society in that sermons served as a critique of larger social issues. Church leaders and members regularly discussed their views on vice and economic problems in sermons or at other church gatherings. Such

¹⁴⁵⁷ *Blaine County Booster*, November 17, 1932, 4

¹⁴⁵⁸ *Blaine County Booster*, July 13, 1933, 4

¹⁴⁵⁹ *Garden County News*, September 26, 1935, 1

interactions were therapeutic in a time of great stress and uncertainty. Wecter wrote of the purpose of these deliberations: “Social and economic themes waxed in popularity as sermon topics, and prayer meetings often turned into discussion groups for canvassing ‘problems in human relationships.’”¹⁴⁶⁰ Beyond examining domestic issues, some Sandhills clergy took the opportunity to use their pulpits as a voice box to sound off on other topics such as foreign policy and the role of earthly governments. One such individual was Berten E. Crane of the Thedford Congregational Church. Crane had served as pastor of the First Congregational Church in Thedford since June 1st, 1934, and between December 30th, 1934 and April 12th, 1936, gained twenty-seven new members for the congregation.¹⁴⁶¹ Impressed with Crane’s sermon on worldly governments and threats to peace, the *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* reprinted part of his Sunday, September 26th, 1937, sermon which stated:

God is love. Man must put love first, if he is to live and grow and become what he has a right to be and what is best for him to become. Religion, if it be the religion of truth has the right to first place in a man’s life. No government nor any other agency has the right to deny this to any man. No government, Soviet, Nazi, Fascist nor Democracy itself has any right to put itself in God’s place. No government or ruler has the right to take its place on God’s throne. No government has the right to demand of any citizen or subject to place their beliefs to become first in their lives...Even since the signing of peace, powers have seen fit to try and bring war. The American Legion has had a great part in stepping in and breaking it up...We all know The Legion is strong against the promotion of war and consider it a futile way to settle difficulties.¹⁴⁶²

Such commentary appealed to many Sandhillers who had qualms about future foreign entanglements and worried about the size of and role of their own Federal Government. Thus, sermon topics served to unite Sandhillers in their views on national and regional matters.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Wecter, *The Age of the Great Depression 1929-1941*, 211

¹⁴⁶¹ Register, 1899-1950, Series I, Volume I, Records 1899-1976, Thedford, Nebraska, First Congregational United Church of Christ Church Records, MS0300, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴⁶² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 29, 1937, 1

The Great Depression was just as harsh on Sandhills religious entities as it was agriculturalists or businesses. Not all churches or their affiliated organizations survived the difficult era. The Ainsworth Apostolic Church struggled to keep its doors open and pews filled during the Depression and finally had to succumb to defeat. The Brown County Historical Society wrote of the church's closing: "In the early 1940's due to hard times from the depression and drought, Priest Huebscher and members moved away, and the church building was sold. The Hesse and Morlang families were transferred to scattered members, being served occasionally by brothers from Chicago and St. Louis districts."¹⁴⁶³ By 1942, the Taylor First Congregational Church again found itself without a pastor and was no longer holding services.¹⁴⁶⁴ The situation had improved somewhat five years later as the church again had a pastor from neighboring Burwell and boasted a twenty-five person membership.¹⁴⁶⁵ The drain of men and resources caused by World War II undoubtedly had a significant impact on the sustainability of these already fledgling congregations. Despite the stress on Sandhills congregations that the Depression, and subsequently, World War II caused, religious entities and their followers largely survived the perils of the era due to mutual cooperation and a common sense of personal determination. An example of this occurred in Oshkosh. The *Garden County News* reported of the Oshkosh Methodist Church's good fortune in early-September 1936: "The pastor of the First Methodist church, the Rev. W. B. Pardun, reports that the conference year of 1935-1936 is closing with most gratifying results. Despite the continued drouth, and the genearl (sic) adverse conditions

¹⁴⁶³ The Brown County Historical Society, *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska*, 131

¹⁴⁶⁴ Year Book, Congregational and Christian Churches, Local Church Report, Year Ending December 31, 1942, First Congregational Church Taylor, Loup County, Nebraska, Records 1893-1968, RG 3051.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

¹⁴⁶⁵ Year Book, Congregational and Christian Churches, Local Church Report, Year Ending December 31, 1947, First Congregational Church Taylor, Loup County, Nebraska, Records 1893-1968, RG 3051.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

growing out of it, this church will be able to report its budget met, not only, but definite local improvements in church properties amounting to approximately \$215.00. The church has been able also to secure new Hymnals and other essential accessories at a cost of \$90.00 and to make the final payment on its indebtedness. It will face the new year free of all incumbrance (sic). The members and friends of the church will rejoice in these achievements which have been made possible through their united loyalties.”¹⁴⁶⁶ Such victories were sources of pride for individuals and congregations and once again served to unite individuals and groups in Sandhills society during a troubled time. An editorial from the *Grant County Tribune* in early-July 1936 summed up Sandhillers feelings about the significance of religion in their lives: “Regardless of what you might hear don’t forget that religion is the real force in the world that leads to better men and women. The organized churches are the real servants of mankind in promoting and encouraging high ideals in everyday life. Religion is vital to many people who are called ‘narrow-minded’ and ‘straight-laced’ by their ‘liberal’ fellow-citizens.”¹⁴⁶⁷ Such beliefs unified Sandhills society when issues such as crime, race, and gender problems threatened to drive a wedge between Sandhillers. Another significant way that Sandhillers came together to strengthen community bonds a larger sense was at secular social gatherings and sporting events.

Sandhills Society and Socialization: Sports, Songs, and Show as a Remedy for Societal Distress

Religion was not the only source of social unity for Sandhillers during the Great Depression. Countless sporting events, concerts, dances, picnics, rodeos, county fairs, and contests were held, attended, and participated in by Sandhills residents as a means to distract

¹⁴⁶⁶ *Garden County News*, September 3, 1936, 1

¹⁴⁶⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, July 1, 1936, 1

themselves from their financial and/or agricultural difficulties and to commiserate with their peers. These activities strengthened Sandhills society as they unified the region's people through participation in common and shared activities, some of which reinforced pride in community spirit or Sandhills culture. Sandhillers participated or observed high school or league sporting events in which individual Sandhills community teams or individuals squared off for regional bragging rights. Such encounters served, like religion, to at least temporarily alleviate personal stresses and depressions. Dances, picnics, rodeos, music contests, performances, and movies also provided other opportunities for friendly competition or socialization. In an era before television and limited radio in the hills, group entertainment served as a bed rock of the Sandhills social foundation. Communities held several successful events which attracted large local crowds as the Sandhills rough, but improving, road situation encouraged people to remain locally instead of travelling far as did their ability or inability to afford passenger train fare. As with religion, community activities did not deter crime, racial attitudes, or gender struggles; however, they aided in preventing these divisive issues from consuming Sandhillers with fear or anger by giving them something else to focus their attention on and in this regard stabilized a society that was at times very turbulent. Annual events such as county fairs or rodeos provided structure for and became annual pillars of Sandhills society. Without group events such as these as outlets of stress and tension, Sandhills life would have been harsher and even more stratified. Such patterns were found elsewhere in the United States and on the Great Plains.

Prior to the Great Depression in the 1920s, American society became enamored with sports and its seemingly larger than life participants. Baseball, college football, and boxing became national pastimes as Americans gave their heroes their undivided attention and

support in their heroic contests. Gerald D. Nash wrote of 1920s America's infatuation with sport: "Cultural life in the 1920s was also affected by the emphasis on organization. A new age of mass culture emerged. This was the heyday of organized spectator sports, particularly major league baseball and prize fighting. Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey were better known to many Americans than were leading businessmen or politicians."¹⁴⁶⁸ In the 1930s, the interest in sports did not wane as the Depression deepened. Rural Sandhillers were no different as they participated in sports as a means of recreation and to promote social interaction and cohesion. High school football and basketball as well as summer baseball leagues drew the largest crowds. Miniature golf, tossing horse shoes, and boxing were also popular. In late-November 1930, gun enthusiasts in Holt County even participated in a turkey shoot near Inman as a means of socializing.¹⁴⁶⁹ For Sandhillers, the participation in and following of high school team sports was as locally significant as professional or major collegiate sports were in more populated areas of the United States as mostly friendly community rivalries developed and successful high school athletic programs emerged for local fans to take pride in and support. Sandhillers throughout the region consistently supported their high school teams during the school year as such events also offered opportunities for socialization and breaks from personal and agricultural uncertainty just as participation in religious services did. The difference between religion and sport was that the latter offered its participants the sanctioned opportunity to take their personal frustrations about the stagnant economy and drought out on their opponents. Sports also offered one the chance to overcome obvious and apparent tangible obstacles instead of unforeseen ones (such

¹⁴⁶⁸ Gerald D. Nash, *The Crucial Era: The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1992), 13

¹⁴⁶⁹ *Holt County Independent*, November 14, 1930, 1

as drought) which they could not control. One such sport that Sandhillers immersed themselves in was high school football.

