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# Dust, Rain, and War: Land Use and Labor on the Colorado Plains from 1929 to 1945

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Dust, Rain, and War: Land Use and Labor on the Colorado Plains from 1929 to 1945

by

Douglas Sheflin

B.A., University of Wisconsin, 1999

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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2012

This thesis entitled:  
Dust, Rain, and War: Land Use and Labor on the Colorado Plains from 1929 to 1945  
written by Douglas Sheflin  
has been approved for the Department of History

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Paul Sutter - Chair

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Thomas Andrews – Second Reader

Date\_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Sheflin, Douglas Richard (Ph. D., Department of History)

Dust, Rain, and War: Land Use and Labor on the Colorado Plains from 1929 to 1945

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Paul S. Sutter

The dissertation argues that the New Deal conservation policy that took root during the 1930s played an important role in changing how farmers approached their land and their government during the 1930s and beyond. The severity of the depression and devastation wrought by the Dust Bowl forced agriculturalists to reconsider how they used the land because the crises exposed the fragility of the rural economy and the problems caused by farming submarginal lands. Many farmers utilized New Deal programs, agencies, and funding to practice conservation, mitigate the Great Depression, and rehabilitate their lands. The system of county agents proved vital to this process, as agents in rural counties helped locals navigate the complexities of an ever-expanding state, serving as interlocutors between federal experts and farmers. It shows that farmers acted pragmatically – participating in programs they found worthwhile, designing alternatives, and capitalizing on federal largesse. Indeed, local farmers helped build the New Deal conservation state through just such engagement. In the aftermath of the drought, altered circumstances did little to disrupt the new coziness between growers and their tax-payer funded benefactor. World War II actually cemented that relationship, when the government responded to Coloradans’ requests for outside labor by importing Braceros and Jamaican workers, by using German prisoners of war, and by establishing work contracts for prisoners from the Amache Japanese American incarceration camp. This contract labor, which local farmers deemed

necessary to augment a labor pool depleted by migration and relocation, boosted wartime production dramatically. In addition, the influx of cheap and readily available labor combined with improved weather to allow farmers to maximize production and capitalize on wartime prices, setting the stage for the development of agribusiness in postwar America.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has taken several years to complete, and I have accrued many debts over that time. The following is a brief note of thanks to those who have funded, guided, humored, and supported me while I researched and wrote this dissertation.

I have received financial assistance from a number and variety of sources. I would like to thank the Department of History at the University of Colorado for several incarnations of dissertation funding over the past four years. The most important funding from my home department came in the form of the Bean Fund Research Fellowship that paid for a research trip to Fort Worth, Texas. I am also grateful to the University of Colorado Center for the Humanities and the Arts for finding me a worthy Thomas Edwin Devaney fellow and offering significant financial support for a year of research and writing. The Boulder Historical Society provided funding for research through the Thomas J. Meier Fellowship, so thank you to both the organization and the Meier family for their generosity.

The funding noted above helped me traverse the state and the Southwest in search of relevant sources, and several individuals and staffs guided me during the various legs of that exploration. The Agricultural Archive at Morgan Library at Colorado State University houses an incredible amount of pertinent information on agriculture in Colorado, much of it I found only with assistance from Vicky Lopez-Terrill and Linda Meyer. Wendel Cox, Senior Special Collections Librarian in the Western History and Genealogy department at the Denver Public Library, gave me a tour of their collections and helped me brainstorm about sources I had not yet considered. Archivist Rosemary Evetts at Auraria Library educated me on the library's

various sources on Amache. Finally, David Hays, Archivist at Norlin Library on the University of Colorado at Boulder campus, offered a wealth of information and friendly banter while I picked his brain about and then dug into the library's holdings.

I found helpful professionals at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) facilities in Denver as well as Fort Worth, Texas. Eric Bittner guided part of my time at the NARA – Rocky Mountain archive and proved especially helpful with the War Manpower Commission records. Marene Sweeney Baker held my hand for a good portion of my initial visit, as well as a few subsequent visits, so I am in her debt. I had the pleasure of working with many people in Fort Worth during a particularly hot summer stretch while delving into the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) records. I also made contact with a number of NRCS employees in Prowers County, including conservationist Susan Hansen, who offered me information about the area and insight into regional history that I could not find in the sources.

I owe a tremendous debt to others who have helped me better define my questions, my scope, and challenged my findings, all in hopes of making this a better dissertation. As one might imagine, many of these individuals are faculty at the University of Colorado. Fred Anderson pushed me to consider the New Deal and Dust Bowl in Colorado during a graduate methods course he taught during my first year; his insight regarding and enthusiasm for an early prospectus of this project compelled me to think more deeply about it. Brian DeLay shared Fred's enthusiasm and assisted me in bridging the gap between that early prospectus on the New Deal in Colorado and the one that eventually led to the dissertation that follows. In addition, I am very fortunate to have such a congenial and dedicated dissertation committee; much to my pleasure

most of the members arrived at the University of Colorado after I had started the project but early enough to help shape it in its final form. Specifically, thanks to Daryl Maeda who compelled me to be more critical about the chapter on wartime labor and especially the role of Japanese Americans in agricultural production. Phoebe S.K. Young has offered tremendous insight into the slow transition from family to industrial farming on the Colorado Plains. She has helped me better define my own thoughts on how New Deal conservation policy impacted region by getting me to recognize that shift. Ralph Mann has been exemplary in offering advice and assistance throughout my graduate career and has assisted me in thinking about the role of the Extension Service and its relation to the communities I discuss in this project. More generally, he continues to give selflessly to graduate students. Indeed, I cannot think of a single graduate student in American history from the CU Department of History who has not benefitted in some way from Ralph's tireless support and considerable expertise. Thomas Andrews has demonstrated how to combine labor and environmental history, with a twist of western history in there as well, to present new interpretations of well-studied events. Although he arrived late to the committee, he logged a lot of hours helping me refine my arguments and strengthen the product, largely by forcing me to think more broadly about both my intentions and contentions.

I had the unusual opportunity to work with two advisors through the process. Peter Boag took me on as an advisee after my first year in the program. He ushered me through my course work and prepared me to take the comprehensive exams, all the while compelling me to think about my dissertation plans. He pushed me to think about the Dust Bowl and World War II in tandem and thus convinced me to focus my



attention on time frame as much as content. Paul Sutter's arrival at the University of Colorado made for a seamless transition between advisors once Peter left for Washington State University. Paul's impact has been tremendous and his influence is evident in every chapter and on nearly every page of what follows. He has offered constructive criticism, abundant commentary, and useful questions, all designed to get me to focus more clearly on both the subject and the process. He has been an excellent mentor and friend. The best parts of this dissertation are likely products of his keen insight. Any mistakes or oversights are my own.

Friends and family have made this process possible as well and they merit recognition. I entered graduate school knowing nary a soul in the program, but I will leave it having made friends for life. I am deeply indebted to a number of people, though a few have put more than their share of time into helping me along the way. Doug Snyder, Nick Stachokus, Gene Tesdahl, and Brandon Williams offered humor, camaraderie, and kind words when they were needed. I will always appreciate them, though not only because they helped make graduate school more palatable.

I was incredibly fortunate that my siblings and their families lived near us for the majority of my graduate school years. Family can sustain us in ways that friends cannot, and their unwavering encouragement has fueled me over the past several years. We have all enjoyed our time living so close to each other, or so I would like to think, but I doubt they truly understand how much their presence has meant to me. My parents have steadfastly stood by me throughout the process and helped me realize that graduate school was a good path, one that I would not regret choosing. Their continued support astounds and humbles me. I am incredibly lucky.

Finally, my wife Ingrid deserves much of the credit for this project reaching completion. We welcomed our son while I was in the process of researching and writing – I am not sure he will ever completely understand this or how much I owe him for it, but he has motivated me to be the best historian I can be while also serving as a constant reminder to balance work and family. I lucked out with Ingrid. She has been my best friend, my confidante, and my biggest cheerleader. This dissertation is largely for her, mostly because it was made possible because of her. For that, I am and will forever be grateful.

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Figure 1: "Baca County, Colorado. April 14, 1935. Dust Storm. Colorado." This photo by J. H. Ward shows a dust storm moving west to east across Baca County on Black Sunday. Courtesy Library of Congress.

## INTRODUCTION

### Drought and Depression

The dust cloud pictured above was part of the dust storm that gathered momentum on April 14, 1935, the day later named Black Sunday. This particular dust storm was only the most visible example of the devastation that swept through the Great Plains during the 1930s. The storms blew away hundreds of millions of tons of topsoil that had been loosened by scorching heat and plows driven by farmers more concerned with production and immediate economic gains than with conservation. Residents of Baca and Prowers Counties in southeastern Colorado, part of the geographic region known as the Dust Bowl, witnessed these storms so frequently during the 1930s that

they routinely donned wet washcloths across their mouths to trap the dust before it entered their lungs. Images of dilapidated and abandoned farms, clouds of dust enveloping entire towns, and movies like Pare Larentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* captured America's attention. Those who stayed and survived the years of dust and drought celebrated as rain returned to the countryside in 1939 and 1940. As Colorado Cooperative Extension Agent Claude Gausman noted in 1940, "Many rural families have just swept out the last dirt in their homes from the black period 1931-1938...thus many of them have just begin [sic] to live again rather than exist."<sup>1</sup> Once the weather improved, the Second World War began, and the Allies ate up everything that Plains farmers offered, farmers hoped to turn the page on the 1930s. The war restored farmers' economic stability, covered some of the scars left by drought and depression, and left southeastern Coloradans ready for the postwar world. Over the course of fifteen remarkable years, farmers in southeastern Colorado faced such ecological distress that few could produce enough to live without federal relief only to return to the same fields to meet unprecedented demand.

This dissertation assesses that transition and considers the impact that the New Deal and World War II had on agriculture and agriculturalists in the Great Plains. Did increased federal attention and funding in the area during the Dust Bowl fundamentally alter how farmers produced and thus represent a break with the mantra of production at any cost? What can the history of southeastern Colorado tell us about broader agricultural changes in production and farm labor across the Great Plains? It is easy to

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<sup>1</sup> Claude E. Gausman, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, November, 1939 to November 01, 1940," Folder 52, Box 8. Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University. All future citations for Colorado Extension Service county records include only author, title of annual report, folder, and box number.



assume that much changed for southeastern Coloradans from the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 to the end of World War II in 1945, but historians have yet to examine how Great Plains farmers who recovered from depression and drought supplied a worldwide war effort less than a decade later. One of the fundamental arguments of this dissertation is that considering the New Deal and World War II as separate and distinct periods necessarily restricts our understanding of this transition. Donald Worster, perhaps the “dean” of Dust Bowl studies, for example, only briefly summarizes what happened in the region once rain returned and World War II opened new markets. Only by considering these two eras in succession can we conceptualize the period in terms of what aspects of New Deal conservation remained after 1939 as well as what changes to agriculture the New Deal and the war brought to the region.

By taking this slightly longer perspective on the Dust Bowl and appreciating the parts locals played in constructing the New Deal conservation state, one can see how federal conservation policy took root in Baca and Prowers Counties and played an important role in changing how farmers approached their land during the late 1930s and the 1940s. The extended view also illustrates how important Colorado Cooperative Extension Service employees, and specifically the county agents, became in farmers’ survival during the lean years and how they promoted the New Deal conservation state. Although county agents had been working in rural America since the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 introduced a national Extension program, they only really took root in southeastern Colorado during the first years of the New Deal. This was not coincidental: the agents became more important to farmers when the federal government expanded because the agents helped rural residents take advantage of

federal programs. For example, one of the agents' key tasks was to ensure that farmers abided by federal policy during the New Deal. Once they checked that farmers followed regulations or cut production according to policy guidelines (e.g. the Agricultural Adjustment Act and its crop reduction plan), then the agent distributed federal money to farmers. The agent also worked with farmers to implement conservation techniques, encouraged tenants to capitalize on resettlement programs, and identified submarginal land that the federal government could purchase to retire. In other words, regardless of the federal program, the agent worked as an intermediary between the federal government and the local farmer. His list of responsibilities grew as the number of government farm programs increased, and, since no other period in American history had as many farm programs as the New Deal, the agent remained busy throughout the 1930s.

County agents maintained this position as interlocutor when federal land use policy shifted from production reduction programs to those more directed at resource conservation after 1935. The growing sense that soil mined of its nutrients contributed heavily to the Dust Bowl left federal observers and agents convinced that soil conservation should be central to their efforts to rehabilitate the land. This push for soil conservation reflected the state's response to the dual crises of Dust Bowl and Great Depression because many experts, ranging from soil conservationists to economists to sociologists, believed that poor land made poor people, essentially that rural poverty and soil degradation were inextricably linked. This premise led federal, state, and local observers to emphasize soil and water conservation as the best way to stabilize the rural economy and make agriculture more sustainable. The agents toiled on the front lines of

this battle against resource waste, offering instruction and expertise, as well as machinery and labor, to help farmers plow on the contour, strip crop, or plant shelterbelts to reduce erosion and maintain soil fertility.

The formation of soil conservation districts as a result of a state law passed in 1938 represented the key moment in the fight against erosion. The districts relied on agents to coordinate and manage conservation efforts but gave local farmers some autonomy in terms of deciding where and how to focus on conservation. In other words, rather than abide by directives given by the Soil Conservation Service or another federal agency, the agents and farmers cooperated in executing a system of conservation on private lands and did so of their own volition. Moreover, and representative of land use policy during the New Deal years, the federal and state governments provided each district with expertise, training, machinery, and funding, demonstrating an unprecedented commitment to natural resource conservation on the Great Plains. The combination of federal largesse and local control, orchestrated by the county agent, allowed for the New Deal conservation state to mature in the Colorado countryside.

A key to gauging New Deal conservation policy and its effectiveness is to consider how conservation fared when rain and demand encouraged farmers to increase production. Quite obviously, the pull to maximize output and garner as much financial benefit from new demand challenged conservation efforts. The desire for economic gain was never far from farmers' minds during the period, particularly given the decades-long economic decline. Some farmers chafed under domestic production regulations employed during the New Deal and continued during the war. Yet, a significant number of those farmers in Baca and Prowers Counties who embraced the

importance of conservation and technical adjustments to protect soil and water during the 1930s continued to maintain these practices during the war. For example, the number of soil conservation districts in the two counties quadrupled between 1938 and 1943; nearly 75% of Baca County sat inside a district and farmers on that land abided by district conservation policy.<sup>2</sup> This widespread acceptance of conservation represented a crucial and underappreciated product of land use reform under the New Deal. In addition, the advocates of New Deal conservation maintained a presence in rural communities, as both educators and distributors of federal subsidies, into the 1940s. As a result, when wartime needs required farmers to meet demand, they did so with the lessons of the New Deal fresh in their minds, and with government money in their pockets.

The theme of federal intervention and the county agent maintaining a presence in the countryside continued during the war in another important way as well. By the start of the war in 1941, most of the labor pool that had worked on southeastern Colorado sugar beet, wheat, and broomcorn farms was no longer available. The labor regime that had matured in the region was no longer capable of meeting farmers' demands. Initially, agricultural labor systems in the region reflected the traditional practice of employing family and local itinerant workers. This combination worked until the 1910s when the sugar beet industry boomed and farmers needed more workers. Sugar beet companies turned to a seasonal migrant labor from within Colorado, nearby states, and, after World War I, from Mexico. This combination of workers satisfied farmers' demands until the middle 1930s. At that point, the labor regime fractured for

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<sup>2</sup> John J. Underwood, "Physical Land Conditions in the Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts" (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1944).

two reasons. First, because the dip in production during the Dust Bowl led to diminished demand among farmers for workers, many local agricultural workers even moved on from the region. Second, Coloradans pushed to limit migrant labor because many white and Hispanic residents argued that the domestic migrants and Mexican workers took their jobs. This animosity broke up the supply of workers because migrants had little desire to move into a region where they faced such steady hostility. In fact, Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson ordered the southern borders of Colorado closed to migrant workers during 1936, a move that at least symbolically suggested that Colorado farmers had no reason or desire to hire supposed outsiders.

Fortunately for farmers who needed workers, however, the federal government identified this dearth and interceded, making an unusual array of workers available to southeastern Colorado farmers in late 1942 and early 1943. Beginning in 1943, the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service took over management of orchestrating this new labor regime through its Emergency Farm Labor Program that consisted of guestworkers from Jamaica and Mexico as well as German prisoners of war and prisoners from the Amache Japanese American incarceration camp outside of Lamar, Colorado. The Emergency Farm Labor Program used the Extension Service's infrastructure, especially the county agents, to determine the scope of the labor problem and to develop solutions. The Service assessed how many farmers needed workers, where the workers were most needed, placed the workers on farms, educated both the workers and the farmers on how to work safely and efficiently together, and even helped remove the workers once they completed the job. Over the course of the four years Extension ran the program, from 1943 to 1947, it recruited and placed 250,000

workers on Colorado farms, a workforce that consisted of a remarkable array of people, including seasonal migrant workers, Jamaican and Mexican guestworkers, German prisoners of war, and prisoners of the Amache camp. This motley assortment made it possible for Colorado's farmers to produce the commodities necessary for the war effort. World War II thus marked a profound moment of change in the labor history of Plains agriculture, one that was facilitated by the successes of the New Deal state.

Other aspects of life on the Colorado Plains reflect a similar consistency between the New Deal and World War II. The issue of land use, and specifically the trend toward industrial farming and away from family farming, started in earnest during the first decades of the twentieth century but accelerated quickly and dramatically during the 1930s and 1940s. New Deal programs were not uniformly promoting the shift to larger and fewer farms. Indeed, many New Deal programs "were based on diametrically opposed philosophies and on contradictory visions of the nature and the future of rural America," but also because certain "agencies advanced initiatives that were canceled by others."<sup>3</sup> Yet, the Dust Bowl forced policymakers to identify and come to terms with limits to developing agriculture in the Great Plains. The frequent droughts compelled farmers and policymakers to consider their goals of long-term settlement by family farmers. In most cases, this meant pushing for fewer farms on larger acreages – what we might call a series of "anti-Homestead Act" policies. The push toward larger farms, one primarily motivated by some federal officials' belief that larger farms were more likely to survive lean years and more prone to practice conservation, continued during the war. In other words, this broad transition in

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<sup>3</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, Second Edition (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 207.

American agriculture corresponded with the decline in family farms and the advent of agribusiness, which was in some ways a product of New Deal policy and the Dust Bowl's impact on the Great Plains.

There are three important reasons to use the two Colorado counties that I have chosen to focus on in this study. First, historians of the New Deal and the Dust Bowl have generally refrained from including Colorado in their histories.<sup>4</sup> Yet the study of Colorado is necessary to supplement our understanding of the periods and, therefore, of modern American history. Historians writing about the Great Plains during the 1930s seem to forget that southeastern Colorado sat at the heart of the Dust Bowl, and instead look to Nebraska, Kansas, and even the Dakotas to explicate New Deal agricultural policy.<sup>5</sup> While the Colorado Plains are often overlooked, they are nonetheless an important part of the state, and they were perhaps hit harder by the Dust Bowl than any other area in the region. In addition, most studies of the Second World War in the West focus on the coast and pay little attention to life on the western Plains.<sup>6</sup> While the Amache camp has garnered significant attention, there is a surprising dearth of

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<sup>4</sup> There are a few notable exceptions. See James Wickens, *Colorado in the Great Depression* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1979); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Stephen J. Leonard, *Trials and Triumphs: A Colorado Portrait of the Great Depression, With FSA Photographs* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1993). For the most part, however, works that detail the period are state or county based and have not attended to Colorado.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007); 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), and Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

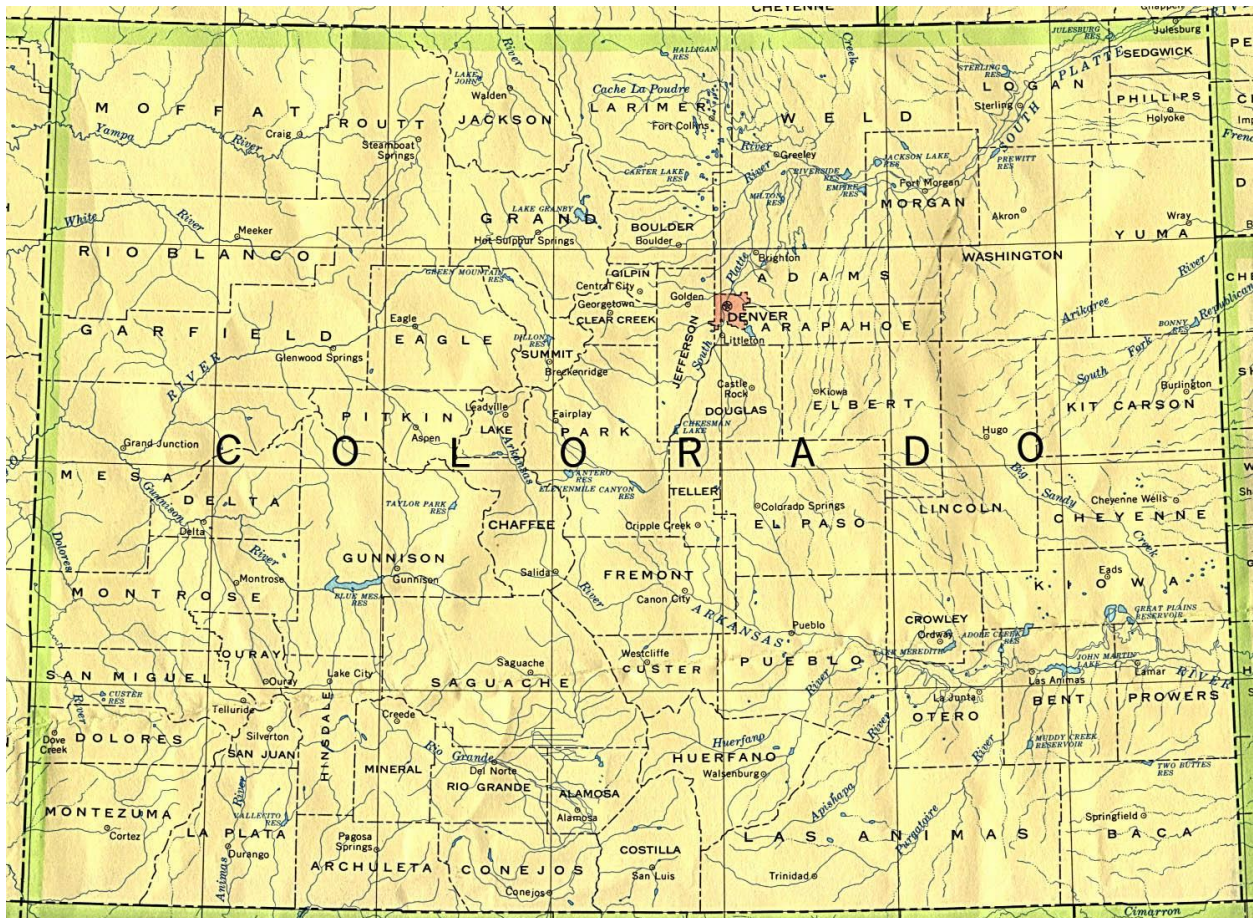
<sup>6</sup> See Roger W. Lotchin, *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Gerald Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985); Marilyn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); John S. Westerlund, *Arizona's War Town: Flagstaff, Navajo Ordnance Depot, and World War II* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

historical literature on other aspects of life in the region during the 1940s. Yet, the situation in Colorado during the war reflects similar themes to those that historians have developed in studies of other areas. Wartime migration, the transition in labor, and the federal government's investment in wartime production played out differently than they did in California or Arizona, but historians have paid no attention to the state during the war. This study, while in no way a comprehensive look at either period, hopes to shed some light on how Colorado fits into the historiography detailing the 1930s and 1940s.