Football represented the ultimate contest of wills for Sandhills residents. High schools throughout the region, from Mullen to Alliance to North Platte to Ainsworth, all participated in the sport. Throughout the course of the 1930s, powerhouse programs developed a knack for winning hard fought games and in so doing developed reputations for perseverance and tenacity, two traits that were important to Depression-era Sandhillers. One such team from the northeastern Sandhills was the O’Neill High School “Fighting Irish.” Throughout the 1930s, O’Neill’s football team won consistently and by the end of the decade was nearly untouchable. The dynasty started slowly in the early 1930s as games were close. Late in the 1931 season O’Neill High was only able to manage a 13-13 tie with Lynch High School; however, less than a year later in late-September 1932 the team was able to rebound from a tough 13-0 loss to Stuart by solidly defeating Atkinson 26-0.¹⁴⁷⁰ Less than a month later, the football program was still stellar as the *Holt County Independent* reported: “Coach Elmer Stolte’s ‘Fighting Irish’ extended their winning streak two more games within a week when they won a bang up contest from Butte Friday afternoon 18 to 12 and by smothering the Bassett eleven Wednesday under the score of 27-0. In the four regular scheduled games played, O’Neill has amassed a total of 109 points...”¹⁴⁷¹ O’Neill continued its success for the remainder of the decade defeating rival Bassett again in 1936 and 1938, 6-0 both times.¹⁴⁷² In 1938, the Irish also trounced Burwell 19-0 as they reaffirmed their status as one

¹⁴⁷⁰ *Holt County Independent*, November 27, 1931, 1; *Holt County Independent*, September 30, 1932, 1

¹⁴⁷¹ *Holt County Independent*, October 14, 1932, 1

¹⁴⁷² *Holt County Independent*, October 16, 1936, 1; *Holt County Independent*, October 7, 1938, 1

of the northeastern Sandhills preeminent football programs.¹⁴⁷³ By the 1940 season, O'Neill High had lost some of its luster as it was defeated 31-0 by Bassett in a game where O'Neill's special teams surrendered a blocked punt.¹⁴⁷⁴ Despite the team's struggles in the years immediately prior to World War II, Holt County residents still took pride in their efforts and enjoyed attending such grudge matches. Attitudes were similar in the southwestern hills concerning the Oshkosh football squad. Like O'Neill, Oshkosh's dominance in the 1930s began slowly; however, by the late-1930s they were a force to be reckoned with. In late-October 1937, Dalton fought them to a 13-13 draw; however, less than a month later the Eagles defeated a highly favored Grant High School team from Perkins County, 27-7, in chilly western Nebraska conditions.¹⁴⁷⁵ One year later, Oshkosh's football team set a record as it concluded a perfect undefeated season in which it defeated rivals Chappell, 6-0, and Ogallala, 34-0.¹⁴⁷⁶ Records such as this were cause for celebration and thus further unified Sandhillers in their social circles.

Besides football, Sandhillers enjoyed watching and participating in basketball. As with football, many people attended high school basketball games to support their community's youth and socialize with their peers in the winter months. In the 1930s, many basketball scores were not the high scoring affairs of the modern-day National Basketball Association; however, this did not make them any less enjoyable for Sandhills spectators to watch when they instead could be watching the thistles blow across parched and frozen fields and pastures. In early-March 1932, Hyannis defeated a Sidney high school team, 17-12, and Bayard High School, 18-14, in a high school tournament in Alliance before losing in the

¹⁴⁷³ *Holt County Independent*, October 7, 1938, 1

¹⁴⁷⁴ *Holt County Independent*, October 11, 1940, 1

¹⁴⁷⁵ *Garden County News*, October 28, 1937, 1; *Garden County News*, November 25, 1937, 1

¹⁴⁷⁶ *Garden County News*, December 1, 1938, 1

championship game, 12-9.¹⁴⁷⁷ A year later, Oshkosh High School struggled to score in double figures as they were crushed by Lodgepole, 44-10, in a contest in which the local newspaper described their effort as “the ‘spirit’ was still there but the fire had died out.”¹⁴⁷⁸ In early-March 1942, the O’Neill Eagles (no longer the “Fighting Irish”) defeated the Ainsworth Bulldogs with a very football-like score of 27-18 in what would be the modern-day equivalent of the Class B District basketball tournament.¹⁴⁷⁹ The Eagles eventually lost the following week to Sidney in the State tournament, 21-13.¹⁴⁸⁰

While high school games served to bring together Sandhills communities, town team (adult leagues consisting of players ages eighteen and older) basketball games provided Sandhillers the opportunity to share experiences and socialize with non-Sandhillers as towns on the periphery of the hills played their non-Sandhills contemporaries in Nebraska or from neighboring states. Some town team games even attracted semi-pro teams from larger cities. The *Grant County Tribune* reported on one such canceled game that was a missed opportunity for larger social and cultural interaction between Sandhillers and outsiders: “Several from Whitman motored to Mullen last Wednesday evening to witness the basketball game between the Mullen town team and the Chicago negroes, but the negroes broke their car and were unable to get there, but they had a pick up game with a score of 20 to 19 in favor of the pickup.”¹⁴⁸¹ This example is also significant for demonstrating that Sandhillers, despite newspapers of the early-1930s bragging of the region’s “whiteness,” could find tolerance of other races through sports. In late-March 1938, the Rushville Merchants

¹⁴⁷⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, March 9, 1932, 1

¹⁴⁷⁸ *Garden County News*, February 2, 1933, 1

¹⁴⁷⁹ *Holt County Independent*, March 13, 1942, 1

¹⁴⁸⁰ *Holt County Independent*, March 20, 1942, 1

¹⁴⁸¹ *Grant County Tribune*, January 24, 1934, 4

basketball team interacted with more regional non-Sandhillers as it won a basketball tournament in Alliance that featured teams from Hemingford, Alliance, Scottsbluff, and as far away as Haxtun, Colorado.¹⁴⁸² Town team basketball tournaments also provided Sandhillers a chance to interact with non-Sandhills residents that quietly lived and worked amongst them toiling away for Roosevelt's New Deal. Town teams regularly played teams from the CCC camps thus providing opportunities for Sandhillers to socialize with young men from other states or from eastern Nebraska. Many CCC teams were quite competitive and regularly won local contests and tournaments. In late-December 1939, as Hitler's armies ravaged Poland, the CCC team from the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey defeated the Hyannis town team for the championship in a tournament at Mullen, 24-14.¹⁴⁸³ Through basketball Sandhills individuals familiarized themselves with other parts of the state and country. It broke them free of their rural isolation and desolation.

In the summer months of the 1930s, Sandhillers, when not haying or trying to plant crops in the sand, busied themselves by playing the nation's pastime. As with basketball, baseball provided opportunities for Sandhillers to interact with other individuals besides just themselves. As with basketball Sandhills communities regularly held contests with African-American teams and, in contrast to the attitudes fostered by local newspapers, seemed to enjoy the company despite repeated thrashings at the hands of the visitors. The Oshkosh baseball team regularly played the bearded African-American House of David baseball club with little success. In an early-June 1930 tournament the House of David dominated the Sandhills' teams defeating Oshkosh 13 to 1, Alliance 15 to 5, and Gordon 13 to 2.¹⁴⁸⁴

¹⁴⁸² *Sheridan County Star*, March 24, 1938, 1

¹⁴⁸³ *Grant County Tribune*, December 20, 1939, 1

¹⁴⁸⁴ *Garden County News*, June 5, 1930, 1; *Garden County News*, June 12, 1930, 1

Oshkosh played the House of David team again five years later and played better but the result in the end was still a loss for the home team, 5 to 1.¹⁴⁸⁵ Likewise, CCC teams were routinely invited to take part in regional baseball leagues that lasted most of the summer, further expanding interchanges with individuals within and outside of the Sandhills. In late-May of 1934, the CCC team from near Oshkosh was invited to play in a southwest Nebraska league which had included a team from Venango, Nebraska.¹⁴⁸⁶ The CCC team took the place of the team from Venango when they dropped out and due to short notice lost their first game 24 to 9.¹⁴⁸⁷ The result was not much better three weeks later when Oshkosh defeated the CCC team, 18 to 3, due in large part to twelve strike outs contributed by the Oshkosh pitcher.¹⁴⁸⁸ The Oshkosh team still dominated a year later, when in an opportunity at cross-state exchange and socialization, they defeated the baseball team from Peetz, Colorado, 6 to 4.¹⁴⁸⁹ CCC teams in the northern Sandhills did not fare much better than their contemporaries from the southwestern hills four years later as the CCC team from near Valentine lost to Bassett 14 to 5 in a game in which they gave up fifteen hits.¹⁴⁹⁰ No matter the score team sports such as football, basketball, and baseball afforded Sandhillers an opportunity to shed stress as well as positively represent the region to outsiders who knew not what to make of the land of sand. Sandhillers also participated in individual sports which gave them a chance to fight back against their individual circumstances.

Individual sports were as popular as team sports in the Sandhills during the Depression. Sandhillers reveled in individual competition; however, some sports were more

¹⁴⁸⁵ *Garden County News*, June 20, 1935, 1

¹⁴⁸⁶ *Garden County News*, May 24, 1934, 1

¹⁴⁸⁷ *Garden County News*, May 24, 1934, 1

¹⁴⁸⁸ *Garden County News*, June 14, 1934, 1

¹⁴⁸⁹ *Garden County News*, May 16, 1935, 1

¹⁴⁹⁰ *Rock County Leader*, July 13, 1939, 1

mainstream than others. Miniature golf became en vogue in the United States in the early-1930s and the Sandhills were not immune to this new take on a classic sport. On August 2nd, 1930, the Hyannis miniature golf course opened for play to the public and two days later offered free rounds as a means to attract new business.¹⁴⁹¹ The sport also was popular in the northeastern hills as a miniature golf tournament for ladies was held in O’Neill on July 19th, 1931.¹⁴⁹² Most organized team sports during this time attracted only male members, as was common in the rest of the United States. Thus, sporting events for women, such as the O’Neill miniature golf tournament, were very popular as they provided women an opportunity for a respite from domestic issues.

A more unique sport that was popular in the northern Sandhills that many participated in was horseshoe tossing. It could be played individually or in a tournament format in which players scored individually contributed to an overall team score. The *Rock County Leader* reported on the results of a horseshoe tournament in Newport held in late-October 1931: “The third horseshoe contest between Bassett and Newport which was held last Sunday at Newport resulted in another victory for Bassett. Each Bassett player played each Newport player one 40 point game, 64 games in all. Of these Bassett won 36 and Newport won 28. The total of all Bassett scores were 2089. The same for Newport was 2007. The tally on total ringers was also rather close with Bassett gaining 758 and Newport 720.”¹⁴⁹³ Between matches, players had opportunities to become better acquainted and thus further strengthen regional, societal bonds. While Sandhillers enjoyed participating in these unique sports

¹⁴⁹¹ *Grant County Tribune*, July 30, 1930, 1

¹⁴⁹² *Holt County Independent*, July 17, 1931, 1

¹⁴⁹³ *Rock County Leader*, October 29, 1931, 1

another sport represented the individuals struggle during the difficult days of the Depression: boxing.

As with the other sports boxing provided an opportunity to interact with other people of the Great Plains. One such example occurred in the spring of 1933, when Garden County had yet again another matchup with northeast Colorado. The *Garden County News* described the early-May matchup between Oshkosh's Flo Contratto and Holyoke, Colorado's, Buddy Garrett: "...a boxing and wrestling exhibition will take place in the Holyoke Stadium at Holyoke, Colo., on May 9th. This is of particular interest to local fight fans as the main go will be between Flo Contratto, of this place, and Buddy Garrett, of Holyoke, a six-round semi-final mixup. Both boys are reputed to be good and a real fight is in store for those who will make the trip to the Colorado City."¹⁴⁹⁴ Boxing was also popular in the northern hills. The *Rock County Leader* reported on how Bassett boxers did in a contest in Norfolk in early-February 1940: "The joint Bassett American Legion and high school boxing team gained some prominent recognition at the semi-finals and finals meet of the Golden Gloves meet in Norfolk Friday night. Although Duane Mauch was the only winner among the locals all of the Rock county fighters were highly commended on their ability, gameness and clean fighting. Bud Gale and Jack Mauch both reached the finals before going out while Don Davis and Marvin Kreitman dropped their semi-final bouts in close decisions."¹⁴⁹⁵ Boxers from Rock County did well the following year also. The *Rock County Leader* reported in early-April 1941: "Rock county high school boxing team won its meet with the Valentine team here Tuesday evening with two Kos and four decisions."¹⁴⁹⁶ For Sandhillers, pugilism

¹⁴⁹⁴ *Garden County News*, May 4, 1933, 1

¹⁴⁹⁵ *Rock County Leader*, February 1, 1940, 1

¹⁴⁹⁶ *Rock County Leader*, April 3, 1941, 1

exemplified the ultimate individual struggle. Sandhills agriculturalists themselves strove to be a group of “Cinderella Men” just as 1930s American boxing icon James Braddock. Individuals who recovered from being knocked down to yet again rise up and win once more.

Beyond sports Sandhillers reinforced their social bonds through other activities and celebrations. Like other Americans having just lived through the Jazz Age, Sandhillers enjoyed their music. In the 1930s, Sandhills high school students participated in music contests that regularly pitted bands and choirs against one another to determine who was the most lyrically pleasing. Rivalries started in sports continued in this genre. For instance, in May 1932 Hyannis High School dominated other central Sandhills schools in a music contest just as it traditionally had in basketball.¹⁴⁹⁷ The *Grant County Tribune* reported the school’s success: “This community does and should feel proud of the showing made at the first Sandhills music contest held at Mullen last Saturday where Hyannis won eight firsts and two seconds with a majority in points of 680 against Mullen’s 630 as second place. Seven high schools participated: Mullen with 12 entries, Hyannis 11, Dunning 9, Thedford 6, Bingham 5, Ashby 3, Seneca 3. Musical scores per school as follows: Hyannis, 8 firsts on piano, trumpet, orchestra, girls glee club, boys glee club, boys quartette, tenor, and two seconds on clarinet and girls sextette (sic).”¹⁴⁹⁸ A year later Hyannis did not fare as well only winning three firsts to Mullen’s five.¹⁴⁹⁹ In 1936, Hyannis High School once again musically excelled as it finished fourth in the Class D State Music Contest held at Kearney with the band actually winning second in its category.¹⁵⁰⁰ Music contests served to also promote the artistic

¹⁴⁹⁷ *Grant County Tribune*, May 4, 1932, 4

¹⁴⁹⁸ *Grant County Tribune*, May 4, 1932, 4

¹⁴⁹⁹ *Grant County Tribune*, April 26, 1933, 4

¹⁵⁰⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, May 6, 1936, 4

talents of Sandhillers and demonstrate that they were not a class of unskilled country rubes perpetually locked in a rudimentary frontier environment.

Sandhillers enjoyed being, or at least feeling, cultured as much as the average New Yorker or Chicagoan as they frequently attended orchestras/band performances and dances wherein Sandhills musicians yet again displayed their talents. As with other social functions, these gatherings provided Sandhillers another opportunity to interact and feel carefree, if only for a moment. Orchestras could also be a source of community pride just as sports teams were. In December 1929, the town of Brewster was excited at the prospect of having their own burgeoning musical group. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote: “Under the supervision of G. Flint, we have a wonderful orchestra. We are in hopes that we will soon be able to say that, we have some of the best musicians in this part of the state.”¹⁵⁰¹ The community of O’Neill had a similarly skilled band and due to this hosted a multi-band function in September 1930. The *Holt County Independent* wrote of this event: “Last Friday evening the people of O’Neill were entertained by a fifty piece band, which was a consolidation of the Ewing, Orchard, Page, and the O’Neill bands. Dr. C. H. Lubker, leader of the O’Neill band directed the band here. These same bands had previously played at Ewing and Page and on Wednesday of this week they played at Orchard...A platform had been built between the Golden Hotel and the First National Bank buildings and a very large crowd was present to hear this concert.”¹⁵⁰² Concerts such as this once again brought together people from different communities and thus reinforced their cultural/social similarities and appreciations. By the end of the decade, band performances remained well-appreciated and attended. *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of the town’s summer band program in

¹⁵⁰¹ *Blaine County Booster*, December 5, 1929, 1

¹⁵⁰² *Holt County Independent*, September 19, 1930, 1

1938: “There was a large crowd at Riverside Park Sunday to listen to the last band concert of the season by the Burwell Municipal Band. The weather was a little chilly for an out-door entertainment of the kind the snappy atmosphere failed to keep the crowd away. These summer concerts have been especially appreciated by large crowds this summer and all are looking forward toward their being continued again next summer.”¹⁵⁰³ Sandhillers who had no instrumental talent or did not care for concerts were able to enjoy music in a different medium: through dance.

Dances were important social gatherings that could be informal or formal depending on the occasion. Periodically dances and balls served a dual purpose beyond entertainment as many were held in order to raise funds for certain charities or individuals who needed help. Such events generally did not have difficulty in attracting participants/donors suggesting that, as with their churches, Sandhillers could display social altruism even though it was on a limited basis. In this regard the spirit of volunteerism that Hoover preached was a limited success but only on this scale. Dances were held to benefit a variety of causes. In late-November 1931 the Women’s Club of O’Neill held a dance that was to benefit the poor and needy by selling tickets for admission for \$1.00 apiece.¹⁵⁰⁴ Women who were spectators and not participants were only charged \$0.25.¹⁵⁰⁵ Fund raising balls continued for the rest of the decade. Volunteer community organizations, such as fire departments, were common benefactors of such annual events. In December 1933, the O’Neill Volunteer Fire Department held one such dance in which Lloyd Hunter’s Serenaders (sic) were the featured

¹⁵⁰³ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 22, 1938, 1

¹⁵⁰⁴ *Holt County Independent*, November 20, 1931, 1

¹⁵⁰⁵ *Holt County Independent*, November 20, 1931, 1

entertainment.¹⁵⁰⁶ One of the most popular events for Sandhillers, regardless of their political affiliation or their voting habits, were the annual birthday celebrations for President Roosevelt as people from all over the various counties came to help stamp out polio. The *Holt County Independent* wrote of one well supported ball in O'Neill in early-February 1934:

The Birthday Ball for the President which was held at Danceland Tuesday evening brought on one of the largest crowds ever seen at that place. The people started coming at 8:30 p.m. and continued from then on until midnight and in all there was about 375 evening tickets pinned on the men who danced. In fact the place was so crowded that there was hardly room to move. The ticket sales will run somewhat over 400 tickets sold and perhaps more as all the tickets have not been checked in as yet. A large birthday cake was raffled off that evening and Hugh Coyne was the lucky one to get it. The hall was well directed with pictures of President Roosevelt and with the American flags. It was one of the largest affairs ever undertaken by the citizens of this town and with the help of all the towns in the county, except Atkinson, Holt County will be able to send a sizeable amount to President Roosevelt to endow the Warm Springs Foundation.¹⁵⁰⁷

Such dances remained popularly supported even after the United States' entry into World War II. Following the tragic events at Pearl Harbor, Bassett held its annual dance against infantile paralysis on January 29th, 1942.¹⁵⁰⁸ The *Rock County Leader* solicited for the event requesting, "Give so that others may walk."¹⁵⁰⁹ Sandhills residents did so even as many of their brothers and sisters themselves walked off to war and the perilous uncertainties it brought with it.