Second, the two counties chosen - Baca and Prowers Counties in southeastern Colorado - offer two distinct land use patterns within the Dust Bowl region and thus offer prime points of comparison and contrast. While these counties share a border and enjoy roughly the same weather patterns, Prowers County farmers have the benefit of the Arkansas River and more developed irrigation. Consequently, irrigation has allowed farmers in Prowers to grow cash crops such as sugar beets and alfalfa and to raise livestock, whereas farmers in Baca focused on wheat, broomcorn, and other dry farming crops. In addition, water rights, though hotly contested and by no means universally available, helped mitigate the consequences of drought and dust for Prowers County farmers. In the absence of a consistent water supply like that provided by the Arkansas River, farmers in Baca County were more responsive to the soil and water conservation lessons taught by federal agents during the New Deal. The two counties also shared many characteristics. Both counties experienced out-migration during the Dust Bowl and again during the war as residents followed the promise of better wages and stable employment. Most importantly, both received an unprecedented level of attention from the federal government with the onset of the New Deal and both played



an important part in supplying integral wartime commodities like sugar and broomcorn. By looking at these counties, we can see how both dryland and irrigated farmers faced the dual crises and better understand how different constituencies utilized federal largesse to survive.



**Figure 2: Map of Colorado.** Notice the bottom right (southeast) corner, home to Baca and Prowers Counties. Courtesy [lib.utexas.edu](http://lib.utexas.edu).

A third reason for studying Colorado is the labor situation in the state during the 1930s and more especially during the war. The agricultural system in southeastern Colorado relied on tenants, migratory labor, and local workers, especially from the Hispanic community, in the decades leading up to the 1930s. The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression marked a point of crisis on Colorado farms, specifically in sugar beet,

wheat, and broomcorn fields, because much of the available labor pool was no longer accessible. The drought cut into farmers' demand and Coloradans' anti-migrant fervor during the depression diminished the supply of workers – as a result, farmers had to basically reset their labor programs in 1941. Fortunately for farmers, the federal response and the Extension Service's Emergency Farm Labor Program combined to meet their wartime demand by providing workers from several countries. The amalgam of laborers that Extension amassed in southeastern Colorado was unique in the United States. Colorado agents and Extension employees, as well as farmers in the state, thus had the unique opportunity to work with and utilize such a diverse group of workers – and the workers made wartime production possible. In the process, farmers became accustomed to using outside workers and took advantage of the labor force to capitalize on wartime demands. Farmers only enjoyed an economic rebound during the war because they employed such workers who helped them bring in their abundant harvests.

This dissertation suggests a number of important connections between the New Deal and World War II. For example, a focus on land use shows that farmers practiced soil and water conservation during both periods. The gradual shift to larger and fewer farms actually promoted a turn to conservation rather than production, as more economically stable farmers proved less likely to misuse their land. These same farmers also took advantage of inexpensive labor. Even though the migrant labor streams dried up during the 1930s, Prowers and Baca County farmers utilized workers made available during the war to meet wartime demand. The county agents stayed loyal to their constituents through it all. They distributed federal money and helped farmers construct the New Deal conservation state, effectively ensuring farmers could

withstand the lean years. They then assisted farmers to take advantage of wartime demand, promoting a sort of measure production that allowed farmers to meet wartime goals without abandoning conservation. In a sense, then, the agents helped farmers prosper during the war years and facilitated the transition to postwar, modern agriculture more reliant on technology and science rather than manpower. The federal government and county agents thus made the shift from family farm to agribusiness possible, a shift that fundamentally changed American agriculture.

•Historiography•

The focus on land use and labor during such prominent periods in modern American history ensured that the dissertation would speak to and engage a variety of different historiographies. In terms of land use, and more specifically in terms of agriculture during the 1930s, the situations in Prowers and Baca Counties suggest a number of new ways to view the Dust Bowl. Since Donald Worster and Paul Bonnifield first published their books on the Dust Bowl historians of the period have had an obligation to weigh in on the declensionist versus progressive debate.<sup>7</sup> This project suggests that, while elements of both views emerge in this study, neither perspective adequately presents what happened in southeastern Colorado during the Dust Bowl years and after. For example, the declensionist view that Worster first invoked in his seminal history *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, argues that the human relationship with the natural world on the Southern Plains was bound for disaster. In effect, once Anglo-Americans reached the area and settled it they were determined to achieve profitable agriculture, regardless of the impact such agriculture

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<sup>7</sup> William Cronon considers this perspective the “declensionist” view, in contrast to the “progressive” view which affords more credit to farmers and residents who proved resilient in the face of the Dust Bowl. William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1347-1376.

had on the land. That greed and a broad dismissal of the land's inherent inability to support expansive agricultural production have defined humans' approach to their farms – they farmed in places that should have been left alone and broke too much sod in their attempts to maximize production. This theme came to a head during the 1920s with the Great Plow Up, and the New Deal had an opportunity to change this unbroken adherence to agricultural capitalism. Yet, it failed to compel farmers to adapt their land use and instead left basically the same systems in place after the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> This project suggests that Worster may have been correct, especially in terms of early settlement patterns and land use more generally from the 1880s through FDR's election, but that farmers *did* adapt their land use practices during the 1930s. Farmers in the two counties widely embraced soil and water conservation, in part because of federal subsidies to promote such resource management, but New Deal policy helped rein in abusive land use practices. Indeed, the persistence of agriculture in the region is evidence that, while not all farmers have acted as good stewards of the land, they have generally been much more attentive to stability and sustainability since the 1930s than the declensionist view contends.

The progressive interpretation, for all intents and purposes the main contrast to the declensionist view and perhaps most embodied by Paul Bonnifield's *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression*, also fails to adequately explain the period. The progressive view invokes a kind of teleology in that it argues for the primacy of human innovation and ingenuity that combined with farmers' perseverance to help residents survive the Dust Bowl. In very basic terms, Bonnifield contends that nature caused the disaster and, by their own resilience, farmers won out in the end because they effectively

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

“willed” themselves through the worst years. This view is much too simplistic. Certainly, folks who stayed through the lean years and lived through the economic and ecological disaster deserve credit for doing so, but they had a tremendous amount of help. Federal, state, and local programs effectively propped up a significant portion of the population that could not sustain itself. Moreover, many people did not, in fact, outlast the Dust Bowl. Tragically, some residents succumbed to the dust, others simply moved out of the region instead of dealing with the catastrophe. Bonnifield seems to suggest that the Dust Bowl was simply not that terrible and farmers proved capable to withstand even the worst years, as if there had never been any doubt that they could and would survive.<sup>9</sup> Farmers in Baca and Prowers County would have certainly disagreed, as this dissertation demonstrates. The Dust Bowl combined with the decades-long agricultural depression to force adaptation and to compel farmers to reconsider how and where they farmed. The depression and drought were transformational for farmers who stayed in the region – they had to acclimate in order to survive. The government largely funded these efforts, enabling farmers to conserve resources and simultaneously stay on their land during 1930s. This dissertation suggest that local enthusiasm for such programs and the dramatic and unprecedented expansion of federal programs to help struggling farmers, through promoting soil conservation and even building a dam and reservoir system, sustained agriculturalists during the period. This combination of events in no way suggests the kind of determinism that the progressive school employs.

The dissertation also takes an approach that differs from earlier studies of the Dust Bowl in two ways. First, the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service, and more

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).

specifically the county agents in the two counties, plays a major role in this study. To date, no Dust Bowl history attends to the county agents, but they proved absolutely critical to helping farmers sustain themselves during the period.<sup>10</sup> For the most part, early histories of the Extension Service were effectively organization histories of the Service that addressed the idea of sending agents into the field and explained the importance of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 that succeeded in creating the national program. While works by Wayne Rasmussen and others illustrate the ideological roots of extension, narrate the Service's approach to agriculture, and explicate the program's and agents' responsibilities, they lose sight of how agents and farmers actually related to one another.<sup>11</sup> More recent studies of Extension have swung to the other end of the pendulum, namely by looking only at how agents related to farmers and consequently losing sight of the educational and financial benefits that agents brought to rural Americans. Authors such as Debra A. Reid inject Extension with an agency to provoke social change or embody rural reform in ways that do not seem to parallel the agents' work in southeastern Colorado.<sup>12</sup> In the end, this project interprets the agents in various roles, from educator to labor broker, but the focus is generally on how agents related to farmers professionally rather than socially. So, while Reid and others have

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<sup>10</sup> While a significant literature exists on New Deal welfare, work programs, and the ways that locals utilized federal assistance to get through the 1930s, historians generally look at the relationship between residents and New Deal experts and therefore bypass the agents even though they were an integral part of that connection. For example, see Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas*, Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation*, and Catherine McNicol Stock *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains*.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Farmers, Cooperatives, and USDA: A History of Agricultural Cooperative Service* (Washington, D.C.: USDA, 1991); Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989); Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970)

<sup>12</sup> Two examples are Debra A. Reid, *Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, The Extension Service, and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007); Angela Firkus, "The Agricultural Extension Service and Non-Whites in California, 1910-1932" *Agricultural History* 84, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 506-530.

demonstrated how the Extension Service could be viewed as a vehicle for social and cultural reform, their work is not pertinent to this dissertation.

In addition to employing the agents' records as a lens into agricultural policy reform during the period, this project also differs from most Dust Bowl and New Deal agro-environmental histories by trying to situate 1930s policy between that of the 1920s and 1940s.<sup>13</sup> In other words, while the economic and ecological disasters provoked adaptation, policies employed in the 1930s neither materialized out of thin air nor disappeared in 1939. Indeed, one of ways that this project hopes to add to the existing literature is by actually evaluating the precursors and consequences of the New Deal conservation state. In that vein, it relies heavily on two excellent works that depict how the 1930s fit into the larger picture of interwar agriculture. Sarah T. Phillips's work on the "new conservationists" of the 1920s and their impact on New Deal agricultural and land use policy suggests a number of ways to reconsider the Roosevelt administration's impact on resource use. Much of Phillips's view that New Deal policy largely sought to use conservation policy to remedy economic depression in rural America, rehabilitating the land to rehabilitate the people, is spot on in southeastern Colorado, and her work connecting such policy to the 1920s is noteworthy. Furthermore, her insight that such policy had the unintended consequence of altering land use to the extent that some farmers were forced from their lands connects well to the decline in family farms and the rise in industrial farming across the Great Plains.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This contention is part of a larger argument about the importance of interwar conservation to resource use in the history of modern America. For a discussion of the relative dearth in interwar environmental histories, which is thankfully being slowly remedied, see Paul S. Sutter, "Terra Incognita: The Neglected History of Interwar Environmental Thought and Politics," *Reviews in American History* 29, No. 2 (2001): 289-297.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Geoff Cunfer's work on the Great Plains also suggests some ways that we might contextualize the Dust Bowl and, as a result, rethink its impact of farming and farm policy across the region. Yet, this project effectively contests his interpretation. Cunfer rightly considers the persistence of agriculture on the Plains as evidence that adaptation occurred and stability eventually won out in spite of economic and environmental challenges. Cunfer traces land use patterns on the Great Plains from roughly 1870 to 2000 and contends that the Dust Bowl was merely a "temporary disruption in a stable system."<sup>15</sup> Cunfer sees land use in the Great Plains as generally stable and static from 1920; technical adjustments, demographic shifts, and other changes, while noteworthy, did not upset the general pattern of how, where, and what farmers produced. This was not the case in Baca and Prowers Counties, where increased federal involvement during the New Deal, farmers' attention to soil and water conservation, and the changing size and number of farms suggest that the depression and drought combined to fundamentally change agriculture on the Plains. The persistence of agriculture in the region owes more to 1930s policies of subsidies and conservation than it does to anything else; as a result, Cunfer's assessment of the point that agriculture became stable is roughly 25 years early and does not adequately deal with policy. Only after World War II, when the number of farms had declined, the size of farms had grown, and farmers had developed a dependency on federal support can we truly consider Plains agriculture as stable.

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<sup>15</sup> Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 6. Cunfer's work builds on earlier but similarly broad studies of agriculture on the Great Plains such as Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), and James Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History*, Fourth Edition (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967).



By tracing agricultural conservation policy into the 1940s, this study offers a firm interpretation of how the New Deal conservation state remained a part of farming in southeastern Colorado. Connecting the 1930s and 1940s, by looking at how soil and water conservation continued and by illustrating how agents remained a part of rural communities and maintained their position as interlocutor between the federal government and resident farmers, suggests that historians need to do more to contextualize the two periods. As much as historians of the New Deal have focused only on the 1930s, most historians of the war only attend to the war years. Moreover, the literature detailing the war has long been presented in reference to the “transformation thesis.” The “transformation thesis” suggests that World War II was a strong and punctuated force in the modernization of the American West. This project addresses two issues with literature on the Second World War: first, the emphasis on World War II gives short shrift to changes originating in the 1930s; second, until very recently the Great Plains had made no entrance into the debate. Gerald Nash first presented the “transformation thesis” to argue that the Second World War transformed the West by bringing it out of a colonial relationship with the East. Through the influx of federal money, the development of infrastructure, economic diversification, and industrialization, wartime mobilization made the West a pacesetter for American economics, politics, and society. This argument met considerable opposition, most notably from Roger Lotchin, who argued more in favor of stability for the region, that the changes that accompanied war proved temporary at best.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nash initially made this argument in a series of books devoted to both economic and social change. Lotchin and others have argued that the notion of transformation goes too far, and that while some things changed it was not a fundamental shift in the history of the West. Historians have also found some middle ground in this debate, noting some significant change coupled with temporary or superficial adaptations rather than uniform transformation. See,

This dissertation addresses two important issues with the thesis and the approach more generally, issues that both proponents and advocates have largely neglected. First, the emphasis on World War II gives short shrift to changes originating during the 1930s. In other words, as Dust Bowl historians have failed to draw their conclusions about the decade into the 1940s, so have historians of the war missed the opportunity to examine precursors of wartime change. Second, members of the opposing views prioritize West Coast and urban histories and have therefore done little to look at agriculture, conservation, or the Rocky Mountain West. Consequently, this dissertation fills that void by assessing how the war impacted Colorado agriculture as well as an important interpretation of how several wartime changes started during the previous decade. By taking this slightly larger perspective of time, one can discern that the war was not in fact transformative in southeastern Colorado. The war accelerated some things and stalled others, but nothing that emerged during the war was wholly without precedent. This is especially true when we consider the role of the federal government in promoting stable agriculture, the omnipresent county agent, and the fact that farmers largely continued to support the New Deal conservation state even during the war years. On the whole, while the influx of paid labor and the healthy markets represented new developments, World War II did not dramatically alter how farmers approached their land; instead, it accelerated changes already in motion.<sup>17</sup>

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for example, Gerald Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985) and Roger Lotchin, *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> I tend to agree with his argument that the war was not a transformative event for the Great Plains, but much is left unanswered by this work. R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

Another way to consider the relationship between the 1930s and 1940s is by considering labor, and that consideration suggests more consistency than transformation. The best study of migrant labor in Colorado during the 1930s, Sarah Deutsch's *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on the Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940*, details how Hispanic workers traveled between villages and seasonal labor locales while trying to maintain family and community ties. This project reinforces her explanation of the challenges that workers faced in terms of discrimination and the dwindling supply and demand of Hispanic seasonal agricultural workers during the 1930s. These migrant workers became a prominent piece of the paid labor pool in southeastern Colorado, and especially in sugar beets, over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. The ecological and economic crises interrupted the flow of workers onto southeastern Colorado farms, but the war renewed the migration – giving both workers and employers a chance to capitalize on wartime demand. For the most part, however, Deutsch attends to the social and cultural aspects of the workers' lives; additionally, she stops her study in 1940. As a result, while her findings are informative, this dissertation supplements her work by extending the time frame forward and considering how some of these laborers lived through the war years. Their continued migration into the region suggests that the 1930s were a brief interruption to the movement of peoples rather than a stiff break in previously established patterns.

By carrying the analysis of farm labor into the war years we can see the quick decline in tenancy and the brief interruption in migrant workers as merely one chapter of the interesting story of agricultural labor in the region. While incredibly few

historians have dealt with tenancy in the West, unlike the voluminous treatment of tenancy in the South, tenants played an important role in fulfilling labor needs in the region during the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the drought and depression meant that few tenants had much reason to stay in the region and little incentive to remain on land that had no great opportunity to produce. Moreover, most New Deal policies had little to do with tenants. As a result, the tenant system, though largely indicative of the problems inherent with marginal farmers within American agriculture, could not sustain itself in Prowers and Baca Counties into the war years. The decline in tenants and migrants was not a problem during the 1930s but the 1940s brought new markets and unprecedented demand.

The Extension Service again heeded farmers' call and by 1943 it managed the farm labor situation across the state. The focus on the Extension Service, especially in its ability to organize and place a labor force unique in American history for its diversity, is a noteworthy twist on histories of the various groups involved.<sup>19</sup> The project makes important contributions to the literatures on incarceration camps, the Bracero program, labor during World War II, and the agricultural economy of the western Great Plains. Works on the Amache camp replicate those detailing other incarceration sites, primarily by discussing life in the camps as well as how local and

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<sup>18</sup> There has been some attention to tenancy in the Midwest but historians have been slow to extend their analyses into the High Plains and beyond. See a couple of examples in William H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions" *Agricultural History* 66, no. 2 (Spring, 1992): 95-119; Frank Yoder, "Rethinking Midwestern Farm Tenure: A Cultural Perspective," *Agricultural History* 71, no. 4 (Autumn, 1997): 457-478; Donald L. Winters, "Agricultural Tenancy in the Nineteenth-Century Middle West: The Historiographical Debate," *Indiana Magazine of History* 78 (June 1982): 128-53.

<sup>19</sup> The example that closest resembles the diversity of workers in Colorado is William Okie's look at Georgia. See William Thomas Okie, "Under the Trees: The Georgia Peach and the Quest for Labor in the Twentieth Century" *Agricultural History* (Winter 2011): 72-101. Okie does not attend to the Extension Service, so while his appreciation for the diversity of wartime labor, this focus on the Extension Service provides another wrinkle.

state officials reacted to the process.<sup>20</sup> While these are important components of the story, very little has been done to assess how prisoner labor fit into local circumstances. A few recent examples show how historians are beginning to consider incarceration in environmental history terms.<sup>21</sup> No parallel developments have yet occurred in bracero or POW historiography, though historians continue to produce interesting work on the bracero program, as well as the Jamaican guestworker program – about which very little is written about and none of the literature suggests the importance of Jamaican workers to Colorado agriculture.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, however, studies on each group of imported labor approach the subject from either the national or the worker perspective, and, while both views are important to our understanding of wartime labor, they neglect the labor broker. By emphasizing the Service we can better appreciate the interactions between agents and farmers, as well as how agents viewed the workers, and thus get a better sense of the wartime labor situation.

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<sup>20</sup> On Amache see William Wei, “The Strangest City in Colorado: The Amache Concentration Camp,” *Colorado Heritage* (Winter 2005): 2-17, Adam Schrager, *The Principled Politician: The Ralph Carr Story* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008), Kumiko Takahara, *Off the Fat of the Land: The Denver Post’s Story of the Japanese American Internment during World War II* (Powell, WY: Western History Publications, 2003), and Robert Harvey, *Amache: The Story of Japanese Internment in Colorado during World War II* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Connie Chiang, “Imprisoned Nature: Toward an Environmental History of the World War II Japanese American Incarceration,” *Environmental History* 15 (April, 2010): 236-267; Robert Wilson, “Landscapes of Promise and Betrayal: Reclamation, Homesteading, and Japanese American Incarceration,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 2: 424-444.