Wherein dances such as those for President Roosevelt were held to appeal to Sandhillers' benevolent and altruistic sides, others charged no admission and simply encouraged community interaction. Some were even sponsored by community businesses as a means to promote good will locally amongst potential customers. One of the latter was held in Mullen in late-May 1934. The *Grant County Tribune* detailed a dance sponsored by Mullen's preeminent automobile dealer, the Matthews Chevrolet Company: "Quite a number

¹⁵⁰⁶ *Holt County Independent*, December 22, 1933, 1

¹⁵⁰⁷ *Holt County Independent*, February 2, 1934, 1

¹⁵⁰⁸ *Rock County Leader*, January 15, 1942, 1

¹⁵⁰⁹ *Rock County Leader*, January 15, 1942, 1

of young people of Hyannis and vicinity are making arrangements to go to Mullen and attend the complimentary dance to be given by the Matthews Chevrolet company in its large, new show room. Harry Matthews will be there and each and every one will be given a demonstration of the real meaning of hospitality.”¹⁵¹⁰ Macke’s Orchestra provided the music, thus demonstrating that, once again, organized bands were as embedded in Sandhills social life as was the image of the Sandhills cowboy.¹⁵¹¹ Likewise in mid-May 1935, radio celebrities Jack Dalton and his Riders of the Purple Sage performed at a dance at Bassett in which dance tickets cost \$0.40 and tickets to observe cost \$0.10.¹⁵¹² Such popular bands when coupled with dances led to further opportunities for pleasant Sandhills socializing. By the early-1940s, dances were being held that sponsored patriotism and not new cars. At the outset of the Second World War, Sandhills communities held dances to support their men in uniform. In early-January 1942, the O’Neill American Legion sponsored a dance for all of Holt County’s draft registrants.¹⁵¹³ The *Holt County Independent* described the purpose of the event: “The American Legion, realizing that it would be impossible to give a farewell party to all men who will leave for the army at the different times, have decided that they would make it one big party and would like to see all the men there.”¹⁵¹⁴ Thus, even in the worst of times dances were held to unite and reinforce Sandhills communities and reaffirm their vibrancy as a vital regional society that contributed to the larger American experience.

During the Great Depression, Sandhillers routinely came together to participate in community celebrations such as county fairs and those held to commemorate American

¹⁵¹⁰ *Grant County Tribune*, May 30, 1934, 5

¹⁵¹¹ *Grant County Tribune*, May 30, 1934, 5

¹⁵¹² *Rock County Leader*, May 16, 1935, 6

¹⁵¹³ *Holt County Independent*, January 2, 1942, 1

¹⁵¹⁴ *Holt County Independent*, January 2, 1942, 1

independence. Sandhillers also attended “free days” in which they took part in fair-like activities at no admission charge. Such festivities were highly welcome during the dark days of the Depression. Fourth of July celebrations served to reinvigorate Sandhillers’ patriotic attitudes during a time of great economic distress when many in the United States were starting to listen to socialist political platforms. Such gatherings also served to reinforce and strengthen community bonds. The *Garden County News* promoted the communal benefits of attending Oshkosh’s 1930 celebration: “Arrangements have been fully made for the big picnic to be held in the canyons south of town on July Fourth. According to the plans there will be a good program rendered and Rev. O. D. Hoagland will deliver a patriotic address. Everything will be done for the sake of entertaining and amusing the crowd and opportunity will be enjoyed for visiting among the neighbors and friends, and people will be there from all over the country to visit with.”¹⁵¹⁵ These gatherings also afforded religious leaders, such as Reverend Hoagland, the opportunity to reiterate that being a good Sandhills Christian was a significant part of being a good American. Five years later, Oshkosh’s Independence Day celebration remained popular as the picnic gathering had expanded to include a parade, concerts, water fights, fireworks, and a Ferris wheel.¹⁵¹⁶ Fourth of July celebrations were also popular in the northern hills. In 1935, Bassett’s Independence Day parade included twenty-seven floats and the day’s festivities also offered six amateur boxing matches for spectators’ enjoyment.¹⁵¹⁷ Two years later the Rock County celebration attracted an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 participants.¹⁵¹⁸ In 1940, the Bassett Fourth of July celebration had expanded to include a rodeo, featuring bronc riding, steer riding, and calf roping, and due to

¹⁵¹⁵ *Garden County News*, July 3, 1930, 1

¹⁵¹⁶ *Garden County News*, July 4, 1935, 1

¹⁵¹⁷ *Rock County Leader*, July 11, 1935, 1

¹⁵¹⁸ *Rock County Leader*, July 8, 1937, 1

this large spectacle the town was able to attract somewhere between 2,500 to 3,000 people to hopefully line the coffers of the town's businesses.¹⁵¹⁹

Beyond Fourth of July celebrations, traditional county fairs and the similarly organized "free days" also provided opportunities for societal mingling and reinforcement. As with Independence Day celebrations, fairs and "free days" offered activities ranging from sports to parades. The Holt County Fair of 1930 offered mule races and a Boy Scout Jamboree whereas a year later in September 1931 the event once again featured three days of baseball as well as horse races featuring stallions from both Nebraska and nearby South Dakota.¹⁵²⁰ In September 1934, O'Neill's free day once again featured baseball, a dance, and a water fight put on by the fire department.¹⁵²¹ It was estimated that this event attracted at least 13,000 people to the Holt County area.¹⁵²² A year later the celebration again welcomed somewhere between 13,000 and 15,000 people and exhibited multiple rides for children, including a small train, and a German band which played traditional German beer drinking songs.¹⁵²³ During these years newspapers did not advertise for the Holt County Fair, which was traditionally held at the same time in September, suggesting that O'Neill held one free day in lieu of multiple days of fair activities due to the financial rigors of putting on such a sustained event during the Depression. No matter their longevity, fairs and "free days" yet again were positive examples of regional social integration that fostered interactions with non-Sandhillers, such as the horse racers from South Dakota at the Holt County Fair, that served to expand Sandhills' resident's cultural horizons.

¹⁵¹⁹ *Rock County Leader*, July 11, 1940, 1

¹⁵²⁰ *Holt County Independent*, September 12, 1930, 1; *Holt County Independent*, August 21, 1931, 1

¹⁵²¹ *Holt County Independent*, September 14, 1934, 1

¹⁵²² *Holt County Independent*, September 21, 1934, 1

¹⁵²³ *Holt County Independent*, September 27, 1935, 1

Celebrations such as balls and dances were not the only method to inform Sandhillers of larger issues or promote certain ideas during the tumultuous years of drought and despair. During the Depression picnics were held by agencies or organizations, not only for Independence Day or county fair celebrations, but to also discuss local problems or concerns as well as to promote goodwill amongst potential members or participants. Topics covered at promotional picnics ranged from conservation to cattle. Multiple gatherings in Garfield County dealt with the subject of the deepening drought in August 1931.¹⁵²⁴ *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of the gathering and the real underlying reason for resident's attendance:

Over seven thousand Nebraska farm people came to 23 picnics scheduled by county extension agents in August. N. W. Gaines, community organization specialist of the extension service, Mrs. Gaines, H. K. Douthit, supervisor of college short courses, and Mrs. Douthit were on the programs. Farmers who came to these picnics were not grumbling. In the drouth areas they agreed that this was a good year to have a drouth if they must have it. In all parts of the state these farmers said they were mightly (sic) well off compared to laboring men in the cities. None of the farmers were grumbling. The large attendance was due in part to the times, because the picnics were inexpensive entertainment, and also in part to the fact that rural people are tired of continually paying for their good times and want now to enjoy each other.¹⁵²⁵

The prospect of free food and further socialization with their Sandhills peers made the messages they heard more palatable. Most picnics were viewed as educational as Sandhillers heard informative messages pertaining to agricultural issues or the environment. In late-September 1937, 1,200 people attended a picnic at the Nebraska National Forest in Halsey in which they learned of the benefits of planting shelter belts on their farms or ranches.¹⁵²⁶ Agricultural organizations also routinely utilized picnics to spread their messages. A year later prominent Nebraska politician and Sandhills rancher Sam McKelvie hosted 1,000 people at the annual picnic of the Sandhills Feeder Cattle Producers Association to discuss

¹⁵²⁴ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 10, 1931, 1

¹⁵²⁵ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 10, 1931, 1

¹⁵²⁶ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, September 22, 1937, 8

ranching issues.¹⁵²⁷ Homer Buell wrote of McKelvie's Sandhills ranching background and the establishment of the Association: "In 1933 former governor, S. R. McKelvie, purchased the Pat Piper ranch twenty miles south of Valentine...in May, 1938, he called a meeting in Valentine at which was organized The Sandhills Feeder Cattle Producers Association. The entire Sandhills of Nebraska was included in the association's territory."¹⁵²⁸ In late-May 1940, McKelvie still supported the organizations' picnic only this time it was held at Victoria Springs near Broken Bow as this location was located closer to the state's eastern cities and their accessibility to the national press which McKelvie sought to help spread his agricultural agenda.¹⁵²⁹ The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of McKelvie's reasoning for locating the picnic in Custer County: "Mr. Sam R. McKelvie, President of the association advises us that it is quite probable that photographers for Life magazine will be there, and he hopes the cow boys and girls will wear their togs...The purpose is to advertise Sandhills feeder cattle and the peerless cow country where they are grown."¹⁵³⁰ Whereas some picnics sought to influence how Sandhillers structured their Sandhills society, another form of gathering came to represent Sandhills agriculture and culture no matter if one ranched or farmed: the rodeo.

Rodeos were common during the 1930s and while many were held at county fairs, others became their own celebrations. For many communities annual rodeos were actually more important than individual fairs for the amount of business and people they brought to town. One such community was Burwell. In the tradition of Cheyenne Frontier Days in neighboring Wyoming, Burwell had hosted what was known as Nebraska's Big Rodeo since 1920. In August 1931, the rodeo featured nearly one-hundred riders from the United States,

¹⁵²⁷ *The Burwell Tribune*, September 15, 1938, 1

¹⁵²⁸ Rock County Quasiquicentennial Committee, *Rock County: Celebrating 125 Years!*, Bassett, Nebraska

¹⁵²⁹ *Blaine County Booster*, May 23, 1940, 1

¹⁵³⁰ *Blaine County Booster*, May 23, 1940, 1

Canada, and Mexico and one-hundred twenty-five race horses.¹⁵³¹ *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of the rodeo's success: "Financial conditions in general and poor crop conditions throughout the immediate vicinity was such that the Fair Association generally conceded that there would be a considerable falling off in attendance from that of one year ago, but in this respect the Association was doomed to an agreeable disappointment."¹⁵³² Three years later the rodeo again went off without a hitch even though there was originally debate over cancelling it due to the persistent drought, heat, and economic situation.¹⁵³³ In September 1935, Mullen also held a two day rodeo which featured one-hundred twenty-five head of livestock and \$500.00 in cash prizes donated by local businessmen, one of which would be for all-around Best cowboy in show.¹⁵³⁴ Mullen's rodeo differed from Burwell's in that baseball games were also played both days and movies shown in the evening.¹⁵³⁵ Thus, while the purpose of Sandhills rodeos may have been to promote the image of the Wild West, cowboys, and ranchers, many also had to cater to a Sandhills society who wanted other options in their entertainment. In the 1930s, not all were cowboys and ranchers nor did they all want to be.