<sup>22</sup> On braceros see Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1976), Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990) and Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California, 1942-1960* (Charlotte/Santa Barbara: McNally & Loftin, 1964); Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012). On Jamaicans see Cindy Hahamovitch, “‘In America Life is Given Away’: Jamaican Farmworkers and the Making of Agricultural Immigration Policy” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001): 134-160; Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man’s Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

It is not coincidental that the Extension Service runs throughout this dissertation. In many ways, the agents' story is the story of how agriculture and the state related to each other starting during the New Deal. The agents helped sustain farmers during the lean years and promoted the kinds of adaptation like soil and water conservation that made the persistence of agriculture in the region possible. To that end, the New Deal worked for such farmers because, while many bristled at a growing dependency on the federal government, enough programs married federal largesse and local control to enable farmers to have some control over their situation. Yet, in some respects, the workers – ranging from tenants to guestworkers to prisoners – suggest that not all of those impacted by federal policy benefitted from such exposure. That some farmers had success during the war after surviving the 1930s almost mandates that other farmers and laborers struggled, and struggled mightily. These individuals largely paid the price for sustaining the farm economy and for providing prosperity to farmers during and after the war. The outmigration of “Okies,” the tough times for workers, the mass removal of Japanese Americans, and the decline of the family farm in the region, to cite just a few examples, all portended the ways that the period quite literally made or broke both farmers and individuals. If a farmer could get through then he or she was well positioned to prosper – but if he or she failed then perhaps it was not in the cards. Admittedly, this project focuses more on the former than the latter, but only by attending to both sides of the story can we fully appreciate how dust, rain, and war impacted agriculture on the Colorado Plains.

A final point about the terminology I utilize in this dissertation. For the most part I have adopted “Hispanic” as an umbrella term to identify the disparate peoples that

relocated to the United States, or found themselves living in the United States as the border shifted. Most of those who came to America did so primarily from Mexico, yet in many cases it is difficult to differentiate between groups of workers from various states. As a result, the term also provides a level of convenience to speak more generally about workers who Extension employees called “Spanish Americans,” “Mexican Americans,” and “Spanish-speakers.” They were able to distinguish between these groups and Mexican Nationals, which is another reason why I use the term to separate resident communities and workers from guestworkers during the war. I also use various terms to explain the evacuation process as it affected the Japanese Americans at Amache. I rely on several sources, including the website Densho.org and Greg Robinson’s recent works on incarceration, and tend to agree with their logic on how to describe evacuation and placement. I use the terms “incarceration” and “confinement” and “prisoners” rather than “internment” or “internees” because Japanese Americans were in effect prisoners of the American state. I apply the term “expulsion” or “mass removal” to connote what historians used to consider the “relocation” process. The term “relocation” implies choice, which the prisoners most certainly did not have regarding their move to camps. Finally, I utilize “Japanese American” to describe all people of Japanese descent living in the United States during this period. Some were unable to become citizens because of restrictive regulations and others perhaps did not desire to become citizens, but the label indicates my assumption that many would have been naturalized if given the opportunity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See the following, each of which includes a section on terminology and a brief explanation of terms and labels: Densho.org; Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009).

## •Chapter Outline•

Chapter one begins with the history of the two counties leading up to 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. By dealing with settlement and initial land use patterns, including the impact of the homesteaders who flooded the region, this chapter will present the typical boom and bust agricultural cycle experienced throughout the Plains and the West. The aversion to federal involvement, the reticence to change land use, and the mentality that nature will indeed provide demonstrated farmers' inability to take responsibility for reconciling their methods to reflect the arid environment. The chapter argues that the decades leading up to the depression demonstrate how economic self interest dictated how farmers approached the land and resulted in both over production and significant personal debt.

The second chapter traces changes in the region from 1929 to 1934, from the beginning of the Great Depression to the onset of the dust storms and the initial influx of New Deal programs. It shows how Colorado farmers developed ties to federal officials and New Deal agents, ties which were crucial to how farmers engaged conservation policy and land use reform broached by these relative outsiders. This chapter presents the transition from Hoover to Roosevelt in terms of increasing popular support for federal involvement to remedy the depression. The agricultural economy had been in decline since the end of World War I so the depression actually affected many farmers in only secondary ways. Yet, by 1932 and Roosevelt's election, farmers were beginning to come to terms with needing federal assistance to make ends meet. The key to this chapter is the introduction of the Agricultural Adjustment Act as a way to keep farmers afloat and the county agent's role in promoting the policy. To reward



farmers for not farming or for killing livestock was indeed foreign to the majority of residents in southeast Colorado, but the subsidy payments were a welcome addition to meager family income. While there was some confusion about the nature of federal involvement and how the AAA worked for farmers, farmers generally warmed to federal policies devoted to the countryside after this initial foray. It helped that the county agents worked with farmers every step of the process to ensure compliance and to offer support – both education and financial – to make sure that they executed the policies and earned their subsidies. This maturing combination of county agents' efforts and federal largesse gained ground during these early New Deal years and set the stage for continued relations between farmers, agents, and the federal government. The essential point is that the first years of the New Deal involved a changing relationship between the farmer and federal employees as well as policymakers – though the changes build upon important and thus far neglected developments during the Hoover years.

Chapter three covers the period from the early New Deal years through the first years of the Second World War. It continues to trace the relationship between farmers and federal agents discussed in Chapter Three as New Deal policymakers laid the groundwork for land reform throughout the Great Plains. This relationship was imperative during the Dust Bowl because struggling farmers needed additional subsidies to counter both depression and drought. It also proved absolutely crucial because the genesis of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) marked a transitional point for New Deal policy in rural America, specifically in terms of the Dust Bowl region. The SCS was the flagship agency in trying to convince farmers to consider soil erosion

a significant obstacle to long-term sustainability and economic security. The process of getting farmers to agree with tenets of conservation and adjusting their methods required both education and economic incentive. While the SCS and the federal government offered the economic incentive, county agents largely supplied the education and were hands-on in their approach to reconciling over production and mistreatment of soil. They also helped coordinate, organize, and lead the soil conservation districts that best represent farmers' embrace of the maturing conservation state. The agents had become the face of federal policy during the early stages of the New Deal so their increasing emphasis on soil erosion took root, particularly in Baca County, because of earlier relationships with farmers in the region.

Chapter four attends more directly to the irrigation situation in Prowers County from roughly the 1890s through the construction of John Martin Dam and Reservoir in 1948. Like those in Baca County, residents of Prowers County heeded advice about conservation, but they enjoyed irrigation from the Arkansas River and were thus sheltered from the worst of the drought. As such, they were less prone to institute conservation techniques on a grand scale as had been accomplished in Baca County. They instead pushed for the construction of the Caddoa Dam to provide more irrigation for the county – irrigators generally think of more water as the best solution to any problems with production. Similarly to Baca County farmers, Prowers County farmers started to look more favorably on federal involvement in responding to the drought and depression. Rather than embrace soil conservation outright, however, they asked for federal funding and expertise to build an expansive dam and reservoir system along the Arkansas River to stabilize the water levels and provide irrigators with more of the

valuable resource. Prowers farmers had utilized the river as a sort of crutch and protection from drought, but the Dust Bowl proved so severe and the Roosevelt administration proved so generous, that they fought for and won federal support for dam construction. Their land use changed to the extent that they thought more about water conservation, and the few dryland farmers in Prowers instituted soil conservation practices, but the drought had a less devastating impact in Prowers County than it did in Baca County. More farmers stayed through the 1930s and were therefore ready to enjoy postwar prosperity as the dam opened and consumer demand helped the regional economy recover. Thus, as it had in Baca County, federal intervention during the New Deal helped sustain farmers and ensure the persistence of agriculture in the region.

The fifth chapter addresses how the depression and drought affected the labor regimes in place in southeastern Colorado. It points to the presence of migrant, tenant, and other agricultural laborers to show that the Dust Bowl had an enormous affect on non-land owners. These individuals had generally made their livings by managing and working wheat and sugar fields in the area, but economic decline, drought, and the dearth in good jobs meant less opportunity for employment for this segment of the population. Like landowners, a portion of these workers decided that the Dust Bowl and depression were too much to make a decent living in the countryside. Their departure changed the nature of agriculture in the area because the biggest farms, most of which were tied to cash crops like wheat and sugar, no longer had an abundant and available labor pool from which to draw. This chapter also inserts the story of these tenants and workers into the broader Dust Bowl narrative. Analyses of the Dust Bowl neglect their presence in the fields, instead focusing on landowners who stayed or white

migrants who left the area. These workers, many poor whites or Hispanics, had a tremendously difficult time trying to make ends meet, find work, and stay in the area long enough for the drought to break.

The final chapter deals with the influx of contract labor in 1942 and 1943 through the end of the war to show how replacement labor influenced area farmers and agricultural practices. It focuses extensively on the Extension Service and its Emergency Farm Labor Program, particularly its success in bringing over 250,000 workers to the state during the war years. The increase in labor was a blessing for many farmers in the two counties. Indeed, most workers were warmly received. Farmers in the two counties had relied on migratory labor and tenants previously so this transition to braceros, prisoners, prisoners of war, and others was not much out of the ordinary, especially in Prowers County with the emphasis on sugar beets and other cash crops. The use of replacement labor was a new chapter, however, as they were paid less, were temporary, and were less tied to the community. Generally speaking, the reliance on this kind of worker, provided by federal intervention and federal programs, helped push many large farms on the path to agribusiness and the employment of cheap workers on a grand scale. Federal and Extension Service intervention during the war, though focused on production rather than conservation, evidenced the agents' continuing role in working with both farmers and federal officials to meet farmers' needs. Only through such involvement could farmers meet demand – the outside workers effectively worked to supply the Allied war effort and helped farmers' economy rebound in the process. The agents' continued role affirms their dynamic role in these communities and their importance in sustaining farmers during the war years.

While the dissertation focuses on the period from 1929 to 1945, the conclusion contextualizes the ways that the 1930s and 1940s set the stage for broad changes in American agriculture. It evidences the broader switch in agricultural patterns from small family farms to the dominance of large acreage farms and agribusinesses which happened as a result of practices employed under the New Deal. This speaks to the larger issue of changes in the history of American agriculture from relatively independent family farms that hearken back to centuries of expansion and settlement, to the subsidy-driven and mono-crop corporate system that maintains powerful lobbyists and ties to American politicians. It also illustrates changes in land use generated during the New Deal, namely the development of the Comanche National Grassland in Baca and the origins of wind-generated power in Prowers County, as demonstrations of locals and federal officials coming to terms with limits posed by aridity. Yet, while these examples show some adaptation, farmers still look for water wherever they can find it, still struggle with an inhospitable climate, and fight to keep their farms. This project concluded at the end of one of the hottest summers on record and left many drawing connections between contemporary times and the Dust Bowl. It is yet another reminder of the immense influence that rain, grass, and soil have on agriculture, and also serves to demonstrate that southeastern Coloradans continue to struggle with their environment.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Early Lessons from the Land of Opportunity

Writing an annual report for the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service in November of 1929, Baca County Extension Agent J. L. Farrand expressed his concern over the state of agriculture in southeastern Colorado. His position as county agent allowed him to develop an intimate perspective on the process and prospects of farming in the region. Indeed, he spent every day of his year in Baca County getting to know area farmers, the land, and the community. His Extension training prepared him for his post by instructing him on how to assess land use, to work with local communities, and to extend his knowledge and resources to farmers to improve the agricultural economy. He visited local farms, published newspaper articles, responded to letters and inquiries, and conducted informational demonstration meetings on issues ranging from food preservation to improving the family diet to proper crop rotation. These factors combined to give Farrand a unique point of view regarding land use in Baca County; his pronounced anxiety over the agricultural economy's stability and his distress over exploitative land use proved remarkably prescient.

Farrand argued that the agricultural system in place was dangerously untenable. By 1929, concern over the farm economy gained steam across the Great Plains as farmers tried to recover from the depression that started quickly following the end of the Great War, continued through the 1920s, and became even more serious in the 1930s.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Many historians have discussed the transition following World War I toward expansive land holding and mechanization on American farms which proved especially costly when prices dropped and farmers were stuck with debt through the 1920s. This, by that reasoning, made 1929 almost another year in a line of many instead of the start of the Great Depression. See for instance Michael Johnston Grant, *Down and Out on the Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago,

Farrand cited a dire need in Baca County to “acquaint farmers with all phases of cooperative marketing” so that they could work toward stabilizing prices and become more adept at “analyzing the farm business.”<sup>25</sup> Farmers looked for answers and safeguards against continued economic strain – in most cases this meant that they had prioritized increased production as the best and only path to economic prosperity. Farrand believed that such a focus led farmers to sacrifice their land’s long-term fertility and therefore its potential for sustained production. Farrand thought such farmers gave short shrift to soil fertility and conservation. As a result, he took it upon himself to offer more demonstrations on the Extension farm “to show the efficacy of proper cultural and tillage methods in the prevention of soil blowing and the conservation of soil moisture.” Farrand understood that farmers remained most concerned for their economic well-being. While he seemed sympathetic to their concerns, he also realized that most farmers thought that production, and only production, could promise prosperity. They therefore looked to maximize their output and thought that doing so would maximize profit. Yet, as Farrand knew and often reminded local farmers, thriving in agriculture meant more than planting, killing weeds, and waiting for rain; to ensure a successful farm, family security, and economic prosperity, farmers needed to

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IL: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 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, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1996), and Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Conversely, a smaller group of historians have downplayed the decline within the agricultural economy during the ‘20s. Most notable is David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> J.L. Farrand, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, April 15, 1929 to November 30, 1929,” 11, Folder 44, Box 8, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado State University Agricultural Archives, Fort Collins, Colorado. Subsequent citations will include author, date, folder, and box.

better value the soil. Unfortunately, Farrand did not persuade many Baca farmers to address that need.<sup>26</sup>

Drought and dust ravaged the region only a few years after Farrand intoned the need for soil conservation. In an unusual way, the Dust Bowl succeeded where Farrand had failed. It compelled farmers and politicians to reconsider agricultural production on the Great Plains; it provoked them to search for a way to properly balance economic prosperity and ecological stability. Observers hoped that striking such a balance might convince farmers in southeastern Colorado and throughout the Great Plains to reconcile the ethos of production with the natural limitations of farming in an arid landscape. Getting farmers to accept that point proved a difficult and arduous journey away from the emphasis on maximal output and toward conserving their resources. The first step on that path, one rife with obstacles, required combating the generations-old belief that the area, which boosters had labeled the “Valley of Content,” was destined to become an agricultural juggernaut. This optimism developed in concert with the first stage of heavy American migration to the region following the Colorado gold rush of the late 1850s and early 1860s. From that point through the 1920s, settlers in southeastern Colorado manipulated the land in hopes of turning it into an agricultural oasis without fully addressing the limitations on farming in the “great American desert.”<sup>27</sup> Their refusal to appreciate that the region posed significant challenges to farming and demanded some adaptation contributed to the ecological devastation of the 1930s. In other words, these early years of settlement provide an explanation for why farmers

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<sup>26</sup> J.L. Farrand, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, April 15, 1929 to November 30, 1929,” 5-11.

<sup>27</sup> The term “Valley of Content” was first used by irrigation promoters in the late nineteenth-century. James Earl Sherow, “Discord in the ‘Valley of Content’: Strife over Natural Resources in a Changing Environment on the Arkansas River Valley of the High Plains,” (Ph.D. diss, University of Colorado, 1987).



faced such hard times during the Great Depression and how the Dust Bowl came to pass.

This chapter traces the history of Anglo-American settlement in Baca and Prowers Counties, beginning with Zebulon Pike's foray into the region in 1806 and concluding with an assessment of life in the area on the eve of the Great Depression. In doing so it explains how agriculture in the region had reached the point of crisis that Farrand identified in 1929. Exploration, expansion, and settlement in southeastern Colorado resembled similar developments across the West in that migrants and immigrants found themselves forced to adapt to a new environment and to scratch out a living in an isolated, desolate, arid region that never lived up to its billing as an agricultural paradise. Regular cycles of drought compounded troubles engendered by the maddeningly inconsistent agricultural economy and its frequent patterns of boom and bust. The consequent stresses challenged settlers from their first efforts to farm the region during the period of intense population growth in the late nineteenth century. The same set of daunting circumstances taxed farmers for the next thirty years as they slowly came to realize that the Great Plains had measured up to neither boosters' promises nor their own expectations. Humans manipulated the environment as much as possible to ensure successful agriculture, but their emphasis on output regardless of its effects on their land eventually degraded the soil to such an extent that drought and wind combined to devastate the topsoil in the Dust Bowl region. In that respect, we can see the ecological and economic devastation of the 1930s as an almost predictable consequence of farmers ignoring environmental constraints and disavowing sustainable agriculture. In that way, it comes closest of any significant piece of this project in

supporting Donald Worster's declensionist narrative that human interaction with the natural world on the Southern Plains was immediately destructive. Settlers indeed arrived in the region intent on getting as much out of the natural resources as they possibly could, and, arguably until the late 1920s, this trend may have continued and thus reinforced Worster's point.<sup>28</sup> Reforms that the Hoover and more specifically the FDR administration enacted bucked that trend, but by the time Farrand noted the misuse of land in Baca County the future stability of agriculture in the region was still very much in doubt.

#### •Exploration•

Zebulon Pike became the first Anglo-American to record a journey through the Arkansas River Valley when he explored the region in 1806. His excursion enabled eventual Anglo-American settlement because he scouted the area, assessed potential dangers, and commented on the region's potential for obliging American agricultural settlement. Pike set out on two expeditions, one in 1805 to follow the Mississippi River to its source and another in 1806 that took him along the southwestern border of the newly-acquired Louisiana Purchase (see Figure 3). Though less famous than his contemporaries Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Pike had a similar role in exploring the West. His journey had two considerable goals: First, "to restore freed captives to the Osage Nation" and engender friendly relations with other American Indian nations in the region; and second, "to acquire a knowledge of the Southwestern

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<sup>28</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

boundary” which required his passing through the northern fringes of the Spanish empire in North America.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 3: Map of the two major expeditions into the new Louisiana Territory. Pike's decision to follow the Arkansas River west into Colorado took him through present-day Prowers County in 1806. Courtesy celticcowboy.com.

Pike succeeded in achieving these goals during his nearly one year-long sojourn into the Southwest. While his encounters with native peoples and the Spanish offer interesting anecdotes about initial American forays into the region, his second goal, namely developing an interpretation of the regional flora and fauna, proves more telling to the region's environmental history. In effect, Pike traveled across the region with an eye trained on the resource base both because it was part of his reason for exploring the

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Harding Hart and Archer Butler Hulbert, *Zebulon Pike's Arkansas Journal*, First Greenwood Reprinting. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1972), xlii-xliii. Pike's orders came from General James Wilkinson, Governor of Louisiana, and were retroactively approved by Thomas Jefferson's administration.

region and because the notion of eventual American settlement never strayed too far from his mind. As Pike assessed the region's merits for potential American expansion, he came to appreciate certain challenges that the arid environment would pose to American farmers. In effect, his review painted a barren, treeless region not amenable to agricultural production – a realistic characterization that subsequent explorers and many disgruntled settlers eventually echoed. He wrote that the region lacked timber and the soil seemed infertile – “parched and dried up for eight months in the year” – and resembled the “sandy deserts of Africa.” If anything, he noted, settlers could potentially maintain livestock along the banks of the Arkansas but he doubted any possibility of sustained agricultural production. Rather than rue the inhospitable climate, Pike believed that it could actually work in America's favor by posing “The restriction of our population to some certain limits, and thereby a continuation of the Union. Our citizens being so prone to rambling and extending themselves on the frontiers will, through necessity, be constrained to limit their extent on the west to the borders of the Missouri and Mississippi, while they leave the prairies incapable of cultivation to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country.”<sup>30</sup>

Pike's interpretation may have influenced later antebellum explorers and observers who similarly questioned the possibility or advisability of sustainable agricultural settlement in the High Plains upon visiting the region. Major Stephen H. Long led an expedition that traveled into the Arkansas River watershed in the Rocky Mountains during 1820. Long, a topographical engineer trained at Dartmouth College, brought along a number of men who had formal training in natural history, including two zoologists and a botanist. The 1820 trek, the more famous of the two, produced a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 523-525.

successful overview of regional flora, fauna, and American Indian tribes of the Great Plains. Beyond his investigations, however, Long's journey gained notoriety for its reconnaissance in and mapping of the area east of the Rockies between the Canadian and South Platte Rivers. Long reiterated what Pike had already contended – that the expanse would prove “uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture” and it would be better left to “remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackal.”<sup>31</sup> Long emphatically identified the expanse as the “great American desert” and thus gave birth to that label as a standard description of the western Great Plains.<sup>32</sup>

Fortunately for William and Charles Bent and their partner Ceran St. Vrain, three of the more notable Americans to venture into southeastern Colorado with hopes of profit rather than exploration, they never set their sights on agriculture. The Bents and St. Vrain took advantage of both location and relative peace to operate successful trading posts along the Arkansas River adjacent to the Santa Fe Trail, a vital trade route that meandered from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, from the 1830s through the 1850s. The owners of Bent, St. Vrain, and Company quickly established themselves in a fort along the Trail near present-day La Junta, Colorado, by forging relationships with local tribes. They accomplished such connections primarily via trade marriages, a useful stratagem designed to tie divergent groups together culturally, economically, and diplomatically. For example, William Bent married Owl

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<sup>31</sup> As quoted in Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson, and Duane A. Smith, *A Colorado History*, Ninth Edition. (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 2006), 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Merle P. Lawson and Charles W. Stockton, “Desert Myth and Climatic Reality,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 71, no. 4 (December 1981): 527-535. Lawson and Stockton note that the area which Long explored was under significant drought conditions and thus, in spite of the incredible number of critiques offered against his label, his perspective has “sustained merit.” Perhaps the most notable work to identify the conflict between the garden myth and the designation “Great American Desert” is Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950). Smith's analysis of the conflict deals with the 1860s and beyond but is nonetheless an important perspective on the issue of aridity and sustainability.