During the Great Depression, Sandhills residents also appreciated cultural expression in other mediums than just concert or rodeos. Many enjoyed attending and mingling at dramatic productions put on at local theaters. The most popular shows featured traveling production troupes that annually visited Sandhills communities. Some groups took advantage of regularly scheduled fairs by scheduling their visits at the same time and became

¹⁵³¹ *The Burwell Tribune*, August 20, 1931, 1

¹⁵³² *The Burwell Tribune*, August 20, 1931, 1

¹⁵³³ *The Burwell Tribune*, August 16, 1934, 1

¹⁵³⁴ *Blaine County Booster*, September 12, 1935, 1; *Grant County Tribune*, September 18, 1935, 4

¹⁵³⁵ *Grant County Tribune*, September 18, 1935, 4

part of the featured attractions. For instance, the Ted North players performed at the Holt County Fair in both 1930 and 1931, performing three plays over the course of the three days in 1931.¹⁵³⁶ Performing troupes performed plays ranging from contemporary numbers to Shakespeare. The Hazel McOwen players performed the play “Smart Women” in O’Neill for one straight week in late-July 1934.¹⁵³⁷ Tickets ranged from \$0.10 to \$0.25 and a promotion on Monday evening allowed a lady friend in free with the purchase of one adult ticket.¹⁵³⁸ Over a year later, in late- September 1935, Bassett residents were exposed to a more famous play and its playwright as the Misner players performed “Hamlet” at the Bassett High School auditorium where only two years earlier they had performed “The Merchant of Venice.”¹⁵³⁹ Like their contemporaries, they also charged \$0.25 per ticket.¹⁵⁴⁰ Other troupes likewise enlightened Sandhillers’ minds by performing culturally significant works. In early-June 1938 one troupe performed “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in front of a culturally accepting audience yet again in Bassett.¹⁵⁴¹ In comparison, the Chick Boyes players performed the less acclaimed “Home on the Range,” a seemingly contemporary play appreciated by the region’s cattlemen in Thedford in late-April 1936 in what was only the first of two trips to the community by the traveling troupe.¹⁵⁴² The *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* reported: “These players expect to make our city again in the fall with their entertainments.”¹⁵⁴³

¹⁵³⁶ *Holt County Independent*, August 20, 1930, 1; *Holt County Independent*, August 21, 1931, 1

¹⁵³⁷ *Holt County Independent*, July 20, 1934, 1

¹⁵³⁸ *Holt County Independent*, July 20, 1934, 1

¹⁵³⁹ *Rock County Leader*, September 26, 1935, 1

¹⁵⁴⁰ *Rock County Leader*, September 26, 1935, 1

¹⁵⁴¹ *Rock County Leader*, May 26, 1938, 1

¹⁵⁴² *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 22, 1936, 1

¹⁵⁴³ *Thomas County Herald-Clipper*, April 22, 1936, 1

Of the traveling drama troupes, by far the most popular were the Hugo players. The Hugos regularly performed in the eastern Sandhills and were well received. *The Burwell Tribune* promoted and commended the Hugo players in its May 22nd, 1930, issue, stating: “Eighteen years ago Harry Hugo came to Burwell with his first tent show and he has been coming this way almost every year since that time. His aim has always been to give his patrons a good clean entertainment at a reasonable price and the fact that he has never fell down in this attempt has been an advertisement that goes a long way toward filling the tent on each successive visit. Personally we believe that the shows and talent that he is carrying this year is the best that he has ever brought to Burwell.”¹⁵⁴⁴ Later that year, they performed in shows at the Holt County Fair and two years later the Hugos acted again in Burwell in front of vast crowds beneath a new waterproof tent.¹⁵⁴⁵ The Hugo players continued to perform in Burwell for the remainder of the decade and eventually expanded their travel schedule to include the nearby community of Sargent.¹⁵⁴⁶ In a time of difficulty, traveling troupes brought Sandhillers tales from an alternate reality or a time gone by. Like with concerts and orchestras, Sandhills residents demonstrated their appreciation for the fine arts and classic literary works performed on stage through their strong attendance. Through such acts many Sandhillers demonstrated they were well-read and were much more than hillbillies.

Sandhills residents’ love for the theater did not cease with live dramatic renditions of classic plays and stories. In the 1930s, color movies with sound became popular throughout the United States, regularly attracting countless audience members to new motion picture

¹⁵⁴⁴ *The Burwell Tribune*, May 22, 1930, 1

¹⁵⁴⁵ *Holt County Independent*, August 20, 1930, 1; *The Burwell Tribune*, June 23, 1932, 1

¹⁵⁴⁶ *The Burwell Tribune*, June 24, 1937, 1

theaters. On the Great Plains, western Kansans were thrilled in the late-1930s when films were produced about Kansas and some of them were actually filmed there. Craig Miner wrote of Kansans' reactions to the filming of part of "Dodge City" in the town it was actually named for: "In 1939, Hollywood came to Dodge... Warner Brothers shot a few scenes of its epic *Dodge City* in the actual Western Kansas environs of the historical events upon which this film was loosely based. Dodge promoters convinced the studio to hold the world premiere of the movie at Dodge City, and the town went all out to make the most of it."¹⁵⁴⁷

The motion picture industry and the movies it produced also intrigued Sandhillers and peaked their curiosities. Larger Sandhills communities began showing movies in their theaters or built new structures specifically for motion pictures. In late-November 1932, the Gayety Theatre in Hyannis debuted "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm," a film the *Grant County Tribune* billed as "a clean, sweet picture, a pleasing romance built around a sturdy, understanding story."¹⁵⁴⁸ Extravagant write-ups describing films appeared in newspapers significantly in advance of their premieres in order to attract audiences. One such editorial was written about Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" in the *Rock County Leader* in late-May 1938: "Have you ever dreamed of Gnomeland? Have your dreams brought you into contact with those wonderful beings, the elves, dwarfs, enchanted birds, and beasts, witches, lovely ladies that weave magic spells and dance and sing through sunny days and moonlit nights of romance? Such dreams of fantasy come to perfect realization on June 5 to 9 when 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' comes to the Kozy."¹⁵⁴⁹

¹⁵⁴⁷ Miner, *Next Year Country*, 286

¹⁵⁴⁸ *Grant County Tribune*, November 23, 1932, 4

¹⁵⁴⁹ *Rock County Leader*, May 19, 1938, 1

Beyond being enthralled at the animated masterpiece “Snow White,” Sandhills moviegoers were also mesmerized by the scale and scope of “Gone with the Wind” and the eerily similar scenes of foreclosure portrayed in the film version of Steinbeck’s classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*.¹⁵⁵⁰ The viewing of the latter film created a minor controversy in Burwell. *The Burwell Tribune* wrote of expectations for the film’s debut in Garfield County in late-June 1940: “There has been a lot of discussion especially in Burwell where the book was barred from the public library in connection with the ‘Grapes of Wrath.’ Now we are to see this much talked of book dramatized by 20th Century Fox. On Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, June 23, 24, and 25, at no advance in prices, the Grapes of Wrath will be the feature show at the Rodeo Theatre in Burwell...Don’t take your neighbors word for it, go see it for yourself.”¹⁵⁵¹ The film “The Black Scourge,” which showed in Burwell a month earlier on May 17th and 18th, was less controversial for Sandhills agriculturalists as it portrayed the elimination of crop diseases, such as blights and smuts, not the elimination of the small farmer’s way of life.¹⁵⁵² As in Oklahoma, Steinbeck’s work was criticized in the Sandhills for its overly negative portrayal of agricultural life on the Great Plains during the dusty 1930s. Despite the controversy, author and Distinguished Professor of English and Theatre, Morris Dickstein, wrote of the importance of Steinbeck’s work: “Finally, however, the novel and film come together as an almost seamless composite of words and images, fictional characters and performances, an indelible testament to their times.”¹⁵⁵³ In contrast to the debate over the film revolving around Steinbeck’s work, across the hills in the southwestern

¹⁵⁵⁰ *Rock County Leader*, May 30, 1940, 1; *The Burwell Tribune*, June 20, 1940, 1

¹⁵⁵¹ *The Burwell Tribune*, June 20, 1940, 1

¹⁵⁵² *The Burwell Tribune*, May 16, 1940, 1

¹⁵⁵³ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of The Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009), 143

part of the region, Oshkosh residents happily viewed a film on the Great Plains.¹⁵⁵⁴ In early-March 1941, the Garden County Historical Society sponsored the viewing of a natural history film created by University of Nebraska Paleontology Professor Bertrand Schultz in which scenery of the county was featured.¹⁵⁵⁵ Through motion pictures Sandhillers once again came together to be distracted from the perils of the Depression, but also to gain a better understanding of contemporary issues like the Dust Bowl and gain a better appreciation of their own environment.

Sandhills society steeled itself against the complications and detriments of socially destructive problems, such as crime, racial apathy, domestic violence and gender inequality by attending and participating in fairs, sporting events, annual celebrations, orchestras, dances, plays, and motion pictures and thus gained shared experiences that were utilized in establishing socially acceptable norms. These activities did not in and of themselves deter and prevent the negative social problems of felonious crime and race and gender issues; however, they instead served to release the tensions caused by such difficult aspects of Sandhills society. Many of these activities fostered interactions with non-Sandhillers, such as African-Americans from eastern cities or fellow agriculturalists from neighboring states, and through these encounters Sandhillers learned that these individuals were not that different from themselves. Thus, Sandhills group activities served to enrich Sandhills culture and society. If Sandhillers had not been determined to continually hold traditional events or annual events in the Depression as they had in the 1920s and earlier, Sandhills society would have been significantly weakened, so much so in that it would not have known what it was or what it represented. Attending movies also exposed Sandhillers to new ideas and cultural

¹⁵⁵⁴ *Garden County News*, March 13, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁵⁵ *Garden County News*, March 13, 1941, 1

interchange through a modern medium and thus had a positive impact on Sandhillers' personal enlightenment. In an environment so difficult even the small things like movies made all the difference in aiding in binding Sandhills' individuals together.

Conclusion

During the Great Depression, Nebraska Sandhills society was nearly cleaved apart by societal stresses that were primarily a result of the region's harsh environmental climate and the abysmal national economic conditions. Felonious crime was a constant threat to the region's social stability as locals and those passing through the hills robbed businesses, banks, farm homes, and people on the street as they sought a means for their own economic survival. Livestock and grain theft was also common as a means of subsistence or income. These crimes did not occur every day but nonetheless their specter hovered over the Sandhills like an ever present dust storm that would not subside. Racial tensions were not as divisive or as obvious as in the American South; however, Caucasian Sandhillers maintained a superior attitude in regards to some of the negative views they held of Hispanics and Native Americans as these groups were viewed as drunken vagabonds who disturbed the societal peace on more than one occasion. African-Americans were somewhat more welcome as Sandhillers enjoyed watching and participating in baseball or basketball games during the Depression with their traveling teams even though some parts of the hills had not long before maintained a Ku Klux Klan presence. Treatment of Hispanics was particularly harsh on the extreme southwestern edge of the Sandhills during the early-1930s as many were forced to return to Mexico by local government officials and beet companies supposedly due to economic issues. The struggle for control within male and female relationships and over one's own life led to severe interactions between genders as domestic violence,

abandonment, sexual assault, and adultery were all detrimental issues that were influenced largely by male efforts to reassert their masculinity in a time of economic impotence. Religion was utilized as a method to reunite Sandhills' society when these divisive issues threatened its stability. Sandhills Christians were not only united in their belief in God and Christ as Savior but were also united in their efforts to save their congregations from the economic pitfalls of the Great Depression through personal donations of limited cash, hours, or sweat in constructing or repairing churches and paying debts and ministers. Christians also fostered Sandhills socialization at various church group meetings and revivals. Secular social gatherings in the hills ranging from sporting events to fairs to concerts to rodeos and to movies also served to bring Sandhillers together in a dire time. Many gatherings served as fund raisers to benefit certain community organizations, such as fire departments, or other national beneficial causes, such as Roosevelt's drive to end polio. Through their participation in these activities Depression-era Sandhillers asserted that they were not defined by their worst days and events but instead could still interact and flourish. Such gatherings themselves were difficult to organize but as with church projects, Sandhillers excitedly and willingly completed these tasks as their efforts would assuredly quickly succeed; whereas, in comparison their agricultural efforts had no such guarantee. Religion and fairs could not end crime and abuse; however, they served as a deterrent to such acts by the positive distractions they offered, many of which were free at no cost. Whereas such events could have attracted pick pockets and car thieves, it does not appear that crime happened on a large scale at fairs or rodeos. Thus, by participating in church and/or secular social gatherings Sandhillers contributed to their own society's stabilization and modernization. Sandhills' society was multifaceted, complex, and cultured during the Depression despite struggling with divisive

issues. Due to these factors and experiences, Sandhills society survived devastating environmental and societal challenges during a period when other agriculturalist societies on the Great Plains nearly vanished, such as the “suit-case” farmers of western Kansas. Such was life on the Great Plains during the 1930s. Nothing was assured. Only through perseverance, patience, and hard work could individuals or societies survive. Fortunately for Sandhillers they passed the test even if at times it seemed like they were nearly devoured by internal problems like a rabbit devouring a dry and grasshopper ridden Sandhills garden.

CONCLUSION

On the early morning of December 7th, 1941, the United States' isolated innocence was forever shattered as the naval forces of the Japanese Empire attacked the United States fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and thus drew the nation into World War II. The Great Depression finally ended with U. S. involvement in the war as the country's economy was revitalized with the mass production of weapons, vehicles, planes, ships, bombs, and personal materials for soldiers and sailors. The United States had been aiding Great Britain through Roosevelt's Lend-Lease Act but with the mass production of goods for its own military the country finally stepped out of its economic malaise and into a world gone mad. Sandhillers were not unaware of the events taking place across the world's vast oceans nor were they personally unaffected by them. Earlier in 1941, Sandhillers had been doing their part in preparing for the inevitable. In late-May, Hooker County agriculturalists began taking part in the Farm Security Agency's "Food for Defense" program. The *Blaine County Booster* wrote of Hooker County FSA supervisor John Hanks's encouragement of the program: "By raising more poultry and livestock, producing more milk, fat, vegetables and eggs, farmers can help themselves and the democracies, too, Hanks said."¹⁵⁵⁶ By mid-summer the impact of preparing for impending war was felt in Oshkosh as the new city swimming pool that was being constructed by eighteen WPA laborers was delayed as there was a shortage of copper

¹⁵⁵⁶ *Blaine County Booster*, May 22, 1941, 1

materials necessary for the pool's completion.¹⁵⁵⁷ The Garden County News succinctly summed the pool's construction difficulties in late-June 1941: "Defense work has priority over WPA projects and requisitions..."¹⁵⁵⁸ By mid-October 1941, the WPA itself became utilized for defense related projects in Nebraska as it aided in constructing new Nebraska National Guard buildings in Lincoln and an armory in Grand Island.¹⁵⁵⁹

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Sandhillers further ratcheted up their efforts to aid in the nation's defense and the new war effort. On December 16th, Civilian Defense Committees were established in Box Butte, Garden, Grant, and Morrill counties to prepare for potential home grown threats.¹⁵⁶⁰ Sandhillers in the southwestern hills of Morrill County also participated in sugar rationing in March 1942 in order to preserve more food stuffs for the American military.¹⁵⁶¹ Besides these efforts, civilian Sandhillers helped the war effort most by contributing to the nation's drive for scrap metal to be reused in making weapons and vehicles. James Kimble wrote of Nebraskans successful efforts in collecting scrap metal in the summer of 1942: "During the three-week summer campaign...the state's citizens turned in nearly *104 pounds* of scrap material per person."¹⁵⁶² Before the summer of 1942, scrap metal was already being solicited throughout the Sandhills. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported in its March 5th, 1942, issue, of the enthusiasm shown for the scrap metal drive in Morrill County:

Morrill county farmers are proud of the gallant fight being put up by General McArthur and his brave little band. Some Morrill county farm boys are in this band and is (sic) is right we should be

¹⁵⁵⁷ *Garden County News*, June 26, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁵⁸ *Garden County News*, June 26, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁵⁹ *Rock County Leader*, October 16, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁶⁰ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 18, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁶¹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, March 5, 1942, 1

¹⁵⁶² James J. Kimble, *Prairie Forge: The Extraordinary Story of the Nebraska Scrap Metal Drive of World War II* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 6

proud, said Louie M. Johnson, chairman of the Morrill County U. S. Department of Agriculture War board. Morrill county farmers, Johnson said, can make a real contribution to their cause by scouring their farms and buildings for every pound of metal scrap to be sold to dealers immediately in order that it may be on its way to the blast furnaces...The U. S. Agriculture War Board chairman said statistics show there is enough scrap iron and steel on farms in the United States, if used together with other material- to make: More than twice as many battleships as there are in the whole world today...It would seem, the chairman said, that anyone who may be hoarding scrap iron for a possibly better price, is putting profit ahead of the lives of American soldiers and sailors. Scrap will scrap the Japs- get yours started toward the front today.¹⁵⁶³

Later in the month, a similar scrap drive was conducted in the northeastern hills of Holt County as salvage materials, including rubber goods, were requested from O'Neill residents.¹⁵⁶⁴ Such efforts demonstrated that during World War II, Sandhills civilians, whether rural or townspeople put aside their own pragmatic interests (i.e. hoarding scrap metal to resell at a higher price) for the good of the country, just as other American civilians did.

A negative aspect of the war, which was also common throughout the country, was a renewed element of acceptable racism and mistrust displayed towards Japanese-Americans as they were believed to be collaborators for the Japanese Empire. This had not always been the case in Nebraska. Bishop George Beecher wrote Reverend H. Kano of North Platte almost six years to the day prior to Pearl Harbor of his pleasure at associating with Japanese guests at a service in his honor: "Mrs. Beecher and I were more than delighted to see so many of our Japanese brethren present on the occasion of the celebration at the 25th anniversary of my consecration as Bishop. We realize that it was through your personal attention and interest that so many were able to come."¹⁵⁶⁵

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor such excited pleasantries were no longer common.