Woman, daughter of prominent Cheyenne White Thunder, while Ceran St. Vrain's younger brother Marcellin St. Vrain married Lakota chief Red Cloud's sister. These marriages allowed Bent, St. Vrain, and Company to build Bent's Fort in 1833 and conduct trade with American Indian tribes north of the Arkansas River. From that locale the company capitalized on buying from both American Indian buffalo robe hunters on the prairies as well as fur trappers in the mountains and then selling those commodities to eastern markets. Additionally, traders looked to Bent, St. Vrain, and Company to provide goods flowing east to west (and even south to north) like horses, gunpowder, and even chocolate. The fort also contained meeting rooms, a warehouse, a billiard room, and a cattle yard, making it a workable yet surprisingly luxurious trading post.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of findings by Long and others who labeled much of eastern Colorado a desert and the number of explorers who had no hope for eventual agricultural settlement, the nation clamored for expansion. Indeed, the impetus for extending American territorial claims and settling the West contributed to the push for war with Mexico. It appears that the war meant little to the residents of present-day Colorado, but its location on the edge of the American and Mexican empires assured the region a role in the conflict. Southeastern Colorado was especially contested terrain: From 1803 to 1848, the French, Spanish, Mexican, Texan, and finally American governments laid claim to the region, to say nothing of American Indian tribes who also considered the

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<sup>33</sup> Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 77-83; Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith, *A Colorado History*, 37-40; Charles Livingstone Seeley, *Pioneer Days in the Arkansas Valley in Southern Colorado and History of Bent's Fort* (Denver, CO: Charles Livingstone Seeley, 1932), 13-15. West in particular provides insight into the changing dynamics of American Indian relations on the Plains during the early and mid-nineteenth century.

area home.<sup>34</sup> The Santa Fe Trail had long been traversed by Mexican, American, American Indian, and other traders. As early as the 1820s, traders from Missouri requested military protection from the American government to secure their considerable investments. Military escorts started in 1829 and by 1846, as conflict with Mexico loomed, American troops started to police the trail regularly under the direction of Stephen Watts Kearny.<sup>35</sup> With the outbreak of hostilities in 1846, Kearny garnered command of the Army of the West and responsibility for executing offensives in New Mexico and California. General Kearny's familiarity with Bent's Fort and its strategic defenses compelled him to use it as a starting point. The Army of the West convened there in late July, 1846, moved through New Mexico and eventually California, and played a crucial part in American victory concluded with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed in 1848.<sup>36</sup>

The war and consequent treaty ushered in two important changes for southeastern Colorado. First, Mexico ceded swaths of land across the Southwest, including Colorado, to the United States, which united the region under the American flag and opened the land to American settlement. The transition "turned borderlands into *bordered* lands" under the proposed sovereignty of the American government.<sup>37</sup> Second, American control of the region suggested to many Americans that the Great Plains were then prime for settlement. Certainly, a slow trickle of Americans moving *through* the Plains turned into a steady stream after the discovery of gold in California in 1849. Yet, migrants had yet to home in on the Great Plains even though, by 1850,

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<sup>34</sup> Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith, *A Colorado History*, 52-53.

<sup>35</sup> Leo E. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 11-25.

<sup>36</sup> Leo E. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 68-90.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review*, no. 104 (June 1999): 816. Italics in original.

Americans had explored the region, assessed its potential (or lack thereof) for eventual settlement, and the American military had demonstrated its strength to American Indian and Mexican forces while establishing itself in the region. What had been unknown started to become familiar, and citizens started to think about testing their mettle on the Plains. Many simply needed a push, and the discovery of gold in Colorado in 1858 provided the impetus for the eventual flood of migrants into the region.

•Extraction leads to Expansion•

William Green Russell's discover of gold in the Rocky Mountains in 1858 ushered in the Colorado gold rush and invited intense Anglo-American migration to the Front Range. Word of his find quickly spread across the Great Plains to the East and across the Rockies to the Pacific coast. As Elliott West claims, gold has "unsurpassed power to set people in motion nearly 100,000 people crossed the Great Plains destined for the Front Range during the first year of the rush."<sup>38</sup> Roughly half of that total grew discouraged with the surroundings, lack of success, or competition, and decided to turn back. The others, devoted to striking it rich, stayed around the foothills of the Rockies, moving from place to place in search of their fortunes.<sup>39</sup> A small contingent of migrants realized that the miners would eventually require supplies and, if they were lucky enough to find deposits, a place to spend their money. While the gold rush proved temporary, town-builders like William H. Larimer appreciated the profit to be made in setting up decent, law-abiding settlements to not only support the miners but hopefully invite travelers as well as migrants. With this goal in mind, Larimer led the charge to establish Denver City in 1859. Larimer helped establish the new town, named after

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<sup>38</sup> West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith, *A Colorado History*, 56-62.



Kansas governor James W. Denver, just as William Green Russell returned to his home in Georgia to recruit more help for his planned return the following year.<sup>40</sup>

The rush immediately transformed the Front Range by bringing an incredible number of people to a region that had never felt such population pressure. Apart from populating the Front Range, Anglo-American settlers eventually spilled onto the Colorado Plains, which, as part of the Great Plains, changed from “a place to get across” to “an essential part of one national vision” that relied on white expansion from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains.<sup>41</sup> The sheer number of people (including soldiers) who passed through the eastern plains starting in 1859 provided enough population that Washington designated the Colorado Territory in 1861. William Gilpin served as the first territorial governor; much of his job revolved around continuing the steady flow of migrants and immigrants by enticing folks willing to rough it on the frontier in hopes of economic success in gold, farming, or stock raising. By emphasizing the seemingly limitless possibilities of productive and prosperous long-term settlement, Gilpin and other promoters set in motion impressive migration and people began settling on the Colorado Plains in more significant numbers. Such migrants provided enough of a boost to the population numbers that Colorado gained statehood in 1876.<sup>42</sup>

Much of the land that eventually constituted southeastern Colorado Plains had been in American Indian hands for generations, but Anglo-American pressure to wrest away such lands grew almost immediately after the discovery of gold. Initially, treaties

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<sup>40</sup> West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado*, 110-113.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>42</sup> Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Rise of the Centennial State: Colorado Territory, 1861-1876* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 5-8.

represented the preferred way to remove tribes peacefully. The Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851, Treaty of Fort Atkinson in 1853, and Treaty at Fort Wise in 1861 were the first concerted forays into assigning lands to both American Indians and potential settlers. These reflected the compulsion to displace tribes but there was not yet sufficient white population in the region to address full removal.<sup>43</sup> Even then, however, it became increasingly apparent that these dictates could not appease American Indians in the area who faced a slow trickle of migration but certainly understood that it would eventually turn into a flood. While Anglo-Americans and American Indians had been fighting sporadically throughout the 1850s, the most serious stage of conflict occurred during the Colorado Indian War of 1863-1865. Settlers hoped that the conflict would finally conclude with the Medicine Lodge treaties signed in 1867 by various United States Commissioners and chiefs of the Cheyenne, Apache, Kiowa, Comanche, and Arapahoe tribes. The set of treaties promised peace between local tribes and whites, with tribes removed to reservations. They gave up claims to land north of the Arkansas River in exchange for federal assistance in providing education facilities, medical care, agricultural implements, and other services. In spite of this agreement, however, tribes proved reluctant to adopt reservation life, and as early as spring 1868 they were violating the treaties.<sup>44</sup> For the most part, however, Colorado remained relatively free from violent conflict from 1868 to 1875 when William Leckie argues the war for the Southern Plains effectively ended and Anglo-Americans took a firm hold of the region.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Rise of the Centennial State: Colorado Territory, 1861-1876*, 63-65.

<sup>44</sup> Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 187-194.

<sup>45</sup> William H. Leckie, *The Military Conquest of the Southern Plains* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 234.

Hopeful agriculturalists who made the trip across the Plains after 1875 resembled gold seekers in numerous ways. Indeed, many gold seekers and migrant agriculturalists crossed the Plains with the same mindset and similar expectations. Members of both groups had a tendency to think of the West as a place for new opportunities, able to provide a chance at wealth or at least some level of economic success. Natural resources were the key – mineral or soil – and each group hoped to extract as much value as it could from the source. As Steven Stoll argues, many migrant farmers turned west once they realized that the East no longer had the space or fertile, productive soil to sustain them or their ways of life. Diminishing returns effectively compelled emigration.<sup>46</sup>

The move into Colorado should be considered within this context, as frontier recollections from Earle Gillis and Glen Durrell suggest. While nearly twenty years came between their two examples, both men and their families came to the area in hopes of prosperous settlement but faced such hard times that they returned east within a decade. In each case the pioneer family moved west onto the Colorado Plains for the chance to farm what had been federal land in hopes of making enough money to prosper. They expressed no concern for the land or its health, choosing instead to emphasize the challenges they faced and the elusive nature of successful farming in the region. They each describe a rather ragtag assortment of people that they met in local towns but generally recall isolated living and a focus on planting marketable crops instead of planting for sustenance. Gillis moved to Baca County from Missouri with his family in 1887, stayed for two years, and moved again to settle in the Oklahoma

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<sup>46</sup> Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002). Much of his second chapter explains the relationship between soil degradation and emigration, but see especially pages 143-150.

Panhandle. His father tried planting three times and failed each time, a cause of enough frustration that their bleak prospects, made worse by long hot summers and the blizzards of 1889, provoked the family to leave the area before making good on their homestead claim.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Durrell's family moved to the Colorado Plains from Illinois in 1908 and hoped to gain title to land through the Homestead Act. Durrell noted hardship and desolation, claiming that most of their efforts to grow crops proved futile for lack of moisture. He and his father understood that leaving some land fallow would improve the soil's ability to hold moisture, but they focused too intently on maximizing production for market to let any of their land sit idle. Durrell and his family lasted eight years before moving back to the Midwest.<sup>48</sup>

Both Durrell and Gillis contended that heavy-handed boosterism provided some motivation for their trip to Colorado. Indeed, boosterism and railroad expansion worked in tandem to make Colorado look more appealing to potential migrants. A cadre of entrepreneurs, including Gilpin, William Larimer, and William Jackson Palmer, realized that the best way to ensure statehood was to take advantage of the ongoing revolution in transportation. They understood that "as long as Colorado remained an outpost separated from the rest of the nation by six days of rough stage travel," then "the boosters' grandiloquence was little more than wishful boasting."<sup>49</sup> A number of railroad companies looked to profit from expanding their tracks into Colorado, and company representatives formed amiable relations with prominent locals. The Union Pacific, Colorado Central, Kansas Pacific, Denver Pacific, and the Atchison,

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<sup>47</sup> Earle A. Gillis, "We Traded Your High Chair for a Quarter of Beef: Two Years on the Colorado Flats" *Colorado Heritage* 24 (2005): 38-47.

<sup>48</sup> Glen R. Durrell, "Homesteading in Colorado" *Colorado Magazine* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 93-114.

<sup>49</sup> Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, Fourth Edition (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2005), 75.

Topeka and Santa Fe laid track as quickly as possible to capitalize on the newfound markets. By 1872 Coloradans had access to California, Omaha, St. Louis, and Chicago, opening up economic connections to the rest of the country while also allowing migrants additional options for transportation to Colorado.<sup>50</sup> The federal government aided railroad companies in the process and threw its full support behind expansion and settlement. Congress passed legislation in 1862, 1864, 1874, and 1875 that offered liberal land grants to railroad outfits willing to push into the Plains and move across the country.<sup>51</sup> Such enticements from the federal government help explain the population boom along the Front Range and demonstrate the federal government's willingness to ensure expansion.

Even with federal support, however, railroad construction often proved difficult because of varying local situations. This proved particularly true in southeastern Colorado, where several companies vied to connect Denver to St. Louis along the Arkansas River, effectively placing tracks along much of the old Santa Fe Trail. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Company eventually won the competition to build west from Kansas along the Arkansas River. Several towns immediately shot up because of this expansion, including Granada in present-day Prowers County. Historian Charles Bowman noted that railroad expansion not only gave rise to Granada it offered a foundation for immediate growth: "Within two weeks from the time the cars reached Granada the place had three restaurants, a hotel and about a dozen other business

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<sup>50</sup> Berwanger, *The Rise of the Centennial State: Colorado Territory, 1861-1876*, 60-67.

<sup>51</sup> Van Hook, "Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900," (Ph. D. diss., University of Colorado, 1933), 131-132.

places.”<sup>52</sup> Shortly thereafter, however, momentum for further construction stalled as the Panic of 1873 disrupted the nation’s markets. Taxpayers in Bent and Pueblo Counties, fully aware that railroad connections to the East as well as Denver could propel the local economy, eventually decided to offer bonds to help the Santa Fe continue along the Arkansas to Pueblo; public indebtedness reached \$400,000 when the line finally reached Pueblo in 1876.<sup>53</sup> In spite of this public stake in construction, the railroad companies largely dictated settlement patterns and had tremendous influence over a town’s fortunes. For instance, the town of La Junta, established in 1876 as a temporary terminus for the Santa Fe, saw its population and influence fluctuate according to railroad extensions. Growing in 1876, declining when the track pushed west from the town, and revived when it gained a connection to Kit Carson to the north and New Mexico to the south, La Junta finally became an incorporated town in 1881.<sup>54</sup> That pattern repeated itself across the West, and, as much as the future of La Junta was in flux during the early stages of construction, residents enjoyed many benefits unavailable to those in areas that lacked railroad access. Consider that the Arkansas River had served as a natural conduit for people and goods and the railroad followed the river for the same purpose. Those furthest from the river were last to enjoy the benefits. Such was the fate of those in the southeast corner of the territory that would become Baca County. Proximity to the river ensured a level of security and prosperity that was in many ways unattainable by others in the region.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Charles W. Bowman, “History of Bent County,” in *History of the Arkansas Valley, Colorado* (Chicago, IL: O.L. Baskin & Co., Historical Publishers, 1881), 846.

<sup>53</sup> Van Hook, “Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900,” 350-386.

<sup>54</sup> Bowman, “History of Bent County,” 846.

<sup>55</sup> Morris F. Taylor, “The Town Boom in Las Animas and Baca Counties,” *The Colorado Magazine* 55, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 1978): 129-131.

The railroads connoted progress and offered a veneer of modernity and opportunity for the territory, helping it earn admission to the Union in 1876. Railroads also enabled migration by people drawn to the region by gold, agriculture, ranching, and the service economy, developments afforded the territory additional legitimacy and enough population to qualify for statehood.<sup>56</sup> Railroads allowed much of that growth and facilitated further migration. Boosters within the new state's Board of Immigration or employed by the railroad and town building companies took to their job with special zeal from the 1860s to the 1890s. They deserve credit for Colorado attaining statehood, yet inviting migrants and foreigners to the Front Range was relatively straightforward. They emphasized that plentiful mineral resources promised wealth to anyone with enough patience and diligence, that Denver was up and coming, and that American Indians no longer posed a threat. The settlement process was never that easy, of course, but as several historian David M. Emmons suggests, boosters had a remarkable level of success inviting migration.<sup>57</sup>

The prospect of increasing migration to the Colorado plains proved much more difficult. The Long expedition's labeling of the region as the "great American desert" lessened migrants' desire to settle in southeastern Colorado for the first two decades after the Mexican War. Increasingly, as railroads and town companies pushed for migration, promoters developed optimistic rhetoric designed to combat the notion that aridity precluded successful agriculture. They sent pamphlets to places like Germany and Great Britain, held exhibits at the Chicago World Fair, and plastered newspapers in

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<sup>56</sup> The process was of course more complicated than simply demonstrating the potential for economic gain or a stable population. Berwanger invokes national political battles as a main reason why Colorado was finally admitted after earlier attempts. See Berwanger, *The Rise of the Centennial State: Colorado Territory, 1861-1876*, 139-153.

<sup>57</sup> David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

the Midwest and East in hopes of luring potential residents. According to promoters, a bit of elbow grease coupled with faith in Mother Nature would be enough to make the Great Plains America's breadbasket. Boosters in the Arkansas Valley reassured migrants that river water was both plentiful and available to all comers. Companies like the Arkansas Valley Sugar Beet and Irrigated Land Company and the Colorado Arkansas Valley, Inc. advertised that any difficulties caused by aridity could be combated by irrigation provided by one of the Arkansas' tributaries or one of the newly created canals that crisscrossed the landscape.<sup>58</sup>

In many cases, railway brochures assured readers that Colorado was a place where "crop failures [are] practically unknown" and it could easily be considered the "garden of the world." One such notice from the Colorado and Southern Railway included a drawing of a man sitting in a chair at his desk, well dressed and smoking a pipe, while daydreaming about the potential life he could live in Colorado. His pipe smoke wafted into the air, and the clouds took the shape of his dream – a leisurely and trout-filled day of fishing in one of Colorado's streams. The railroad thus promised not only agricultural productivity and the potential for prosperity, but also a chance at a better life, one filled with recreation and luxuries. Moreover, the emphasis on fishing seems to have been a calculated move by the brochure's author, as a caption by the picture of the man fishing noted that the irrigated land along the railway promised the highest "agriculture development by irrigation" in the world.<sup>59</sup> Promoters from other outfits, including the Santa Fe Railroad as well as private enterprises, similarly

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<sup>58</sup> Examples of company pamphlets and brochures available at the Colorado Historical Society. See Box Arkansas Valley: [ephemera] 1894-1976; Stephen H. Hart Library and Research Center; Denver, CO. Other examples include *The Arkansas Valley Truth: Devoted to the Development of the Arkansas Valley in Colorado* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Co., 1898).

<sup>59</sup> Glen R. Durrell, "Homesteading in Colorado," 94.



promised agricultural success to anyone willing to make the trek to the Colorado Plains because of their efforts to help provide irrigation.<sup>60</sup> To their credit, such companies participated in constructing nearly 300 miles of canal ditches – most of that total ran through Prowers County – by 1895 and therefore helped deliver on their promises.<sup>61</sup> Such numbers supposedly supported boosters’ claims that extensive irrigation all but guaranteed agricultural success.

Irrigation opportunities like these made it much easier for boosters to sell the possibility of viable agriculture to the early migrants who contemplated a move to Colorado and settlement along the Arkansas River or one of its tributaries. Boosters promised these potential farmers that irrigation offered insurance against an arid climate because water could mediate any constraints on agriculture. Most importantly, reliable water combated aridity and promised prosperity. The issue of aridity in areas far from the river proved much more difficult to counter; the fact that so much Plains land sat a distance from viable water helped give rise to the “rain follows the plow” theory. Promoters across the Great Plains proffered the notion that “rain follows the plow”: that the lack of moisture, while daunting for initial pioneers, would be remedied by population and settlement. In essence, “the plow, symbol of the American farmer, was to give life to the Plains, not just by breaking them, but by producing conditions which would lead to increased rainfall.”<sup>62</sup> Few questioned the assertion that sustained agriculture had the power to dramatically shift a region’s climate, in part because scientists supported the claim. Relying on the scientific climatology theories from men such as Ferdinand V. Hayden and Cyrus Thomas, boosters tried to convince potential

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<sup>60</sup> Ava Betz, *Prowers County History* (Lamar, CO: The Prowers County Historical Society, 1986), 127-143.

<sup>61</sup> Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado* (Chicago, IL: The Blakely Printing Company, 1895), 282.

<sup>62</sup> David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains*, 128.

migrants that humans, and specifically those involved in agriculture, could effectively become agents of climatic change. A similar theory purported that plowing and sustained agriculture helped expand the “rain belt,” a constantly expanding yet theoretical expanse of land that enjoyed consistently increasing precipitation levels. For example, the Syndicate Land and Irrigation Company celebrated the inclusion of what would become Baca County into this growing expanse, thereby identifying it as a legitimate destination for farmers. While most future residents would be too far from the Arkansas or its tributaries to rely on irrigation, the growing “Rain Belt” should be taken as proof that “successful agriculture without irrigation is an established fact” because the rain would eventually make up for not having irrigation.<sup>63</sup> Historian David Emmons writes that such boosters succeeded in that they “mocked the desert theory, they attacked it with sophistry and bombast, and in their rhetoric they destroyed it.” As a result, migrants flooded into the region intent on becoming successful farmers and unconvinced that any significant obstacles stood in their way.<sup>64</sup>

As it had in pushing railroad expansion with the land grant legislation passed during the 1860s and later, Congress tried to entice migrants to populate the Great Plains by offering land from the public domain. Most famously, the Homestead Act of 1862 offered a plot of 160 acres to any head of household, at least twenty-one years of age, who resided on the acreage and prepared it for cultivation – known as “improvement” in some circles because the potential landowner took previously undeveloped land and made it productive. The homesteader then gained title to the land after five years of continuous residence and the payment of a small fee. The policy

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted from Emmons, 159. Original quote from Syndicate Land and Irrigation Company, *Valuable Data* (Denver, CO: no date), 42-43.

<sup>64</sup> Emmons, 128.

reflected the long-held notion of yeoman farmers as the embodiment of republican virtue, a testament to the idea that hard work and integrity put one on the path to success. Yet, while it demonstrated the continued efforts by federal politicians to facilitate white expansion across the nation, the policy proved largely inadequate for homesteaders in arid Colorado. An increase in relinquishment or cancellation of homestead claims “brought realization of the fact that one quarter section of the non-irrigable lands of the high plains was, in many instances, not adequate for the subsistence of a family.”<sup>65</sup> Quite obviously, in spite of having access to 160 acres and supposedly living within the “Rain Belt,” homesteaders faced a tough task in getting their farms on track.<sup>66</sup>

Consider the case of Earl Gillis, who lived in Baca County after his father, “lured by the promise of a free homestead,” moved the family in 1887. They relocated to “a land where the sun bears down relentlessly in summer and blizzards of arctic intensity sometimes rage in winter; where hot winds blow in the daytime, and night winds chill.”<sup>67</sup> Their new home, a one-room shack built from sod and covered with dirt – “typical of the homesteader’s house in that day” – housed them for “two long years filled with loneliness [sic] and disappointment, with hardship and poverty.”<sup>68</sup> The lack of water constituted the biggest problem for Gillis and his family, who gathered rain water or took some from nearby arroyos then boiled it to clean out the bugs and

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<sup>65</sup> Van Hook, “Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900,” 127.

<sup>66</sup> There are a number of works which deal with the Homestead Act, but I have focused on those which detail its influence in Colorado, particularly Van Hook, “Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900,” 125-127. See also Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith, *A Colorado History*, 186-187; Earle A. Gillis, ““We traded your high chair for a quarter of beef”: Two Years on the Colorado Flats,” *Colorado Heritage* (2005): 38-47.

<sup>67</sup> Earle A. Gillis, ““We traded your high chair for a quarter of beef”: Two Years on the Colorado Flats,” 39.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

mosquito larvae but had little respite for their crops. Their first crop “was practically a failure” and only produced enough to feed the oxen; Gillis’s mother raised chickens and his father hunted jackrabbits for fresh meat.<sup>69</sup> The second year proved just as disappointing and even with two growing seasons the family had nothing to sell in town, leaving them with just enough for sustenance. Consequently, the Gillis family looked to alternatives to make money, and finally found a way to scratch together a few dollars by selling cattle and buffalo bones to buyers in nearby Lamar who then ground the bones for fertilizer. Gillis remembered the most profitable trip that included the sale of 1,300 pounds for \$3.40 – quite a haul considering it cost the family nothing to collect the bones and it was their only income. In the end, however, it was not enough to keep them in Colorado. They faced consistently harsh weather, isolation, and uncomfortable living conditions, and they failed to last the five years necessary to earn ownership via the Homestead Act.<sup>70</sup>

The Gillis’s trials are a telling portrayal of the difficulties that most homesteaders faced in trying to establish themselves in a foreboding environment without enough land or capital to make it a profitable venture. The size of one’s farm had a hand to play in that as well; Glen Durrell, whose family moved to the Colorado Plains in 1908 and stayed until 1916, remembered residents talking about summer fallowing to allow moisture to accumulate, but it was never practiced because “land available to any one settler was too limited” to do anything except plant and hope for a

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 40-46.

healthy harvest.<sup>71</sup> Such problems only became worse with inclement weather, and obviously no one could control or predict it. As A. W. McHendrie remembered, the drought of 1889 led to significant migration from Baca County: “The spring of 1889 opened up as a very promising season and a large acreage of crops was planted.... The crops came up very well, however, but in June the hot southwest winds started in and literally burned the tender crops in the field. This drought condition persisted for a number of years and by the summer of 1890 the people had to move out and left in droves. The streams, which had been quite substantial creeks, dried up.”<sup>72</sup>

Still hoping to maintain a steady stream of settlers onto the Great Plains in spite of such droughts, Congress offered additional legislation designed to tender more land to homesteaders. For example, the Timber Culture Act of 1873 sought to exchange a 160-acre tract for the applicant’s planting of trees as a way to provide tree cover and eventually fuel to inhabitants. The applicant could claim the land after three years if he/she cultivated forty acres of trees per 160-acre plot.<sup>73</sup> The Desert Land Act of 1877 represented another example of Congress trying to come to terms with aridity in the Plains, with a specific focus on invoking personal responsibility for irrigation. It offered up to 640 acres to any applicant willing to find ways to irrigate land that was considered “desert land,” defined as “all lands exclusive of timber lands and mineral lands which will not, without irrigation, produce some agricultural crop.”<sup>74</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> Glen R. Durrell, “Homesteading in Colorado,” 98-99. Durrell explains that he was party to conversations about soil conservation and fallowing as a way to ensure steady, stable returns, but few farmers cared enough or had the luxury to remove a portion of their acreage from production.

<sup>72</sup> A. W. McHendrie, “Boyhood Recollections of Springfield, Colorado” *Colorado Magazine* 11 (May, 1944): 96-97.

<sup>73</sup> Van Hook, “Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900,” 128-130.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Congress, 44th, 2nd Session, *An act to provide for the sale of desert lands in certain States and Territories*, vol. 19, U.S. Statutes at Large (Washington, D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1877), 377.

Newlands Reclamation Act, passed in 1902, promoted irrigation throughout the West by devoting a portion of the money made by selling public land to the research and development of irrigation projects on the state level.<sup>75</sup> The Dry Farming Homestead Act of 1909, which enlarged available acreage from 160 to 320 on lands that were not irrigable, and the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916, which allowed previous homestead entries to increase to 640 acres in hopes of allowing for grazing and raising forage crops to feed livestock. Each of these acts demonstrated federal policymakers' efforts to invite and then sustain settlement on the Great Plains, and while each had its own issues in terms of enforcement and even viability, they were used to populate southeastern Colorado.

Federal efforts combined with promoters' rhetoric to produce the desired influence in the area, bringing enough people into the region to break up vast expanses in favor of smaller county-level units. State officials created Baca County and Prowers County in 1889 with county seats in Springfield and Lamar, respectively, out of land that had been part of Bent and Las Animas Counties.<sup>76</sup> The population consisted of a small portion of farmers who either immigrated to the U.S. and settled in the area or were first generation Americans born to foreign parents. Germans and English predominated among that population in Baca, while German, Russian, Irish, Dane, Swiss, and even Canadians registered in the 1910 census for Prowers County.

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<sup>75</sup> U.S. Congress, 57th, 1st Session, "An Act Appropriating the receipts from the sale and disposal of public lands in certain States and Territories to the construction of irrigation works for the reclamation of arid lands," in *U.S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 32 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1902), 388-390. A number of works deal with the Act, most significantly Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1985) and Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

<sup>76</sup> Taylor, "The Town Boom in Las Animas and Baca Counties," 120-123.

Mexicans also represented a significant portion of this select population.<sup>77</sup> A larger percentage of the early population actually hailed from nearby Plains states and moved to Colorado in search of new opportunities – or as Earle Gillis put it, promises of new opportunities helped lure families to the region. Heavy migration streams entered the state from Missouri, Texas, Kansas, as well as states in the Midwest and East.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Joseph Orland Van Hook calculated roughly 2,000 homesteaders who took advantage of federal legislation to settle in southeastern Colorado from 1860 to 1900.<sup>79</sup> The census of 1890 reflects the initial growth in both places, with Baca County home to 1,479 and Prowers to 1,969 residents. From that point, however, the two counties embarked on separate developmental paths, as the possibility for irrigation in Prowers led to a more stable population base and a better economic forecast for local farmers.<sup>80</sup>

#### •Natural Differences•

The prospect of farming in Prowers County was much more promising than it was in Baca County, particularly by the end of the nineteenth century when irrigation started to play a role in regional agriculture. The Arkansas River and its tributaries made this possible. The push for Anglo-American irrigation in Prowers County started during the early 1870s as irrigators and boosters tried to realize the image of an agricultural garden despite living in the “great American desert.” Ditches were variously owned by individuals, by groups of partners, by neighbors, or by companies;

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<sup>77</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913).

<sup>78</sup> Gillis, “We traded your high chair for a quarter of beef”: Two Years on the Colorado Flats”; Glen R. Durrell, “Homesteading in Colorado,” *The Colorado Magazine* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 93-114.

<sup>79</sup> Van Hook, “Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900,” 134-140. Van Hook offers settlement numbers for the valley, including what will become Prowers County, but does not include numbers for Baca; the rough estimate of 2000 is based on his assessment.

<sup>80</sup> Gutmann, Myron P. Gutmann, *Great Plains Population and Environment Data: On-Line Extraction System* [Computer file], (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan [producers], 2005).

each entity used the water to safeguard against drought, to grow cash crops that required irrigation, and to attain more stable production. The initial irrigators faced obstacles, most notably the concern over one's right to use the water. Most states abided by the common law doctrine of water law, whereby those who owned land bordering streams had access to the water without achieving property rights in that water. The Colorado constitution of 1876 inaugurated the "Colorado Doctrine" of water law, otherwise known as the doctrine of prior appropriation, which permitted the diversion of water from rivers and streams without mandating ownership of the land along the water. Effectively, anyone putting the water to productive use for home or farm received access rights. Those with senior rights, established by the date of their claims as connoted by the phrase "first in time, first in right," had priority to use the river water but the system relied on everyone getting a split of the abundant water. In sum, then, anyone who used the water for beneficial purposes could access it, but those with seniority had leverage against junior appropriators. The Colorado Doctrine came to serve as a blueprint for water rights in other states across the arid West after it came to fruition in Colorado.<sup>81</sup>

The mutual stockholding company became the system of choice for most early farmers throughout the Arkansas Valley. Such companies effectively worked to share risk and reward among several members – acting as associations of farmers who owned various numbers of shares and who enjoyed water rights according to the company's original claim. One example is the Fort Lyon Canal Company that established a canal system that continues to provide water to shareholders living north of Lamar in Prowers

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<sup>81</sup> Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith, *A Colorado History*, 189-192; James Earl Sherow, "Discord in the 'Valley of Content,'" 74-77.



County. One of the original investors, T. C. Henry, secured water rights that allowed the company appropriation dating from 1883. The company offered 105,000 shares for five dollars apiece; 100 shares bought one cubic foot per second of water.<sup>82</sup> Eventually shareholders agreed to build a canal north and east of the river that reached 113 miles in length. Additionally, the company dug two reservoirs to offer holding areas for river water and to ensure continued access by the shareholders, making the Fort Lyon Canal a successful venture for all involved parties.<sup>83</sup> The stockholding company became a viable model for farmers who had enough capital to buy into an irrigation system but not enough to do it themselves. The company allowed for shared risk and shared reward – the issue of minimizing risk proved enticing for many newly-arrived farmers still trying to get settled in the Valley. As a result, companies shot up across the Valley.

The boom in irrigation led to conflict. So many claims existed on the river as it flowed down from the Rocky Mountains that its flow weakened dramatically by the time it swept through Prowers County. This was an obvious consequence of trying to divide a finite amount of water among consumers with an insatiable thirst for it; the Colorado Doctrine assumed that priority could decide access but the notion that anyone with a viable argument to attain access should get it meant that there was never enough water to go around. In essence, appropriators tried to divide the water so thinly as to ensure everyone's benefit, but even then gave priority access to those with senior rights. For example, the Rocky Ford Ditch Company filed for and secured water rights from the state water board in 1890. The company constructed its first ditch in 1874 so it used

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<sup>82</sup> Sherow, "Discord in the "Valley of Content": Strife over Natural Resources in a Changing Environment on the Arkansas River Valley of the High Plains," 95.

<sup>83</sup> Van Hook, "Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900," 285-287.

that date in its application. The board granted the company a portion of acre-feet commensurate with the 1874 claim and therefore allowed the company that amount every year, before anyone else, unless the river ran dry. Junior appropriators had to wait until those senior to them received their allotment, and in years of low flow those latest to earn rights faced the potential for not having access to water at all. Junior appropriators had no way to insure that they would get their water and, in many years, quite literally waited for the weather to determine if they could irrigate their crops.<sup>84</sup>

Even with the issues inherent in the irrigation scheme that developed in the Arkansas Valley, the mere presence of water led farmers, boosters, town builders, and even migrants to believe that a prosperous agricultural economy was possible on the High Plains. Such optimism fueled the notion that the desert would recede and be replaced by a garden. Part of their argument about the merit of irrigation included the chance to expand on crops like wheat, corn, and other vegetables. George Swink, an entrepreneur with a particular vision for the Arkansas Valley, arrived in southeastern Colorado in 1871 and began experimenting with crops. Swink hailed from Illinois and made the trip from there to Kit Carson, Colorado, the Kansas Pacific Railway's western terminus, where he then proceeded to walk the last 100 miles to Rocky Ford. Swink owned a store, helped jumpstart the region's first irrigation company, the Rocky Ford Ditch Company in 1874, and eventually conducted a series of tests to determine what could grow well in the region.<sup>85</sup> Through his initial efforts to grow squash, cantaloupe, alfalfa, and even sugar beets, Swink came to believe that irrigation allowed him to grow

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<sup>84</sup> Sherow, "Discord in the Valley of Content," 79-81.

<sup>85</sup> Dena Sabin Markoff, "The Beet Sugar Industry in Microcosm: The National Sugar Manufacturing Company, 1899-1967" (Ph. D. diss, Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 1980), 33, 35-38; Sherow, "Discord in the 'Valley of Content'," 78-82.

just about everything he wanted. The soil was fertile and the water made it possible to effectively grow everything that he had grown in Illinois. This finding seemed to promise exactly what Swink had hoped for, a crop to transform the region from “a few rough dwellings” to a valley of settlement and abundant crops achieved by “advanced agricultural methods,” namely irrigation.<sup>86</sup>

A key moment for the development of irrigated agriculture in the region came when Swink determined that the Arkansas Valley represented a perfect climate for sugar beets. Swink, confounded by an article he read that showed Americans imported most of their sugar from Germany, decided that he would make beet cultivation his primary concern in the region. After experimenting with both American and German seeds, Swink settled on German seeds and produced two healthy crops. He then convinced a refiner named Henry T. Oxnard to test his beets, who found them more than serviceable and recruited additional investors by proclaiming that the Arkansas Valley was “the best place for a sugar beet plant in the world.” Swink then set out to recruit potential growers in the area and, once he had amassed enough farmers willing to contract with a company to grow sugar beets, Oxnard spearheaded the creation of the American Crystal Sugar Factory in 1900.<sup>87</sup>

A successful sugar beet industry needed irrigation and reliable transportation from refinery to market, and the Arkansas Valley satisfied both demands. Sugar beets fetched a considerable market price, a key motivator for potential beet farmers. Since the beets required somewhere around twenty inches of precipitation, and Prowers only enjoyed an average of about sixteen, only irrigated farmers had a chance to take

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<sup>86</sup> Dena Sabin Markoff, “The Beet Sugar Industry in Microcosm: The National Sugar Manufacturing Company, 1899-1967,” 33

<sup>87</sup> Sherow, “Discord in the Valley of Content,” 85.

advantage of the “sugar boom” between 1897 and 1907 that placed Colorado at the top of the list for domestic sugar beet production by 1907. The American Beet Sugar Company and the Holly Sugar Company, with factories in Lamar and Holly, respectively, quickly took advantage of the boom and served as prominent examples of the potential for cultivating beets on irrigated lands. Investors in these companies realized that transporting the beets long distances from field to refinery not only cost them to ship the beets but also reduced the beets’ sugar content, making them less valuable to the refiners. The refiners in Prowers County thus had a viable population of interested growers, factories to refine the beets, and railroad connections to ship the product from their refineries to markets in Denver, Chicago, and beyond. The sugar boom produced thriving towns and successful farmers throughout Prowers County, giving credence to the rhetoric of boosters. As Dena Markoff writes, “the entire valley was not a garden in 1907, but there were a great many fragile oases blossoming along the Arkansas River.”<sup>88</sup>

The sugar beet industry also flourished because the federal government supported it and boosters promoted it to entice potential migrants. Indeed, the industry garnered so much government attention that it earned the nickname “Uncle Sam’s Child.” In addition, Swink eventually won a seat in the state senate and pushed for beet promotion in the state. On a federal level, the United States Department of Agriculture worked with state experiment stations to develop test plots and coordinate research agendas around beet cultivation under irrigation. Washington also aided industry development by imposing a series of protective tariffs like the McKinley Tariff and Dingley Tariff to encourage beet growers and refiners during the 1890s by promising

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<sup>88</sup> Markoff, “The Sugar Beet Industry in Microcosm,” 2-30. Quote taken from page 30.

consistently competitive prices for their product. Boosters fueled enthusiasm for the industry and helped entice speculators and investors to consider factory construction along the Arkansas River. Companies also continued the theme of Arkansas Valley as “garden spot” to entice additional settlers. For example, the Twin Lakes Land and Water Company promised the “choicest Fruit Lands, Sugar Beet Lands, Cantaloupe and Melon Farms.”<sup>89</sup>

A viable labor force represented the final ingredient for successful and prosperous beet cultivation in the area, and sugar beet companies worked hard to recruit and develop a viable labor force. Beet companies initially reached out to migrant workers to satisfy grower and refiner demands. The companies hired a recruiter who then went out and promised both a good wage and temporary company housing (effectively a tent and kitchen area) for families willing to work in the fields. The entire family contributed to the work. For example, men took hoes to the plants shortly after planting to chop the top off, and then women and children followed him down the row of beets to thin the small plants (see Figure 4).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 1-30, quote taken from reprint of original advertisement on 107.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 73-80.



**Figure 4: "Mexicans. Beet workers and the shacks they live in near Rocky Ford, Colorado. See Hine Report, Colorado. Sugar Beet Workers, July, 1915. Location: Rocky Ford [vicinity], Colorado." Courtesy Library of Congress.**

The first group that companies targeted to work the fields, the one that effectively made the sugar beet boom possible, was an assortment of German-Russians that the company recruited from places like Denver, Pueblo, and small towns in neighboring states. These early efforts to entice outside workers eventually became typical for companies seeking workers. While the German-Russians generally proved amenable to the work and satisfied early demand, sugar companies eventually opened up additional labor streams, including tapping white American migrant labor from Colorado and neighboring states. Additionally, companies recruited Asian immigrants

from Denver, Hispanic migrant workers from southern Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, as well as American Indian labor from New Mexico and Arizona.<sup>91</sup>

Similar developments fueled the cantaloupe industry's growth into becoming the area's other main cash crop by the turn of the twentieth century, though it never found the same footing that beets did in the Arkansas Valley. Farmers could only grow cantaloupes under intensive irrigation, and in that sense the crop resembled the sugar beet. They also needed workers, though they needed fewer laborers than sugar beet growers. Both crops also burst onto the scene in the 1890s – George Swink actually believed that cantaloupes would invite immediate cultivation in the 1890s, produce profit, and help grow the population, more than sugar beets. Agricultural Experiment Station employee Philo K. Blinn noted the importance of two innovations in expanding the cantaloupe industry in the Arkansas Valley. First, he claimed that the invention of standard crates meant that every melon grown in the region could be easily placed on the train and sent to market in Denver, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Barrels and thrown-together bushels had previously housed marketable melons, making them tough to ship, prone to bruising, and difficult to tally the total cantaloupes in each shipment. This attempt at standardization helped sales by confirming the amount to seller, shipper, and buyer. Second, local co-operative efforts among Colorado farmers gave them leverage to negotiate with the railroad to ensure that it devoted regular cars for cantaloupes sellers – in 1896 the growers supplied 150 cars a day by the end of harvest in August because of such agreements. The use of ice cars on the Santa Fe and other lines helped protect the melons as they passed from the Colorado Plains to points distant, including Chicago, Boston, and New York. Unfortunately, farmers could not sustain their

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 73-80.

cooperation, and fragmentation among growers and growers' associations led to competition. Moreover, the development of the beet industry and its promise of a better return for production enticed a number of cantaloupe growers to switch cash crops. As a result, while cantaloupes represented an important part of the Prowers agricultural economy, their prominence diminished over the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>92</sup>

Neither the cantaloupe industry nor the sugar industry represented a fail-safe enterprise. Even though irrigation offered some flexibility for farmers in Prowers County and elsewhere, they still found themselves faced with obstacles, including drought, insects, mercurial markets, and locating labor. For the most part, however, irrigated farmers enjoyed more economic stability than dryland farmers, and their stability helped nearby towns and villages prosper. Farmers in Baca County never enjoyed that security and were forced to contend with the limitations of trying to maintain a successful farm in southeastern Colorado without irrigation water.

Baca County had little farming until the 1880s because stock raising dominated the county economy and ranchers owned most of the land. For example, John W. Prowers, the Prowers County namesake, owned more than 800,000 acres of range for his herd of roughly 10,000 cattle, much of it inside the borders of Baca County.<sup>93</sup> The ranching industry's power and influence peaked in the late 1880s when agriculture slowly started to gain ground in the county. Declining meat prices, a presidential decree to remove unauthorized fences from the public domain (a decision that forced cattlemen to find alternative feed options for their cattle), volatile weather, and the push to homestead federal lands combined to take some of the best grazing land from public use

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<sup>92</sup> Philo K. Blinn, "Development of the Rockyford Cantaloupe Industry" Bulletin 108, March 1906 (Fort Collins, CO: The Agricultural Experiment Station, 1906): 1-17.

<sup>93</sup> Bowman, "History of Bent County," 879-883.



and cut into the ranching economy. New homesteaders often strove for a balance between crop and livestock, but these diversified farms never came close to the expansive operations employed by Prowers. As a result, what had been mostly open prairie in Baca County and southern Prowers County slowly became home to small, scattered plots and burgeoning towns, a decided shift in the landscape.<sup>94</sup>

Baca County agriculturalists faced a number of problems once operations started to intensify by the late 1880s. The vicious regularity of drought and tough winters made any type of farming in Baca County incredibly difficult. Indeed, even some town builders found it impossible to deal with the conditions; Earle Gillis noted a few who successfully populated their lands and tried to satisfy the incoming settlers by digging a well. They dug two hundred feet into the ground and still could not tap into the underground reserve. As a result, they quickly picked up and left the area, taking nineteen claimants with them and leaving only the Gillis family and two others who remained through the winter.<sup>95</sup>

As this story suggests, aridity posed the biggest problem to agricultural production. Consider that, on average, rainfall in Baca County hovers around sixteen inches per year. In addition, drought is a common occurrence – drought broke out from 1865-72, 1892-95, 1901-04, 1907-08, and 1911-12.<sup>96</sup> The inconsistent weather made it tough to plan on harvests with any reliability, limited production, and left many migrants quick to leave. Additionally, outbreaks of crop-eating pests like grasshoppers

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<sup>94</sup> Van Hook, "Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900," 199-243.

<sup>95</sup> Earle Gillis, "We Traded Your High Chair for a Quarter of Beer: Two Years on the Colorado Flats," 43.