As Sandhills newspapers had done twelve years earlier with African-Americans, the

¹⁵⁶³ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, March 5, 1942, 1

¹⁵⁶⁴ *Holt County Independent*, March 27, 1942, 1

¹⁵⁶⁵ George Allen Beecher to Reverend and Mrs. H. Kano, December 6, 1935, George Allen Beecher Collection, RG 2509.AM, Box 4, Folder 19, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska

Japanese-American population totals in Nebraska were reported with condescension. The *Rock County Leader* reported with concern in its January 1st, 1942, issue: “Nebraska has more Japanese than any other state in the west north central division. It has 480 Japanese residents of whom 323 were born in the United States and therefore citizens. Nebraska has more Japanese than Ohio, Indiana, Michigan or Illinois.”¹⁵⁶⁶ Due to such numbers, Japanese Nebraskans, along with those of German or Italian ancestry, had to be properly vetted by local government officials at the bequest of their U.S. government counterparts in order to ensure that they did not have traitorous intentions. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of such efforts in early-January 1942: “Five radios, two cameras and 11 guns were turned in to Sheriff A. M. Webb’s office since Saturday, by German, Italian and Japanese aliens in Morrill county, under an order issued by U. S. District Attorney Joseph Votava, Saturday. The collection of banned articles turned in here include one large cabinet radio, four smaller sets, shotguns and .22 calibre rifles and ...cameras.”¹⁵⁶⁷ While Japanese Americans were rare in the Sandhills pleas for their monitoring were not scoffed at as in the Sandhills the region’s racial past was ambiguous at best.

Beyond searching through rural scrap piles for metal and disarming local Japanese, Sandhillers were most affected by the war on a personal level as many of their sons, husbands, and fathers fought in the war defending the United States from the evils of fascism. Young men who had less than a decade earlier signed up for service in the Sandhills Civilian Conservation Corps camps, enlisted in droves or were drafted prior to the United States entry into the war. More joined the military after the Japanese attack.

¹⁵⁶⁶ *Rock County Leader*, January 1, 1942, 1

¹⁵⁶⁷ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, January 8, 1942, 1

Off they went by the hundreds, no longer fighting soil erosion, but instead fighting very real military threats to American freedom and democracy. Frank Harding served in the United States Navy Seventh Fleet and Mary Hallstead worked at the air base in Alliance.¹⁵⁶⁸ Throughout the course of World War II, many Sandhills soldiers, sailors, marines, and pilots died on faraway Pacific island beaches, the forests of Belgium, and the skies over Germany. Several died in the war's initial battles on hostile sandy soils unfamiliar to the peaceful hills they left at home. Men from all across the Sandhills from communities as far afield as Bridgeport to Broken Bow fought and died at Pearl Harbor and Midway Island. In the war's earliest days many Sandhills parents, friends, and sweethearts waited to hear word of their loved one's condition with bated breath and sweaty palms. The *Bridgeport News-Blade* reported of Morrill County residents' concern for their fighting men in early-December 1941: "First news of the war this week brought many conflicting emotions to Bridgeport and Morrill county people. Anxiety for the safety of their sons in the armed forces in Hawaii and the Philippines was the first reaction of parents and relatives of those men. Relatives of other persons living in those islands also experienced many anxious hours...Some county boys thought to be in the Hawaii or Phillipine areas are Harold Horn...Bery Collyer...Tony and Joe Reano...Edgar Kelsey...Probably one of the most regrettable (sic) things that has occurred here is the circulation of rumors of the death of several Morrill county boys at Pearl Harbor."¹⁵⁶⁹ Concerns were equally high in nearby Keith County as it was known that Keith County sons, Walter Stein and Clifford Stansberry served aboard the U. S. S.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Taped interview with Frank Harding conducted by the author, October 4, 2014, Mullen, Nebraska;
Taped interview with Mary Hallstead Reed conducted by the author, October 5, 2014, Mullen,
Nebraska

¹⁵⁶⁹ *Bridgeport News-Blade*, December 11, 1941, 1

Oklahoma, M. C. Reed was stationed at Hickam Airfield, former Kingsley Dam construction worker Lt. Jack Wilson served at Pearl Harbor, and former district WPA supervisor Ray Gardner was believed to be at work on a government project at Midway Island.¹⁵⁷⁰ Tragically Marion E. King, Jr., was reported killed in action at Hickam Field on December 7th, in the December 11th issue of the *Keith County News*.¹⁵⁷¹ A week later, further disconcerting information about Keith County's military men was reported in the Ogallala newspaper: "The war in the Pacific came nearer home when this week it was learned that a Keith county man was on the U. S. S. Arizona sunk in the Jap attack on Pearl Harbor Dec. 7...Lester Riggins, Brule, son of Mrs. Belle Riggins, was assigned to the Arizona, but no word has been received by his mother. It is assumed that young Higgins was not among the casualties since the war department has made no announcement."¹⁵⁷² Such optimism was denied in Broken Bow as word was received of the death of local hero, Navy Lieutenant Stuart Lomax at Pearl Harbor the same week.¹⁵⁷³

The conclusion of the Great Depression in the Nebraska Sandhills, as elsewhere in the United States, sadly was tied to the quick and unsuspected loss of life for so many young Sandhillers in uniform, such as Lomax. The Depression did end but unfortunately not due to allowing the New Deal to run its course, but instead to a bloody deal offered by Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo that only ever had one decisive and finite response. Former Sandhills CCC boys, such as Arthur Marine Elmer Morrell,¹⁵⁷⁴ gave their lives defending the promise and possibility inherent in the progressive and hopeful spirit of the

¹⁵⁷⁰ *Keith County News*, December 11, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁷¹ *Keith County News*, December 11, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁷² *Keith County News*, December 18, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁷³ *Custer County Chief*, December 18, 1941, 1

¹⁵⁷⁴ *The Arthur Enterprise*, January 22, 1942, 1

United States during the 1930s, no matter their political affiliation, in order to assure that liberality survived in the face of fascism and totalitarianism. Morrell's fiancée, Hazel McKeag, poignantly penned how Sandhillers felt of their fallen sons' sacrifices for the hills and the country they so loved in a tribute she submitted in the January 29th, 1942, issue of *The Arthur Enterprise*:

...With tear filled eyes, I now recall Our shattered hopes and dreams, For during that notorious peace conference, December 7th, to be exact, Pearl Harbor, Midway, the whole Pacific Experienced a Nipponese attack. He was reported killed in action. The voice we love is still. But the 'leathernecks' still fight on courageously For the flag he loved and served so well On far off Midway Island Neath skies so blue and serene, His soul shall rest forever, Our handsome, young Marine. You have crossed that beautiful river To a distant golden shore, You have met our blessed Saviour (sic) To dwell with him forevermore. Yes, my darling, we shall miss you 'Tis (sic) so hard to say goodbye, But we hope someday to join you in that mansion of gold in the sky...¹⁵⁷⁵

The sacrifices of Morrell and individuals like him were not in vain as the Sandhills prairie itself remained as calm and as peaceful as it had ever been, despite the modern infrastructure improvements of the New Deal, thus, at least in this regard, demonstrating the region's eternal insulation from the cacophony of time and man.

Between 1929 and 1941 the people of the Nebraska Sandhills struggled to find their identity in an environment devolving into a land of fire and dust. Much of the region's rural areas maintained aspects characteristic of Turner's late-nineteenth century frontier in the form of crime, rudimentary roads, and agricultural practices into the 1930s whereas Sandhills communities became more modernized with the advent of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies which led to improved roads, schools, dams, and irrigation projects. Thus, the region simultaneously experienced its most "frontier"

¹⁵⁷⁵ *The Arthur Enterprise*, January 29, 1942, 1. This is only a small part of Ms. McKeag's moving tribute, for the rest please see the cited issue of *The Arthur Enterprise*.

challenges and modern, progressive changes. In many ways, the region's environmental and social problems of the 1930s clashed with its long held libertarian cowboy image as Sandhillers fought against these very real challenges to their social existence as all of these significant issues could not be solved solely by their own free and independent efforts. William Savage, Jr., wrote of the twentieth century American West's clash with its sacred past: "Motion-picture director Sam Peckinpah, who has devoted some time to the analysis of the cowboy psyche, once remarked, 'When we can't live something, we try to recreate it.' The nineteenth-century cowpuncher's life cannot be lived in the twentieth century, but frequent attempts are made to re-create it, and always for purely selfish reasons."¹⁵⁷⁶ Sandhills' ranchers and their cow hands still lived this life, but they did so in an atmosphere that also included paved highways and automobiles, movie theaters, and hydroelectric marvels. Thus, Depression-era Sandhills society was a land in flux precariously juxtaposed between the past and the present in an environment replete with dust storms, drought, and plagues that posed a very real threat to the existence of both. At the end of the Depression era Sandhills society's "cowboy" identity, typically associated with ranchers and their hired cow hands, had survived in conjunction with its modern New Deal amenities even though much of its frontier past was gone thanks largely to societal cohesion created by social groups and gatherings. Such units remained important to sustaining Sandhills' society for the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

During the Great Depression, Sandhills society reached its apex as it experienced much of its highest levels of population, agricultural and racial diversity, technological

¹⁵⁷⁶ William W. Savage, Jr., *Cowboy Life: Reconstructing An American Myth* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 13

innovation, infrastructure improvement, and cultural exchange. The Sandhills environment was just as harsh and challenging as other areas on the Great Plains as Sandhillers experienced dust storms, drought, tornados, hail, grasshopper and rabbit plagues, and numerous prairie fires. The region did not turn into a “dust bowl” as the southern plains did as the region’s topography and soil structure were not amenable to over plowing by Sandhills farmers. Ranchers and land speculators also prevented such actions, whether purposefully or inadvertently, by conserving the land for their own uses which did not avail themselves to sod busting. The implementation of such pragmatic capitalism thus contrasted sharply with wheat farmers in western Oklahoma and Kansas and eastern Colorado, who as Donald Worster argued, destroyed much of the southern plains’ ecology in their attempts to exploit it for profit. Craig Miner wrote of a necessary principle shared by many agriculturalists on the Great Plains: “...Great Plains residents have been environmentalists on purpose or in spite of themselves, because that is the only way to survive there.”¹⁵⁷⁷ Sandhillers lived this principle more than any other agriculturalists on the Great Plains. The environmental conservation lessons they learned during the Great Depression, whether from their own experience or through Roosevelt’s New Deal agricultural agents, have remained in practice to the modern day.