<sup>96</sup> Abbott, Leonard, and Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, 167-169; Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas*, Rural America (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 2-3; R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, Inc., 1981), 6-14.

and locusts occurred regularly, devastating crops and frustrating farmers. As Jeffrey Lockwood contends, the worst outbreak of Rocky Mountain locusts in the 1870s “inflicted a staggering \$200 million in damage on agriculture west of the Mississippi.”<sup>97</sup> Lockwood argues that locust attacks spurred farmers to ask for federal assistance and compelled both public and private institutions to offer charity and assistance to Plains residents because the locusts had so decimated the agricultural economy as to leave tens of thousands in poverty. Plagues of grasshoppers ravaged the Plains from the 1880s through the 1940s, taking a heavy toll on Colorado pioneers in the 1870s and again during the 1930s.<sup>98</sup> They posed significant problems on the Colorado Plains, as Colorado pioneer Mrs. Pitt Smith remembered the grasshopper plague in 1872 and recalled that “they ate everything green” and “darkened the sky like a cloud.”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Jennie Lucas later said that “they came one afternoon like a great cloud, settled down on the ground and started eating.”<sup>100</sup> These early settlers had no real way to combat the infestation, so the grasshoppers generally ate until they moved on.

Farming in Baca posed additional challenges, especially to people unfamiliar with how to farm in an arid climate, who lived in primitive conditions, and who lacked any capital to expand their operations or even to serve as a nest egg. In other words, farming challenged most everyone who migrated to the region. Those willing to stay and try to make it work realized that something had to give; either they needed to adjust their goals or the weather had to stabilize. Obviously, the latter remained out of their

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<sup>97</sup> Jeffrey Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect That Shaped the American Frontier* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004), xvii.

<sup>98</sup> Jeffrey Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect That Shaped the American Frontier*, 67-86.

<sup>99</sup> Mrs. Pitt Smith, CWA Interviews, Colorado Historical Society, 1934.

<sup>100</sup> Jennie Lucas, CWA Interviews, Colorado Historical Society, 1934.

control (and was not going to happen), but at the turn of the twentieth century farmers started to appreciate the need to adapt their techniques. That realization helped spur farmers' adoption of dryland farming techniques designed to sustain agricultural production in arid conditions. Promoting such methods and convincing farmers to employ them was largely a group effort on the part of experts and practicing farmers. For example, the first meeting of the International Dry Farming Congress met in Denver in 1907 to devise ways to stabilize production in arid environments. Even earlier, Agricultural Experiment Stations sprouted up across the state, serving as outposts for recent graduates of the State Agricultural College trained in modern agricultural methods designed to ensure success for every farmer, even those living on the Colorado Plains.<sup>101</sup> In a stark statement of a harsh reality, the opening line from a Colorado Experiment Station Bulletin on dryfarming in eastern Colorado from 1910 announced rather ominously that such farming "is a continual fight against relentless, unfavorable conditions" and that even "with the best seeds and methods of tillage there will be some years of total failure and many others of short crops."<sup>102</sup> It suggested that farmers diversify and not focus solely on grain; while wheat should proliferate in the arid conditions the farmer should think about sorghum to feed his dairy cows, hogs, and poultry. The danger of not diversifying meant that the farmer could not attain self-sufficiency. In addition, the bulletin reminded farmers to plant household gardens of drought-resistant crops, as well as starches like potatoes and fruits such as melons, to ensure that the family would not starve during even the worst years.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Abbott, Leonard, and Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, 168-169.

<sup>102</sup> H.M. Cottrell, "Dry Land Farming in Eastern Colorado" Bulletin 145, December 1909 (Fort Collins, CO: The Agricultural Experiment Station, 1909), 4.

<sup>103</sup> H.M. Cottrell, "Dry Land Farming in Eastern Colorado," 4-7, 20-27.

The real boon for dryland farmers, however, came with the adoption of wheat, specifically hardy winter wheat and the turkey red variety that grew well in arid conditions. Wheat quickly became the most important cash crop for Baca County farmers and supposedly signified that dryland farmers had a good chance to prosper in spite of aridity. Unfortunately, farmers' intense focus on wheat and its consequent impact on the Plains is a familiar story, one that concluded with the Great Plow Up following World War I.

Demand during World War I and consecutive years of good rainfall convinced farmers that breaking land for wheat was a smart investment. And with wheat prices over \$2.00 per bushel in 1917, those not involved in wheat cultivation quickly turned their attention to that crop. Indeed, the push to focus intently, or even exclusively, on wheat production represented a broader increase in wheat cultivation across the state, as wheat acreage in Colorado tripled between 1909 and 1919.<sup>104</sup> Such enticement then opened the door for suitcase farming, ownership of farmland by someone who did not make his or her primary home on that expanse but who bought the land as an investment. Relying on tenants, farm laborers and using new technology like the tractor and combine – generally shifting towards mechanized agriculture when possible – absentee landowners had the capital to not only plant their whole acreage to cash crops but to expand their holdings by buying up land. This trend started with the war and increased over the 1920s even though the wartime boom quickly and decisively slowed.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Abbott, Leonard, and Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, 169.

<sup>105</sup> Leslie Hewes, "Early Suitcase Farming in the Central Great Plains," *Agricultural History* 51, no. 1 (January 1977): 23-37.

The general narrative about agriculture in the 1920s is that farmers bought machinery or land on credit, hoped that prices would stay high or stabilize, and then broke more sod to plant more acreage to pay off loans and high interest mortgages. Obviously the drop in prices left many in considerable financial distress. As they could not pay off debts, many continued to plant as much as possible, breaking more sod in trying to make up the difference. In effect, farmers' wide embrace of wheat meant initial, temporary financial growth but the drop in prices after the war basically broke many Baca farmers who had so intently, and blindly, turned to the big cash crop. This slow decline in sales and the overall farm economy in wheat regions like Baca essentially started a decades-long agriculture depression made worse by the fall of the national economy after 1929.

Economic data from the U.S. Agricultural Census tell the story about both land use and population in Baca and Prowers from 1910 to 1930. The number of farms in Baca in 1910 was 540, by 1930 that number was over 1,700. Tenants serviced only 16 farms in 1910 but by 1930 the number had skyrocketed to 621 (more than a third of farms noted on the 1930 census). The numbers suggest that many of these tenants probably worked on wheat farms, as the number of acres under wheat was merely 453 in 1910 but, following the 1920s wheat boom, the number sat at 87,551 in 1930. Broomcorn, a crop less likely to fetch the attractive prices that wheat garnered but one suited to an arid environment, became the second most popular crop for Baca farmers, moving from only 3,805 acres in 1910 to 52,764 in 1930, a spectacular increase in a short time. The rise in mortgage debt demonstrates another part of these developments, namely the hard path that many expanding farmers took to capitalize on grain prices.

Only 12 farms reported any mortgage debt in 1910, a figure that suggests most owners had their finances at least within their control. Conversely, the 1930 number shows the impact of large-scale debt, as only 359 were debt free. Certainly, the amount and type of debt varied, but when we consider mortgage debt specifically, and then figure it as one instance of debt in addition to the debt accrued buying seed, tractors, and other products necessary for mechanization, we can assume that the average Baca farmers faced significant financial strains by 1930.<sup>106</sup>

Similar developments occurred in Prowers County, and although the central agriculture products differed, farmers still accrued debt between 1910 and 1930 as the nature of agriculture shifted to mechanized, profit-maximizing cash crop production. In terms of the number of farms, Prowers expanded from 991 in 1910 to 1,382 in 1930 – a smaller rate of growth than the heavy wheat farming endeavors in Baca. Farmers only devoted 23,279 acres to wheat in 1930, though up from the 1910 total of 5,006 represented a significant difference to Baca land use and similar to county production of oats and rye – all of which paled in comparison to the 30,912 acres devoted to irrigated alfalfa. Sugar beets and other commodities made up the difference; Prowers farmers planted beets on 5,520 acres in 1910 and a small bump to 6,810 acres in 1930. The issue of debt further evidences the trend towards expansion in spite of increasingly tenuous economic times. The 1930 census shows that 64% of Prowers farmers faced mortgage debt (476 of 744) while that number in 1910 sat at only 199 of 705 farmers, a

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<sup>106</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914); Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States 1930: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).

much lower rate of 28%.<sup>107</sup> Again, it is fair to assume that the amount of debt varied by farm but the fact that so many Prowers farmers faced mounting economic challenges suggests the heavy financial strains they knew even before the Crash in 1929.

This debt, and the trend of expansion and mechanization more broadly, meant that few farmers deviated from a production-first mentality for much of the 1920s. Farmers demonstrated marked resistance to having anyone, especially an outsider, offer assistance or try to hinder the push for profit by putting the brakes on production. This became evident in local newspapers like the *Springfield Democrat Herald* that covered an extensive debate about the value of county agents in Baca County. Opponents to the county agent argued that the economy had been stagnant, locals grew increasingly concerned over county budget money spent on such employees, and one writer argued that the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service remained too devoted to irrigation and “wet farming” to help Baca farmers. In rebuttal, Marlon D. Lasley contended that the Service and county agent could be a real asset for county farms: “If our farmers will just give him a chance to help them, I am sure they will find that he will be right on the job.”<sup>108</sup> J. L. Farrand knew that he needed some significant community support if he wanted to stay in Springfield beyond 1929. He noted the importance of making connections with prominent locals, including members of the Baca County Chamber of Commerce, because he wanted the people to understand his value. Unfortunately,

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<sup>107</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Agriculture*; Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States 1930: Agriculture*.

<sup>108</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald* “Letter to the Editor,” March 29, 1929; *Springfield Democrat Herald*, “Letter to the Editor,” April 19, 1929.

Farrand failed to convince them of his worth and Baca County residents refused to pay for a county agent again until 1934.<sup>109</sup>

Times were indeed tough for people in both Baca and Prowers, moreso in Baca, but most believed that they could weather the economic storm and get out from under debt once demand returned and prices rebounded. In the meantime, they thought that plowing, planting, and harvesting for markets represented the best use of their resources. In that respect, little had changed between the late 1890s and the 1920s, as farmers in both periods prioritized production as the only way to prosper. The sugar boom around the turn of the century and the wheat boom twenty years later demonstrated basic patterns of how outside forces – markets, weather, and even labor – influenced agricultural production.

Railroad expansion into the region represented one significant difference between the periods as it connected farmers to distant cities and opened up additional markets. Much of the impetus for extending rail into the state came after the mining successes after 1859, it just took a few years to amass the capital, receive federal assistance, and lay the track. In effect, the drive for minerals and fossil fuels invited investment into not only retrieving the resources but moving them to points east, west, north, and south as well.<sup>110</sup> Once the miners proved successful (always a relative term) and the lodes provided consistent resources, investors built railroads to connect the mines to industrial points like Chicago as well as cities on the Pacific Coast.

Importantly, the first rail to pass through the Plains along the Arkansas, the Atchison,

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<sup>109</sup> J.L. Farrand, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, April 15, 1929 to November 30, 1929,” 11, Folder 44, Box 8.

<sup>110</sup> See Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 78-83. Andrews addresses how the drive for mineral extraction compelled several changes along both the Front Range and the Colorado Plains.



Topeka, and Santa Fe, reached from St. Louis to Pueblo, home of the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company and prominent loading site as well as logical depot between Denver and Santa Fe. At that point, the Arkansas Valley merely represented a place to move through rather than a place to reside to most Americans. Indeed, one of the railroad's first stations in Colorado eventually grew into the city of Lamar, which still serves as an important stop for the Santa Fe. Once it hit Pueblo the line connected with the Rio Grande to service Denver, running a north-south path akin to present-day Interstate 25 in the middle of the state. Consequently, farmers in Prowers County used the line to sell their goods in Denver as well as parts west from that particular hub in addition to all points east that the Santa Fe serviced, including Houston, St. Louis, and Chicago (see Figure 5).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Frederic J. Athearn, "A Time of Building, 1870-1880" in *Land of Contrast: A History of Southeast Colorado* in BLM Cultural Resources Series (Colorado: No. 17) accessed via [http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/blm/co/17/contents.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/blm/co/17/contents.htm).

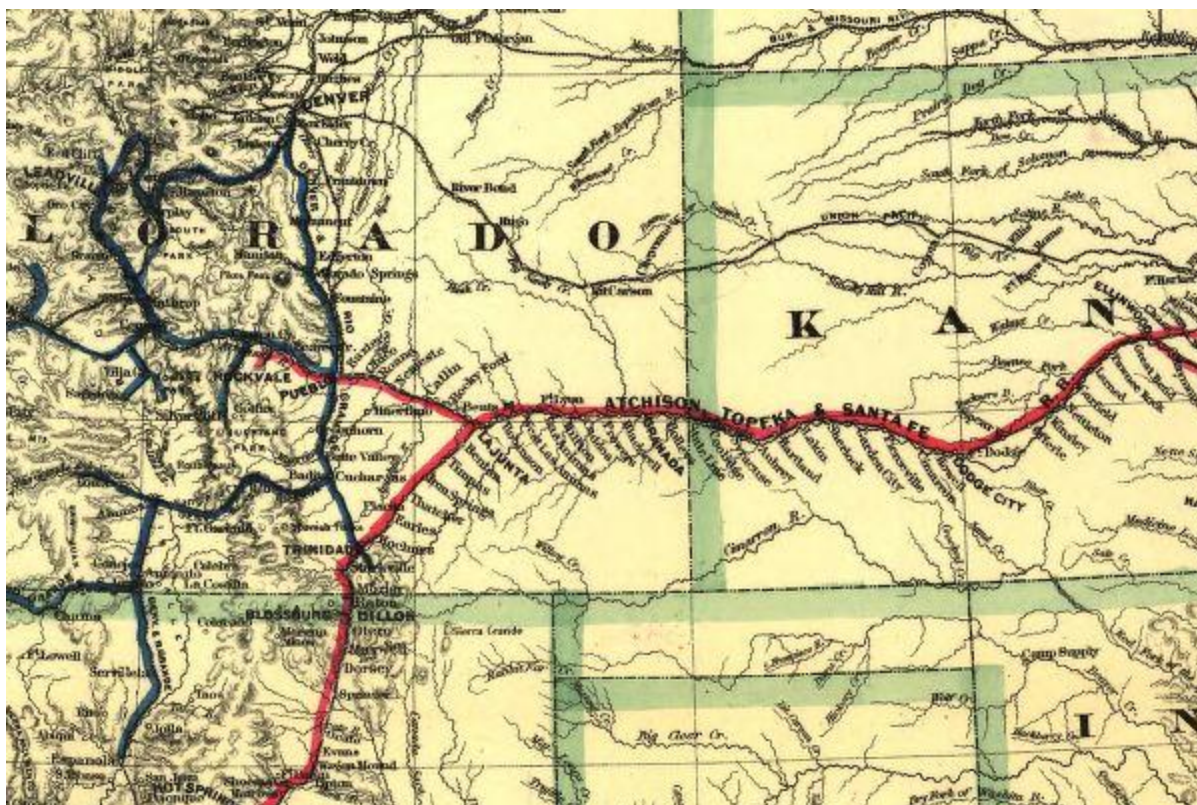


Figure 5: "The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad System, with its connections." G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co., 1883. The image shows the railroad running along the Arkansas River, connecting Prowers County towns to Denver as well as the Pacific Coast and the Midwest. Courtesy Library of Congress.

As a result, and as they had with irrigation, Prowers farmers enjoyed a geographical advantage over their neighbor to the south. The Arkansas River offered a natural trade route and invited early agricultural settlement because of its potential for irrigation. Baca had no such irrigation option and only finally received a tributary of the local railroad in 1926 when the Santa Fe finally extended into the county. Before 1926, Baca County farmers relied on automobiles and wagons to move their goods from their plots to stations along the river; this process took time, money, and added a level of inconvenience, in addition to meaning that most Baca farmers had to convey multiple loads of goods if they had a bountiful harvest. It also seemed to lend to Baca residents

being a bit more isolated, a bit more segregated, than their counterparts in Prowers.<sup>112</sup>

These differences led the two counties to follow markedly different paths from inception through the 1940s.

#### •Conclusion•

Over 120 years lapsed between when Zebulon Pike became the first Anglo-American to explore the region and the Great Depression struck in 1929. Yet, many aspects of life in Prowers and Baca Counties remained the same. Of course, the key similarity is that Anglo-American explorers noted and settlers eventually understood that agricultural settlement in southeastern Colorado would prove difficult if not impossible. The aridity, isolation, and the soil proved as daunting in the 1920s as they had to Pike and other explorers. Long's label of the area as "the Great American desert" fit almost as well in 1920 as it had when he passed through the area one hundred years earlier. It was then, and remained, inhospitable country.

Migrants generally made the trek into Colorado in search of resources. The 1859 gold rush transformed the territory and, according to Elliot West, the central Great Plains. The rush set up the population center in and around Denver and the influx of miners and goldseekers meant that a viable market for goods sprouted up almost immediately. Farmers had an outlet for their commodities, and the population boom proved enticing enough to invite railroad expansion, such that farmers on the Plains could send their goods to residents of expanding Denver. The farmers who made the trip to southeastern Colorado came for land, another resource that migrants hoped could

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<sup>112</sup> Colorado Preservation, Inc., "Baca County Survey" accessed via [http://www.coloradopreservation.org/crsurvey/rural/baca/sites/baca\\_resources\\_transportation.html](http://www.coloradopreservation.org/crsurvey/rural/baca/sites/baca_resources_transportation.html)

produce immediate and lasting wealth. Unfortunately, as both miners and many farmers came to realize, prosperity often proved elusive.

Yet when the federal government's agenda aligned with boosters' prognostications, thousands of potential migrants came to believe that settlement was possible. Certainly, Washington, D.C., played a major role in the push for expansion and settlement. The government effectively made room for settlement and enticed potential migrants to populate that space. Beginning with battling and then removing American Indians from the Great Plains as well as conducting the Mexican War, the federal government ousted previous inhabitants of the Great Plains. Then, with the various Homestead Acts, the land grant legislation that promoted railroad expansion, and continued federal support for agricultural production in commodities like sugar beets, the state promoted long-term settlement along the river and on dryland plots alike. Boosters from land syndicates, irrigation companies, and railroad outfits tried to convince potential migrants that southeastern Colorado was always on its way to becoming paradise. They promised irrigation and refused to accept that drought should impede production. They promoted free land, up for grabs, and regardless of where one landed s/he could prosper with some hard work. If the rain followed the plow then everyone should benefit, even those away from irrigable streams and creeks. The land was available, the country was welcoming, and the future was theirs to for taking. It may not have been a unified effort to settle the western Plains as quickly and fully as possible, but boosters on the Plains and in Washington pushed the American empire west.

The migrants constituted the key cog in the machinery of expansion, of course. The chance to take advantage of the Homestead Act brought Earl Gillis and Glen Durrell from points east, and their temporary stay on the Plains is indicative of many migrants' experience. The isolation, frequent droughts, grasshoppers, and overall difficulty bringing in a crop proved too challenging for many potential settlers who, though they came to the region because of its promise, turned away defeated and ready to try their luck elsewhere. To their credit, some farmers adapted to the conditions, especially by adopting dryland farming techniques in Baca County after the turn of the twentieth century. Others refused to think about anything but production, and the drive to grow wheat for World War I and after meant a dramatic influx of outsiders who sought to capitalize on high prices. The Great Plow Up ensued, and as we will see in the next chapter, farmers continued to pay the price of this push for maximized production well into the 1930s.

Prowers farmers who enjoyed irrigation had a relatively stable production regimen after the turn of the century. For those fortunate enough to have water rights or have a stake in one of the early canal companies, access to water mitigated some of the harshest aspects of life on dryland farms. Irrigation also made it possible for Prowers farmers to take advantage of the sugar beet industry, as beet companies contracted with growers, supplied workers, and employed folks in their refineries. The sugar boom helped the Prowers economy prosper and set it on a trajectory that remained relatively stable from 1900 to 1929. There was no massive influx of outsiders, also known as suitcase farmers, as there had been in Baca. Much of the population seemed settled, especially for those with water rights who realized that moving from the area meant

sacrificing their rights. In that respect, there seems to have been far less dramatic change in Prowers than in Baca during the decades leading up to the Great Depression.

Even then, however, the potential for expansion lured many farmers to take on debt to buy more land or machinery as they ended the 1920s. The number of farms and farmers increased from 1910 to 1930, but so did the number of farmers who faced mortgage debt. As the census numbers suggest, farmers in both counties started the 1930s from a rather tenuous position, as the national depression led to diminished demand and declining prices for agricultural commodities. The downturn had been relatively gradual for most dryland farmers in Baca, starting just after World War I and slowly worsening during much of the 1920s. For Prowers residents, the Crash and subsequent depression marked the first real down years – it seems that many irrigated farmers, even those in debt, maintained a level of confidence about their ability to eventually make it in the area. In reality, though, both groups remained beholden to the weather. This point became brutally apparent during the mid 1930s when continued depression and the onset of severe drought severely tested that confidence and challenged farmers in both locales to think about ways to safeguard their livelihoods.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The County Agents Take Root

Writing as “The Unofficial Observer” in the *Lamar Daily News*, Prowers County resident Joe T. Lawless celebrated the election of Democrats to various posts in the 1932 elections, specifically citing victories by Franklin D. Roosevelt for president and Edwin C. Thompson for governor. Lawless believed in a direct correlation between politics and the weather, arguing that since the Democrats’ victories “nature has blessed our farming sections with timely and abundant contributions of rain and snow.” This moisture, greeted with elation and cause for heightened expectations in the arid region, promised recovery for local farmers and a way out of the economic doldrums that they had been navigating for nearly fifteen years. Lawless hoped that the rise in precipitation could convince fellow Prowers inhabitants to support the Democratic Party, the group deserving credit for bringing the rain: “What the grateful residents should do in return is to see that it will not be such a long time between Democratic administrations in the future.”<sup>113</sup>

While the association of weather with political tides may seem a stretch, Lawless’s view demonstrates the optimism with which agriculturalists greeted the Roosevelt administration. Most Americans who voted for FDR hoped that the transition from Herbert Hoover to the more active and engaged administration that Roosevelt promised during the campaign could remedy the Great Depression. Hoover’s political life and legacy were, and generally remain, tied to the economic catastrophe. For right or wrong, he personified the Great Depression to millions of Americans, and voters turned to Roosevelt in 1932 largely because he offered hope at a time when

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<sup>113</sup> Joe T. Lawless, “The Unofficial Observer,” *Lamar Daily News*, May 08, 1933.

millions of Americans struggled to meet basic necessities – and blamed Hoover. Yet Hoover campaigned extensively on his desire to revive the agricultural economy and became the first president to consider using the federal government to subsidize agriculturalists during his time in office. Indeed, he had been a friend to the farmer in many ways. Given the gravity of the Depression and its continued grasp on the country in 1932, as well as the election results in both counties, support for Hoover had waned by the election. The *Springfield Democrat Herald*, the primary Baca County paper and ardent supporter of the Democratic Party, extolled Roosevelt’s virtues and celebrated his victory as the start of a new chapter in American history, one filled with optimism and prosperity.<sup>114</sup> The *Lamar Daily News* announced a veritable landslide in favor of FDR, even though many other races were much closer than the presidential vote.<sup>115</sup> Lawless embodied the exuberance surrounding the election and his hope that FDR’s promise of increased government intervention, his talk of a “new deal” for the American people, could lead the country out of the crisis. While it is doubtful that Lawless seriously considered the Democrats capable of changing the weather, it is apparent that he searched for some positive omen in a time of widespread desperation, comforted by the thought that change would come, and come quickly.

FDR’s election victory represented a watershed moment in American history, as the New Deal ushered in unprecedented federal involvement in American lives. In terms of agricultural policy, however, early New Deal programs did not break new ground merely by reaching out to rural constituents or trying to stabilize the rural economy. Indeed, while numerous historians have derided Hoover’s unwillingness to

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<sup>114</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, November 10, 1932

<sup>115</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, November 09, 1932.



extend more federal assistance to suffering Americans during his time in office, Hoover was in fact quite sensitive to the plight of American agriculture. David Hamilton argues that Hoover tried to help farmers through an “associational” plan, designed to combine efforts between locals and federal experts, utilize scientific research to determine the best crops for each soil type, promote stock-raising, and help farmers build personal credit. According to Hamilton, Hoover’s approach was “to fit farmers and agriculture to an advanced capitalist economy without either resorting to formal intervention to support prices or bowing to interest-group demands.”<sup>116</sup> The Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 is the best demonstration of that approach and the most prominent agricultural policy of his administration. According to Hamilton, the Act represented the “first attempt by a presidential administration to develop a comprehensive farm policy” and it laid the foundation for the Federal Farm Board to oversee the rural economy.<sup>117</sup> Hoover wanted to help farmers help themselves, stabilizing the rural economy without getting the federal government too heavily involved.

To that end, Hoover relied on the system of County Extension Agents created by the Smith-Lever Act to execute his policy. In fact, most agricultural policies designed after the Smith-Lever Act became law in 1914 utilized the agents as interlocutors between the federal government and rural residents. The Smith-Lever Act initiated the national Extension Service program and, for the first time, the federal government sent an army of experts into the American countryside to help farmers. That army, composed of county agents who worked for the United States Department of

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<sup>116</sup> David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 5-7.

<sup>117</sup> David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* 27.

Agriculture (USDA) and trained at state land grant agricultural colleges, became critical for both Hoover and FDR to execute their broader agendas. The Smith-Lever Act, by articulating the need for experts to help modernize farming practices, address rural families' needs, and stabilize the rural economy, was one of the more important steps Congress made in the first part of the twentieth century to reach out to rural America. Agents took on the role of local expert and sage advisor for all aspects of rural life and became the ideal mediums to execute federal policy on the ground. The agents were largely responsible for advising and teaching farmers various lessons on modern farming techniques or how to save money, or even detailing how farmers could become and then stay involved in their communities. That agents and locals came together to combat rural problems together represented a key component of the Act and subsequent exercise of the Extension programs. Essentially, the entire system relied on farmers to participate in the process, to work hand-in-hand with county agents (who were principally responsible for pushing cooperation) and to offer feedback on federal programs and policies.

In this way, farmers started becoming more accustomed to dealing with advisors after 1914 and thus had experience dealing with federal employees, regulations, and programs by 1929. Hoover utilized agents to institute his farm policies and consequently became the first president to use the agents as the legislation had intended, by inserting them directly between farmers and the state. Yet no one relied on the agents as much as FDR, who employed them to carry out his rural agenda and to build political support in the countryside. The New Deal included a number of federal programs designed to help agriculturalists, and it depended on local agents to ensure

that residents were abiding by new regulations and satisfying requirements to attain newly created subsidies. Those subsidies proved crucial for farmers to survive the worst parts of the Depression and became critically important in southeastern Colorado during the Dust Bowl years. The New Deal also increased funding for the Extension program, including a provision to pay the agents from federal and state coffers rather than have the individual counties pay the agents' salaries. This lessened the financial burden on impoverished counties and thus made residents more amenable to the agents themselves. That funding helped agents solidify their place in the community, making it easier for them to build relationships with their constituents. Those ties became even especially important during the New Deal when the agent spearheaded rural reform by taking responsibility for translating federal policy, for listening to farmers' complaints, for being part of the rural community, and for protecting farmers' best interests.

This chapter explains the origins of the county agent system, how agents approached rural problems under Hoover, and how agents helped usher in the New Deal. It argues that agents effectively came to personify the New Deal and symbolize a growing federal government to rural residents. In southeastern Colorado this meant that locals sometimes embraced them and at other points dismissed them. As David Danbom explains, the agents' first job was to make sure their constituents understood their value, largely because "the early agents ran against the coarse grain of rural conservatism." The agents faced a resistant population wary of scientific solutions to agriculture, many farmers resented the book-trained experts, and the agents found themselves adapting their programs to make them more amenable to farmers' demands. In these ways, the agents had to adjust their approach according the community, and

this took some time.<sup>118</sup> Farmers, too, had to adjust to the agents. Certainly, agents represented federal largesse to supporters as much as they reminded critics of bureaucracy. But folks living in Baca and Prowers County undoubtedly knew their agent well enough to form an opinion about him, rural reform, and, eventually, the New Deal. Regardless of locals' reception of them, agents consistently advised and assisted farmers, whether by demonstrating how to terrace their fields or how to best store produce for winter or what forms they needed to fill out to satisfy the terms of federal policy. Their tenure in southeastern Colorado reflected the severity of the economic crisis. The first agent arrived in Baca County in 1929 but only lasted one year before another agent returned in 1933. The county agent only finally earned a permanent place in Prowers County in 1933 after several different temporary stints by various people. In other words, the agents became more important to locals, more vital to their survival, as their economic outlook further deteriorated and the weather turned for the worse. While agents had served in other parts of the state, region, and country before the New Deal, Roosevelt's election and subsequent First Hundred Days opened a new chapter in the history of the Extension Service and in the lives of its constituents on the Colorado Plains.

•Smith-Lever•

Congress created the system of county agents in 1914 to reflect a growing sensitivity on the part of politicians to the plight of rural residents who were, in one way or another, losing their place in an increasingly modern (and modernizing) country. Representative A. Frank Lever of South Carolina and Senator Hoke Smith of Georgia

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<sup>118</sup> David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1979), 86-95. Quote taken from pg. 88.

introduced the bill as a way to both establish a national cooperative extension program and attain federal funding for it. At its core, the Smith-Lever Act represented a concerted effort by the federal government to use seasoned experts to help the farmer manage his or her life, economy, family, and land, primarily by using experts to educate the people.<sup>119</sup> Each state that participated in the program received federal funding to offset expenses accrued by program employees, including printing costs, travel expenses, salaries, and other fees from working in the field.<sup>120</sup> The key to the program was the relationship between the expert and the farmer. As A. Frank Lever described it:

This bill proposes to set up a series of general demonstration teaching throughout the country, and the agent in the field of the Department and the college is to be the mouthpiece through which this information will reach the people—the man and woman and the boy and girl on the farm. You can not make the farmer change the methods which have been sufficient to earn a livelihood for himself and his family for many years unless you show him, under his own vine and fig tree as it were, that you have a system better than the system which he himself has been following.

The plan proposed in this bill undertakes to do that by personal contact, not by writing to a man and saying that this is a better plan than he has or by standing up and talking to him and telling him it is a better plan, but by going onto his farm, under his own soil and climatic conditions, and by demonstrating that you have a method which surpasses his in results.<sup>121</sup>

The bill's basic goal involved getting available agricultural experts in a given locale to work at "diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same."<sup>122</sup> The emphasis on experts and their role in disseminating valuable information to "the people" reflects the bill's Progressive qualities. As Samuel Hays argues, the federal government's use of experts trained in applied science to

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<sup>119</sup> Roy V. Scott illustrates how the Smith-Lever Act represented the culmination of work done over a century through mostly trial and error to get a national program of educating farmers. See Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 288-313.

<sup>120</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 1932.

<sup>121</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session, 1937.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 1932.

ensure efficient and productive use of natural resources constituted a hallmark of Progressive conservation efforts.<sup>123</sup> The Smith-Lever Act promoted the role of learned men in the USDA and at state agricultural colleges in leading farmers toward economic stability. If these experts had the opportunity to demonstrate proper farming practices to agriculturalists then their knowledge, in Lever's words, "would work a complete and absolute revolution in the social, economic, and financial condition of our rural population."<sup>124</sup>

According to Smith-Lever supporters, most prominently Liberty Hyde Bailey who organized one of the first state Extension programs in New York, the Extension Service should "advance the larger cultural ideals of a 'self-sustaining' agriculture and personal happiness."<sup>125</sup> Smith-Lever supporters hoped the bill could promote farmers' achieving and then sustaining this kind of idealized rural life, one full of prosperity and personal fulfillment. To help farmers on their way required experts and these experts needed to ingratiate themselves with local populations. The experts, who we now refer to as county agents, had to communicate with the farmers and their families in order to fully understand that challenges of rural life as only the farmers could easily identify what parts of their lives and communities warranted attention. The Act proposed that these experts enter the countryside armed with training gained at state agricultural colleges. Politicians pushed for the agents to educate the public on issues like cooperative marketing techniques, which seemed to make possible the end of boom and bust cycles, as well as ways to improve production so as to maximize sales and improve

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<sup>123</sup> Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), passim.

<sup>124</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 1937.

<sup>125</sup> Scott J. Peters, "'Every Farmer Should Be Awakened': Liberty Hyde Bailey's Vision of Agricultural Extension Work," *Agricultural History* 80, no. 2 (2006): 190.

income. They also expected the agents to emphasize the new field of home economics that was a crucial part of the rural economy and integral to a family's ability to survive, or, hopefully, to thrive. The agents' most important task was then to take these new skills and perspectives into the country's rural areas to help farmers. Wayne D. Rasmussen's work on the Extension Service, aptly titled *Taking the University to the People*, suggests the importance of using expert technique and cutting edge practices on American farms – using education and cooperation between farmers and experts to “help people help themselves.”<sup>126</sup> The agents utilized their training, adopted research-based knowledge promoted by the Extension agricultural experiment stations, and encouraged farmer participation in their educational programs. Rasmussen insisted that the system relied on a “voluntary cooperative framework” where the agents offered assistance but in no way compelled farmers to take part.<sup>127</sup> The combination of agent and farmer thus combined outside expertise with local knowledge and initiative in hopes that the two groups could come together, identify the primary issues, and develop worthwhile solutions.

By its design and eventually through its execution, the Service facilitated community cohesion, as agents literally took to the fields and offered educated insight to help farmers improve their methods and production. In that respect, the agents delivered as the legislation intended. The agents and the Extension Service more broadly also succeeded in pushing for resource conservation to protect farmers from depleting their resource base. Smith-Lever supporters believed that resource conservation, and specifically a stronger effort to take care of the soil, would prove

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<sup>126</sup>Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989), vii.

<sup>127</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension*, 5.

absolutely critical to stabilizing the rural economy and population by ensuring that farmers protected their most valuable commodity. In the course of discussion surrounding the Smith-Lever Act, for instance, the bill's supporters argued that the Extension agents' most important responsibility was to correct abusive practices:

The soil of this country...is the storehouse of all wealth. Every living soul is dependent upon it. The very best thought of this Nation should be directed to its conservation. We hear much of the conservation of our timber, our mineral lands, and our rivers and harbors. The soil is the mother of all, and by who or when has a voice been raised and decisive active stand taken to conserve and perpetuate the soil...The soil—the land—is an inheritance, handed down to man for humanity. It belongs to future generations, and, as it passes through our hands, we are as responsible as the man with the talents. Let us do our duty—pass this bill—and receive the plaudit, “Well done, thou good and faithful servants.”<sup>128</sup>

While lacking specifics for exactly how Americans could save their soils, this call for the cooperative Extension program to remedy the already-evident and pressing issue of declining soil fertility represented one of the more compelling arguments in favor of the bill. Extension Service supporters knew that conservation was critical for prosperity and posterity, as only concerted protection of soil and water could ensure “that future generations also may have a good living and the general welfare be thereby safeguarded.”<sup>129</sup> With that reasoning they tried to tie America's progress as a nation with its ability to protect its resources, an argument that proved successful enough to win the bill's passage.

As much as the agents' efforts resembled the rhetoric underlining the legislation, most agents, though not all, resembled the enlightened experts that Smith-Lever promoted. The agents in Baca and Prowers Counties during the 1930s and 1940s offer an interesting amalgam of backgrounds, training, and perspectives. For example, Frank

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<sup>128</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, 1935.

<sup>129</sup> Kelsey and Hearne, *Cooperative Extension Work*, 117-118; Sanders, *The Cooperative Extension Service*, 417.



Lamb grew up in Colorado before taking a post as Baca County agent in 1929. While the agents' goal was to build relations with his constituents, Lamb only lasted one year in Baca. Claude Gausman and Jack French knew each other in Fort Collins, Colorado, both of them excelling at the state agricultural college. They played several sports together, including basketball and baseball, and maintained a strong circle of friends while living in Fort Collins. Eventually they took their education to Baca and Prowers; French worked as an agent in Prowers County during the late 1930s while Gausman worked in Baca for several years before replacing French in Prowers (see Figure 6).<sup>130</sup>



**Figure 6: "Three sets of brothers, French-Gausman-Vahles." Jack French and Claude Gausman (far left and third from left, respectively) knew each other at college before working in the Extension Service as agents. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.**

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<sup>130</sup> Their experiences in the two counties can be found in various Extension Service summaries. The Colorado Digital Archive has pictures of the two in various sports groups and in several pictures with their brothers and other friends.

Yet an education at the state land grant college did not prove mandatory for agents. A. J. Hamman worked as Prowers agent for many years before earning promotion to Extension Service Soil Conservationist and finally managing the Emergency Farm Labor Program during World War II. Hamman noted that “having no degree in agriculture was no handicap in my work. Common sense and farm experience were the best foundations. The lack of degree reduced my prestige among a very few of the self-exalted [sic] agriculture college graduates. Director [F. A.] Anderson had no degree, nothing but a business college diploma.”<sup>131</sup>

Hamman’s recollection of his time with the Extension Service also showed that political allegiance had nothing to do with his position. Even though he owed much of his Extension career to the New Deal, especially the agreement to pay agents’ salaries, Hamman held nothing back in his memoir. He routinely referred to local and national “dimocrats” and mentioned how he never made public “how few ‘dimocrats’ I had ever voted for.” He disparaged local Democratic candidates and, while he claimed to have never been involved in local politics, remembered well the number of Republicans elected to local committees. For Hamman, who eventually rose to one of the most powerful posts in the state during World War II, political allegiance to either FDR or the New Deal mattered less than the government giving him an opportunity to do his job.<sup>132</sup>

The agents in Prowers and Baca were thus a motley array, but one thing that tied them together was their willingness to work with Colorado farmers. Indeed, Smith-Lever supporters’ apparent sensitivity to the importance of sustaining rural America—

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<sup>131</sup> A. J. Hamman, *The Long Journey* ((Marjorie J. Miller, 1989), 121.

<sup>132</sup> A. J. Hamman, *The Long Journey*, 129.

its economy, its soil, and its families—proved crucial to farmers in two important ways prior to the New Deal. First, it evidenced at least some trepidation over exploitative agricultural practices and how such damaging habits threatened an entire segment of the American population. It demonstrated that many people inside and outside of Washington, D.C. considered the correlation between the health of the land and the health of the folks who lived and worked on it. Second, the practice of sending experts into the field to advise rural America represented an initial foray into extending federal intervention into the countryside, especially during periods of crisis.

Put another way, rural Americans started becoming more familiar with the presence of outsiders after 1914. That did not necessarily produce public support for the Extension Service or for the county agents. Farmers in Baca and Prowers Counties were only willing to embrace the agents when the national economy had effectively hit rock bottom. They seemed to have little faith that the agents would have much impact, but, more importantly, the Smith-Lever Act included federal and state funding but mandated that each county pay for its agent. As a result, residents in rural counties, places that did not have much in the county coffers, proved reticent to hire agents especially during the relatively down years in the 1920s. That was the case until locals became more eager to utilize outside assistance when the economic outlook and climate combined to tear away at their livelihoods; Extension experts looked more useful as the circumstances became more dire. Therefore, the agents' presence in southeastern Colorado can be seen as an indicator of the economic outlook for local agriculturalists, of the improving relationship between agent and farmer, and of the growing sense that the agents could truly help. The agents thus provide a unique window into how the first

years of the depression impacted rural towns and how residents in farm communities survived.

•Hoover•

The causes of the Great Depression are many and varied; the economic collapse that ushered in more than a decade of depression surely affected all Americans. While it is easy to assume, and as has been reinforced by various American history textbooks, that the Great Crash of 1929 signaled the beginning of the decline, in truth the crisis proved more complex. The main problem in rural southeastern Colorado was the extensive depression in the agricultural economy that started at the end of World War I. Consequently, most residents in Baca and Prowers had been facing tough times for a decade before 1929 and paid little attention to the Crash. As longtime Baca County resident Ike Osteen noted, “few people in Baca County even knew what the stock market was, and I don’t know of a single person in Baca County who killed themselves because of what happened on Wall Street.”<sup>133</sup> Indeed, of the two major newspapers in the area only the *Lamar Daily News* recognized the event, giving it front page coverage with the title “Billions Lost on Stock Exchange.”<sup>134</sup> Both the *Lamar Daily News*, and its Baca County counterpart the *Springfield Democrat Herald*, actually covered a local bank robbery more attentively than they did national news during the fall of ‘29. It was perhaps a sign of the desperate times when five men walked into the Lamar First National Bank in May, 1928, killed the bank president, his son, and a bank teller while abducting another teller and stealing over \$500,000. Authorities either caught or shot

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<sup>133</sup> Ike Osteen, *A Place Called Baca* (Chicago, IL: Adams Press, 1979), 169.

<sup>134</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, October 24, 1929. *The Springfield Democrat Herald*, the largest Baca County paper, made no mention of the Crash and seems much less connected to national and even some regional news than the *Lamar Daily News* appeared.

and killed those attempting to escape; their trial in the fall of 1929 invited intense local media coverage.<sup>135</sup> Most local newspaper coverage from the first years of the Depression simply recounted local events and news without much fanfare. The editors, presumably to the same extent as the readership, seemed resigned to accept both the Hoover presidency and the national economic climate with indifference; local issues remained paramount as the economy continued to sputter and residents struggled to make ends meet.

One might postulate that locals would have been more invested in Hoover and his administration because he had campaigned on the need, and his desire, to help rural America. Certainly, Hoover had been sensitive to the depressed farm economy during his time as Secretary of Commerce, and over the course of the 1920s he developed a system that he hoped could stabilize the rural economy – the most important problem facing American farmers. His basic idea relied on federal employees to instruct farmers about how to best market their products. Large, national cooperative bodies could effectively stabilize prices by regulating the flow of products and thus negotiating the price point; this allowed farmers to help themselves with only minimal federal intervention. A federal farm board could then supervise the marketing strategy and verify that the associations in wheat or cotton or other products judged the domestic and international markets correctly, ensuring that farmers garnered the best price for their goods. This procedural approach became the foundation for the most significant agricultural policy the Hoover administration passed, the Agricultural Marketing Act of

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<sup>135</sup> See *Lamar Daily News* and *Springfield Herald Democrat* from the middle of October to beginning of November, 1929. The only day that either paper did not include trial coverage as its central, front page story, was the day after the Crash in the Lamar paper. Ava Betz also covers the robbery, murder, and trial in her brief pamphlet on Prowers County history. Ava Betz, *Prowers County, Colorado: A Prowers County History* (Lamar, CO: Prowers County Historical Society, 1986).

1929. That Act combined personal responsibility with minimal federal involvement (education and coordination of the federal farm board) to mitigate the problems caused by fluctuating markets.<sup>136</sup>

This idea shared many basic characteristics with the McNary-Haugen Bill and thus illustrated some of the basic changes that Hoover envisioned and deemed necessary to help farmers. The McNary-Haugen Bill, introduced in 1924 but refined and adjusted over several incarnations during the mid 1920s, likewise relied on a federal farm board system but focused on the issues of export and tariff as ways to ensure solid prices for American products. It centered on the “two-price system,” a federally-designed cooperative marketing scheme to set up a domestic price as well as a lower international price so that American produce could compete on the world market and sellers could also make money at home. It also included an equalization fee that was effectively a tax that farmers paid to offset the loss accrued by selling their surplus on the world market for lower prices. The bill’s supporters believed that farmers’ ability to take advantage of the domestic market would more than offset the federal tax that farmers paid to support the marketing scheme.