In comparison, agriculturalists on the southern plains returned to their old ways as many Kansas and Colorado farmers returned to farming wheat in droves. In 1954, Ellis County, Kansas, had an approximate total land area of 576,000 acres and of this 211,050 had been harvested for cropland.¹⁵⁷⁸ Likewise, in Haskell County, Kansas, the county’s

¹⁵⁷⁷ Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 297

¹⁵⁷⁸ *1954 United States Department of Agriculture Census*, County Table I, 46

approximate land area totaled 370, 560 acres and of this 169,487 acres had been harvested for cropland.¹⁵⁷⁹ In comparison, Nebraska Sandhills' counties maintained more pasture land just as they always had. In 1954, Arthur County contained 451,840 acres of approximate land area and only 37,353 of these were for crops.¹⁵⁸⁰ In this year in nearby Hooker County, cropland remained at a minimum as of the county's 462,080 total acres only 22,369 had produced some sort of crop.¹⁵⁸¹ David J. Wishart wrote of farming practices in eastern Colorado during this era: "So, despite the hard lessons of the 1930s, when the rains returned in 1941 and 1942 (which were exceedingly wet years, as was 1944), and with the renewed stimulus of high wartime grain prices, the land was fully put back into wheat. The increase of land in crops, mainly wheat, in Kit Carson County from 1939-1954, for example, was an extraordinary 328 percent."¹⁵⁸² By 1974, farmers in the Oklahoma panhandle were again feeling a sustained dust bowl effect. Worster wrote of their environmental issues: "In 1974 severe drought returned to the panhandle, and, indeed, to the entire West, all the way to the redwood coast...the average plainsman was no better prepared than before. Like an old movie rerunning on the late show, the dirt began to blow, much of it coming from four million acres of former grassland in the Great Plains, some of it unplowed since the thirties, now lying bare. It had been torn up and seeded to grain following the massive Russian wheat purchase of 1972, when the per bushel price shot up to almost \$6.00..."¹⁵⁸³ Despite the similar environmental hardships shared by Nebraska Sandhillers and their fellow Great Plainsmen during the Depression,

¹⁵⁷⁹ 1954 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 47

¹⁵⁸⁰ 1954 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 44

¹⁵⁸¹ 1954 United States Department of Agriculture Census, County Table I, 48

¹⁵⁸² David J. Wishart, *The Last Days of the Rainbelt*, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 158

¹⁵⁸³ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th Anniversary Edition, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 233

Sandhills' residents proved unique in that they allowed the land itself to dictate how best to utilize it following the dusty, dry 1930s in comparison to agriculturalists in other parts of the Great Plains who did not. Such conservation/stewardship practices are still maintained by Sandhills ranchers in the present day.

During the early years of the Depression under the Hoover administration, Sandhills society also struggled with how and who to provide relief to, bank foreclosures, and a significant hobo population. Due to such malaise, Sandhills voters, who typically always voted Republican, shifted to the Democratic ticket in the Presidential election of 1932 in hopes of rectifying the region's deteriorating economic and environmental situation. Their support of men like Roosevelt and Norris was politically significant as the 1930s represented the highest point of political progressivism and Democratic support the region has ever had. In the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first Sandhillers returned to their Republican roots sticking strongly to their conservative principles even if it was not in their best interest. The region, and Nebraska as a whole, has recently become a bastion of Tea Party support. Tea Party candidates are endorsed and voted for who vocally support issues such as the Keystone Pipeline because they are Republican even though most Sandhillers do not support the pipeline and the environmental danger it poses to the Ogallala Aquifer. Thus, Sandhills politics has simply become about labels and not substance in the present-day.

During the Roosevelt administration, Sandhills infrastructure was greatly improved through New Deal programs such as the CWA, PWA, WPA, and CCC as roads were paved, high schools built, swimming pools opened, forests and wild game preserved, court houses erected, and massive dams such as Kingsley Dam constructed as

monuments to Nebraskan ingenuity and perseverance. Such projects were welcomed, whether permanent or temporary, as they provided much needed employment to Sandhillers who could not find work during the earliest days of the Depression. The New Deal fell into disfavor with Sandhills' agriculturalists due to concerns over the misapplication and effectiveness of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The act had a doubly negative effect for Nebraska New Deal Democrats and progressives as its unpopularity drove many Sandhillers, whether agriculturalist or not, back into the Republican political camp. During this era, Sandhillers sought profit from the discovery of natural resources, such as oil, demonstrating that financial gain, no matter how unrealistic, was pursued in the hills during this period. In the current era, large scale infrastructure improvements are unheard of in the Sandhills as instead some Sandhillers focus on job creation in the recreation industry as extravagant golf courses are built to attract wealthy individuals to play in the summer. Such jobs are primarily seasonal leaving Sandhills' youth to fend for large tips as caddies or waiters while school structures and hospitals need tending.

While Sandhillers built roads and dams with the help of New Deal programs, they also contended with "frontier" style problems related to the stereotypical Wild West in the form of bank robbers, shootouts with lawmen, horse and cattle stealing, and murder. Sandhillers of the 1930s, as with many of their fellow countrymen, were generally not progressive when it came to race relations and civil rights. Native Americans were viewed as indigent drunks by Sandhillers along the northern border with South Dakota and many western counties practiced a form of segregation where they were concerned. Hispanic-Americans were utilized as field labor on the border of the southwestern

Sandhills and many were forcefully deported supposedly due to financial issues as the Great Depression deepened. African-Americans were generally not welcomed either as some Sandhills communities, such as Arthur, maintained a significant Ku Klux Klan presence into the mid-1930s. Women, no matter, their race suffered verbal, physical, and sexual abuse during the Depression at the hands of their husbands or others as men felt emasculated and not in control of their own fate and destiny. Many abandoned their wives and families when they believed they could no longer support them. All of these divisive problems were alleviated, not eradicated, with religious gatherings and church functions as well as secular social gatherings and entertainment such as sporting events, fairs, rodeos, orchestras, and films which served to bring Sandhills society together on a most basic level when the aforementioned issues nearly ripped it apart. In the current era crime is relatively non-existent in central Sandhills communities due primarily to low population levels and is low in the region's larger border communities as well. Race is still a problem as, just as it was in the 1930s, the Sandhills is predominately Euro-American in its ethnicity and minorities are still referred to negatively. Many Sandhillers proudly proclaim that they voted against President Barack Obama because of his skin color, not necessarily his policies, and tensions with Native Americans in the northern hills remain high. On the date that Frank Harding was interviewed for this study in Mullen, the county seat of Hooker (named for Union general Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker), a private residence on the south side of town proudly flew a Confederate flag thus visually displaying the prejudices of the occupants within. Despite race remaining a stratifying issue, social gatherings remain a prominent unifying factor in the region especially as communities continue to shrink.

Modern day Nebraska Sandhillers face similar challenges as their counterparts from eighty-five years ago as they must always walk a delicate environmental tight rope between abundant pastures and overgrazed ones, concerns over population exodus, and social isolation and stagnation. The most significant challenge to modern Sandhillers is continued gradual societal declension. Much of this decline is tied to the region's agriculture, not in that it is unsuccessful, but that it is the only industry. If one does not ranch or cater to ranchers' needs there is little opportunity for economic/social mobility in the region. Schools continue to struggle as many are closed if they are not able to consolidate. A recent bond measure for the Mullen Public Schools was voted down in which the community would have shouldered part of the burden for gym improvements. The communities of Dunning, Halsey, Thedford, Stapleton, and Tryon have to annually debate if they will consolidate with neighboring towns or not in order that their local schools, and especially their high school sports teams, survive. Such possibilities were unimaginable in the 1930s as bond issues carried with little debate, new schools were established, and school student rolls were abundant and numerous. Many Sandhills residents no longer have hospitals or regularly operated medical clinics and have to travel long miles for emergency treatment. Towns such as Seneca in Thomas County, once an essential railroad town on the Sandhills' Burlington route which featured a roundhouse, now a sleepy hamlet of less than one-hundred people, no longer have electric street lights or a post office as the community shifts rapidly to a ghost town even before the last resident is dead. Due to these issues, modern Sandhillers must take heed of a voice from the 1930s which seems eerily prophetic today. University of Nebraska Political Science Professor Lane W. Lancaster wrote of the main issue facing American agriculture in the

late-1930s: “However pleasing it may be to reformers to think of farmers in terms of the sturdy yeomen of the Jeffersonian Democrats, it is much more sensible to face the fact that the United States is an industrial nation, that both economic and political power is passing to the cities, and that agriculture must fit itself as best it can into a social organization which it has had little part in creating and which it can only feebly influence.”¹⁵⁸⁴ It will be up to remaining Sandhillers to decide how their region will prosper and survive in a larger bustling world where its remote and peaceful beauty is at times far from appreciated. In contrast, the legacy of Great Depression era Sandhills residents is less ambiguous as their tenacity, determination, roughness, guile, and diversity will never be duplicated as they survived and prospered in an era when so many other American agricultural societies failed and floundered. They were a society comprised of people from all walks of life and dreams as different as grains of sand in the hills. They were cowboys, farm hands, drunks, ministers, soldiers, teachers, lawyers, rapists, road workers, Democrats, Republicans, politicians, businessmen, murderers, minorities, ranchers, robbers, football players, sailors, and playwrights. They were all these things and more.

¹⁵⁸⁴ Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1937), 29

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Reed, Mary Hallstead. Mullen, Nebraska, October 5, 2014.

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Thomas County Road Record 1. Thedford, Nebraska.

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