The McNary-Haugen Bill eventually passed both the House and Senate in 1927 only to be vetoed by President Calvin Coolidge. Most McNary-Haugenites rightly believed that Hoover pushed Coolidge towards the veto because Hoover did not agree with or support the idea of the equalization fee. Everything else about the McNary-Haugen approach seemed to align well with Hoover’s views and therefore he passed his Agricultural Marketing Act in 1929, a bill he later called “the McNary-Haugen bill

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<sup>136</sup> James H. Shideler, “Herbert Hoover and the Federal Farm Board Project, 1921-1925,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42, no. 4 (March 1956): 711-718.

stripped of the equalization fee.” In that way, Hoover effectively ushered in the agricultural marketing program after working on it during the 1920s. He devised a way to deal with agricultural surpluses and simultaneously funnel money into the farm economy, but made sure that farmers had some skin in the game. Rather than push a comprehensive top-down farm program, Hoover wanted to create a federal board responsible for limiting production and buying up agricultural surplus. Everything was voluntary, however, and the Act gave the board little enforcement power to ensure that farmers cut production to discourage a surplus. Thus, Hoover tried to maintain his cooperative approach even though he seemed willing to extend some federal financial assistance to farmers.<sup>137</sup>

While it is evident that the Hoover administration came into office with the firm conviction that depression in the agricultural economy required remedy and had a sense of how it wanted to proceed, it largely failed to help farmers. FDR’s election victory in Baca and Prowers Counties suggests that Hoover failed to convince his rural constituency that he had done much in their favor. This might be due in part to his failure to utilize county agents to build relationships with locals or drum up enthusiasm for administration policies. Unlike Roosevelt, who used the agents to work as mouthpieces for federal policy, encouraging participation and promoting support, Hoover did not seem terribly concerned about how, or even if, agents dealt with rural Americans. For the most part, while agents worked on building relations with farmers, no public relations activity to establish a base of support for federal involvement existed under the Hoover administration. Residents of southeastern Colorado seemed isolated

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<sup>137</sup> Roger T. Johnson, “Part-Time Leader: Senator Charles L. McNary and the McNary-Haugen Bill,” *Agricultural History* 54, no. 4 (October 1980): 529-541. Quote taken from pg. 539-540.

from policy discussions and unconvinced that Hoover had done anything for them, so they approached the Hoover administration with little fanfare. The issue of farm boards or equalization fees had little bearing on how Prowers and Baca County farmers faced the first few years of the Great Depression. Most simply wanted to know what the federal government could offer them to help them in their time of need and showed no concern for federal politics or policies.

#### •Valuing the County Agent•

The initial debates about the county agent's value and place in rural Colorado emerged within this context. The public conversations showed that locals had started to evaluate the Extension Service, and therefore assess the need for the Service to place agents in their counties, by 1929. Some evident trepidation to embrace the Extension program demonstrated that many residents resisted outside "help" in spite of their continued economic distress. Most hesitation abated as the economy worsened, and criticism of federal involvement in local and even regional affairs almost completely disappeared by Roosevelt's election in 1932. By the coming of the New Deal, then, locals had become more accustomed to working with agents, more comfortable with an outside presence, and more aware that these agents helped them relate to an expanding state. That proved crucial to early New Deal policy taking root in the region and gave FDR's administration some credibility with farmers.

For most of the Hoover administration, agents across the country undertook responsibilities like establishing 4H Clubs, leading home economics demonstrations, and assisting farmers in the field, just as they had since 1914. The agents in Baca and Prowers took the Hoover administration's lead and focused intently on cooperative



marketing and farmer organization. By the end of Hoover's term and the start of the New Deal, however, the agents' role turned steadily towards that of financial manager. More specifically, the system of agricultural subsidies which started under Hoover and expanded with the New Deal, required farmers to abide by extensive regulations and then have the agents approve their compliance, effectively making agents responsible for determining whether local farmers received federal assistance. Agents were thus absolutely critical in keeping farmers afloat during trying economic times, especially as the number and variety of agricultural programs increased under the New Deal. They not only explained the programs and demonstrated how to abide by new regulations, but they literally decided who received federal financial help. In that respect they played a vital role in helping struggling farmers survive the lean years.

Locals only gradually reached that conclusion, however, and many voiced their hesitation about the Extension Service and agent program from the start of the Great Depression in 1929 through the first year of the New Deal in 1933. Local newspapers actually served as one important medium for a discussion about Extension and the appropriate level of "outsider" intervention more generally. The debate involved larger questions of the agent's use, especially when considering that many proud farmers did not believe that a book-trained college kid could offer much insight. Housing a county agent also involved money, and until the county had no money to foot the bill until the New Deal. The Smith-Lever Act afforded a federal budget for the program but one so limited that the program lacked the funding to pay for county agents. Consequently, counties that chose to employ agents had to come up with their salary out of the county budget. This proved difficult for many rural locales, even during relatively stable years,

so much of the potent animosity toward the agents represented as much concern for the county budget as it did for the agent himself. Indeed, the county budget represented something that locals could exert some control over; they sought to limit expenses to help further buttress themselves against the Depression. Certainly, this meant a close accounting of expenses and careful bookkeeping. It also compelled a few locals to dismiss the agent because they believed he was not worth the cost.

An editorial in the *Springfield Democrat Herald* from 1929 initially spurred a public conversation about the program and summarized the key points against employing the county agent. The author chastised Colorado Agricultural College (renamed Colorado State College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts in 1935, and eventually Colorado State University) for educating students with book rather than empirical knowledge and for then ushering them to places like Baca County where residents had to foot the bill. Moreover, the “county-agent racketeers” only worried about irrigation, “wet farming,” and because the majority of Baca farms lacked irrigation the agent was effectively unnecessary. The author asserted that Baca County farmers were as adept at their craft as farmers anywhere and, therefore, they had no need to support the agent because he offered nothing of value. The agent’s salary was perhaps the key issue, as the author cited the “outrageous” taxes already levied against locals and the importance of having more money at their disposal.<sup>138</sup>

Most of the public discussion about the Extension Service in local newspapers was positive and optimistic that the agents could in fact help local farmers in various ways. The *Springfield Democrat Herald* included a rebuttal to the editorial criticizing the program that defended the new agent and tried to drum up support for the Service.

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<sup>138</sup> *Springfield Herald Democrat* March 29, 1929.

Marlon D. Lasley applauded the county commissioners who invited an agent to work in Baca and predicted that the Service would be a tremendous boon to local farmers. Considering the Extension Service in Baca County was still in its infancy when he wrote the editorial in 1929, Lasley argued for patience: “If our farmers will just give him a chance to help them, I am sure they will find that he will be right on the job. I expect to call on him for advice on several things I have in mind, regarding my orchard and grapevines, and both hogs and sows.”<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Joe T. Lawless, notable as “The Unofficial Observer,” criticized the Prowers County commissioners for temporarily dispensing with their agent. Agent Frank Lamb “was unusually efficient and always willing to work overtime. His advice and assistance enabled the farmers to improve the quality and increase the output of all crops, thus aiding them to earn many times over the small fractions of taxes they paid for the benefit of his counsel and aid. The County agent’s office is an investment instead of a liability.”<sup>140</sup>

The agents actually entered the conversation about their relative worth and how they served the community at various points during the public debate. They did this by writing editorials, penning regular sections in the back pages like the “County agent’s Column” and “Country Correspondence,” and attending public meetings to discuss the program and agents’ jobs. Local agents generally wrote such columns to explain some aspect of pending legislation or the proper ways to fill out credit applications or which crop variations were doing especially well at that particular time. Agents continued writing these columns well into the 1940s, but their efforts to publicize their impact seemed more pressing during the first years of the Great Depression when they were

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<sup>139</sup> Marlon D. Lasley, “Editorial,” *Springfield Herald Democrat*, April 19, 1929.

<sup>140</sup> Joe T. Lawless, “The Unofficial Observer,” *Lamar Daily News*, May 8, 1933.

still trying to gain a foothold in the community. In one of the more straight-forward examples of an agent defending his position, Prowers County agent Frank R. Lamb calculated what he considered to be his relative worth to explain that his salary was indeed worth locals' sacrifice. Lamb argued that his \$2,150 a year salary was incredibly inexpensive considering his ability to educate farmers, help them become better producers, and assist them in marketing their goods. He deemed those services to be worth nearly \$25,000 annually, a cost ten times his salary.<sup>141</sup> He did not specify how he tallied that total, but we can assume that he accounted for his help attaining seed loans for farmers, ensuring that farmers could take advantage of Hoover's Agricultural Marketing Act, and even his demonstrations of how to improve soil and capitalize on irrigation. While the number might be questionable, he and other agents certainly saved farmers money by advising them, assisting them in obtaining credit, and abetting production. Again, Lamb deferred to money to show his worth, illustrating that he fully realized that most locals who resisted the program did so because of the cost to the county. If Lamb could find some way to convince them that he had actually *saved* them money, then they might be more likely to sustain him in Baca.

The agents' jobs became more complicated – and their relative worth became clearer – after Roosevelt's election and the development of New Deal agricultural programs. The flood of federal legislation inaugurated during the First Hundred Days promised tumult for American farmers as they came to grips with new programs, regulations, and, eventually, the opportunity to qualify for federal subsidies. The

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<sup>141</sup> Frank R. Lamb, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1931 to December 01, 1932," in Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University. All future citations for Colorado Extension Service records include author, title of annual report, folder number, and box number.

impact of this transformation emerged in locals' continued debate regarding the county agent who seemed to become more desirable in the face of such chaos. For example, the editor of the *Lamar Daily News* argued in favor of reinstating the Prowers County agent to serve area farmers immediately following FDR's election. The editor claimed to disagree with the initial decision to remove the agent and believed that an agent could now undoubtedly help local farmers and could do so at a minimal cost to the county government. An agent familiar with the local terrain, practices and products, and someone friendly with local farmers could advocate for county farmers and protect their interests. Rather than have the federal government supply an "emergency administrator" for government programs, which would occur if the county refused to appoint someone from Extension, the editor pushed for a permanent agent who represented Prowers residents. Only then could farmers ensure that they qualified for federal subsidies based on drought or satisfied policy requirements in terms of the corn and hog program, for example.<sup>142</sup> The editor effectively surmised the agent's job during the New Deal and presciently identified how the agent, working with both the state and local farmers, would maintain allegiance to locals' needs during the Roosevelt years.

Southeastern Coloradans, even those who dismissed the need for a county agent, seemed to understand that the New Deal's prescription for stabilizing the rural economy meant a dramatic increase in federal intervention in the countryside. For example, Mrs. C. L. Nickelson expressed her belief that the agent served as nothing more than a cheerleader for local farmers in a letter to the *Lamar Daily News*. Given the financial strain that his salary would exact, she argued that he was not worth the expense. She

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<sup>142</sup> "The County agent Matter" from "The Editor Speaking," *Lamar Daily News*, November 11, 1933.

claimed that while the initial phase of New Deal policy was going into effect, the federal government had already proven capable of reaching agriculturalists during Hoover's administration without an agent's help. She conceded that the situation was dire enough to warrant federal intervention and dryland farmers specifically deserved assistance because of drought and dust. Nickelson argued that "The facts alone should determine as to whether or not dryland farmers should receive federal benefits; a county agent should not be expected to 'doctor' the facts." By suggesting that an agent merely served as "press agent of the community," Nickelson simultaneously discredited the Service and accused it of discounting dryland farmers in favor of bigger, irrigated, cash crop farms. While her perspective largely reflected the same thrust offered by other critics, it is important to note that Nickelson was sensitive to the changing context when she offered her perspective in 1933. She understood that Roosevelt's election brought an increasingly active federal, state, and county government. She even welcomed such intervention on some level, and she believed that federal employees and programs could filter through the area without help from the county agent. She contended that the federal government had already proven "quite capable of getting to the farmers in counties where there was no county agent" and consequently locals could access government services directly.<sup>143</sup>

The *Lamar Daily News* included George B. Long's rebuttal to Nickelson. Long felt that the sheer number of New Deal programs, to say nothing of their complexity, necessitated some kind of translator for local farmers to communicate with federal bureaucrats. Long wrote that "our Federal Government was developing to contact the individual farmer" and "the wheat farmer and the corn and hog farmer has [sic] been

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<sup>143</sup> Mrs. C.L. Nickelson, "Letter to the Editor," *Lamar Daily News*, December 08, 1933.

brought under the protecting arm of our Uncle Sam.” Because of the drought, Long continued, the county would enjoy even greater federal largesse and consequently needed a contact person – the local agent. The government moved toward price controls over “every commodity of importance produced” in Prowers County and the USDA recognized Extension as the “one channel thru [sic] which authentic information goes to Washington.” Because he fully expected government intervention, Long reiterated his support for some kind of mediator to work on behalf of local farmers and refuted Nickelson’s view that leadership from Washington was enough.<sup>144</sup> Long’s argument also further expressed a key rationale to support the program; only the agent could promise financial stability through supplying federal subsidies, and in that way the Service became vital to farmers during the New Deal.

This conversation may have compelled agents to better appreciate the need to build constituencies and demonstrate their worth to the community. They did this in part by keeping meticulous records documenting their experiences, utilizing both a Narrative Summary and a Statistical Summary to explain how they executed their assignments. As the titles imply, the agents included information about their regular day-to-day activities in the field, submitting quantitative evidence in the Statistical Summary to demonstrate their involvement in the community. The bulk of the agents’ Narrative Summaries delved into personal experiences with farmers and community leaders as well as their perspectives on local problems, potential solutions, and interpretations of local conditions as more qualitative analysis. Additionally, the agents

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<sup>144</sup> George B. Long, “Letter to the Editor,” *Lamar Daily News*, December 08, 1933. Long also demonstrates a certain anxiety about federal intervention in this letter by claiming that he was in fact unsure whether federal involvement was a good thing for locals or if it sacrificed independence.

sometimes offered other documentation to evidence their impact, including pamphlets, newspaper clippings, posters, and other notifications about agent-led activities.

By scribing such detailed accounting of their exploits, agents seemed not only conscious of justifying their position to the community but also to their superiors at the state office, as either of the two had the power to replace the agent or conclude the program. It seems that many agents figured that involvement in the community represented the best way to both help farmers and gain some exposure. For instance, the agents tracked their time in the field by noting the number of visits to communities in the respective counties. They also recorded the numbers of letters and articles written, bulletins distributed, and meetings/training sessions held for interested locals. They also offered technical assistance to farmers by conducting one of two demonstrations, labeled method and result. The method was “given by an Extension worker or other trained leader for the purpose of showing how to carry out a practice” while the result was “conducted by a farmer, home maker, boy, or girl under the direct supervision of the Extension worker, to show locally the value of a recommended practice.”<sup>145</sup> For instance, the Baca County agent held demonstrations and conducted visits with local families regarding issues like the family diet, food preservation, furnishing the home, tending to home gardens, and even planning the family’s wardrobe.<sup>146</sup> In another example, the Prowers agent recorded how his seven sugar beet

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<sup>145</sup> R.E. Frisbie, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, January 15, 1934 to June 25, 1934,” Folder 5, Box 67.

<sup>146</sup> J.L. Farrand, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, April 15, 1929 to November 30, 1929,” Folder 44, Box 8. Also see Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989), 86-88.



demonstration plots performed and noted the number of people who visited to check the agents' work and the beets' progress.<sup>147</sup>

In addition to showing their influence on the community, agents' ledgers and notes from the Hoover years demonstrate two key components to the Hoover administration's approach to stabilizing the rural economy: limited direct federal intervention and reliance on local cooperation to spearhead reform. Frank Lamb, Prowers County agent from 1929 to 1934, noted that most of his work involved working with farmers to join or start cooperative organizations because he received such little help from either the state or the federal government. This became painfully clear when the Governor's Relief Committee refused to acknowledge that Prowers residents needed state assistance in 1932. Surprisingly, government assessors who traveled the Colorado Plains to determine what counties should be considered drought stricken, and therefore subject to federal assistance, decided that Prowers did not face such severe drought that it warranted additional federal assistance. Rather than rely on federal subsidies, then, Lamb hoped that he could increase the number of farmers taking low interest federal loans to satisfy their needs. Since most farmers had little capital they often ran into debt each year as they prepared for the season's planting. As a result, one of Lamb's principal jobs was to help people coordinate loan applications to take advantage of federal loans, and Lamb helped some 188 farmers garner a total of \$30,852 in 1932.<sup>148</sup> Even then, however, Lamb felt that deference to local instead of federal means to combat the depression would prove inadequate to meeting the crisis.

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<sup>147</sup> Frank R. Lamb, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1930 to November 30, 1931," 32, Folder 64, Box 66.

<sup>148</sup> Frank R. Lamb, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1931 to December 01, 1932," 88-89, Folder 1, Box 67.

Lamb noted a couple examples of how he worked with farmers in an educational manner, but many of these seem to be independent of any state involvement. For example, Lamb claimed that he helped a number of Prowers farms institute some remedial soil conservation techniques. He mentioned a pair of farmers who built terraces on their land and another two dozen farmers who built shelterbelts to break the wind before it got to their acreage. He also cited one case of a farmer who built a “soil saving dam” to control erosion. In addition, Lamb entered the field to help farmers deal with grasshopper problems as well as issues that locals had with rodents, jackrabbits, and other critters that threatened farmers’ crops. On the whole, though, he referenced local connections and calculated his time in the field as time spent with farmers, not in an official capacity to promote a program or agency, but to address their immediate needs. He was more passive advisor than active participant in that respect.<sup>149</sup>

Agents’ efforts during the early Great Depression years also exemplified Hoover’s philosophy by looking to foment relationships with local advisory boards, prominent individuals, and county organizations. Indeed, agents tried to facilitate community relations to help those most in need to attain assistance and also to help themselves gain the community’s trust. Lamb mentioned the Southeast Colorado Livestock Association, Inc. and the Prowers County Farmers for their assistance to him in reaching county residents. Additionally, he thanked the Prowers County Farm Bureau and the Arkansas Valley Economic Conference for their help.<sup>150</sup> Such emphasis on local boards and clubs demonstrates the ways that Lamb and other agents immersed

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<sup>149</sup> See for example, Frank R. Lamb, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1930 to November 30, 1931” Folder 64, Box 66.

<sup>150</sup> Frank R. Lamb, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1929 to November 30, 1930,” 1, Folder 62, Box 66.

themselves in their communities and how they eventually became fixtures in rural life. In Lamb's case, he succeeded where Baca County agent J.L. Farrand had failed; Farrand never made enough powerful friends who could sway the public toward accepting the agent, but Lamb did, and they rewarded him with steady employment.

Essentially, Extension agents spent much of time between late 1929 and early 1933 trying to combine local, private, and federal resources to help farmers survive the early years of the Great Depression. That they flailed so much in search of assistance suggests that the Hoover administration did not utilize the Extension Service as well as it could have in building support among or in helping rural Americans. Agents like Frank Lamb understood that the Extension agents represented a powerful resource, one that did little for anyone if allowed to lie dormant. Even though he tried to address the growing economic crisis through associational means, Lamb conjectured that only expanded and direct federal assistance could truly bolster the declining farm economy. Lamb noted that the level of desperation in Prowers by 1932 required at least some help from the federal government because local, county, and state government failed to provide for all parties. He hoped that a little federal support would allow him and his colleagues a chance to make a difference.<sup>151</sup>

#### •Agents Step Forward•

By giving the agents more responsibility in their communities, the New Deal promised the most significant opportunity for agents to realize their goals in helping rural Americans. With the flood of New Deal legislation designed to help farmers, the agent found himself in uncharted territory; even though the agent had acted as

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<sup>151</sup> Frank R. Lamb, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1931 to December 01, 1932," 88-89, Folder 1, Box 67.

mouthpiece for the state universities, county and state government, and even prominent local organizations, the influx of federal monies made available through New Deal policy was unprecedented and the agent effectively became a financial manager. Consequently, the agents now had a much more expansive purview. This proved particularly true with the advent of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), a product of the Agricultural Adjustment Act that Congress passed during FDR's First Hundred Days. This AAA attempted to cut supply to arouse demand and stabilize prices because many New Dealers blamed an oversaturated market for facilitating economic decline.

The AAA represented another tie to the Hoover administration, as the AAA was based in part of the ideas of McNary-Haugenism and the Agricultural Marketing Act that sought to regulate supply as a way to stabilize prices for consumers. The AAA promised direct federal intervention in coordinating the removal of surplus goods until the price improved, a signal difference between it and its precedents. It offered subsidies to farmers who voluntarily decreased their production rather than relying on farmers to freely combine and stabilize prices by cooperatively holding back surplus, all with minimal government involvement and supervision, as had Hoover's policies.<sup>152</sup> This amounted to programs across the Great Plains that paid farmers to not put wheat or hogs or other products on the market in order to stabilize prices. The AAA tried to get prices to meet those from the 1909 and 1914 span because it was the last point that most commodity prices represented adequate prices for farmers. It then determined how to

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<sup>152</sup> Martin L. Fausold, "President Hoover's Farm Policies, 1929-1933," *Agricultural History* 51, no. 2 (April 1977): 376-377. Fausold argues that Hoover became too reliant on individual compliance and voluntary action by farmers, thus refusing to offer any enticement to make sure the system remained afloat. It seems that the federal subsidization also helped convince farmers to abide by the AAA in higher numbers and with less reticence than they had with the Agricultural Marketing Act and consequent Farm Board.

subsidize farmers to make sure that their income reflected stable, consistent prices for their goods.<sup>153</sup> The AAA's subsidy programs made for an active agent and effectively represented the agents' introduction to the New Deal. According to the foremost historian of the Extension Service, Wayne D. Rasmussen, "he [the county agent] became an administrator rather than a teacher" and "a promoter rather than an educator" to ensure that farmers understood the new programs and to maximize their participation.<sup>154</sup> He did so by encouraging farmers to take advantage of government subsidies or conversely by informing them that penalties for noncompliance could be levied against them. It may not have been what most agents had signed up for when they took jobs with the Service, but it amounted to their most important task for the early New Deal years and it effectively set the stage for the use of federal subsidies that continues to the present day.

The AAA had a considerable impact in southeastern Colorado by early 1934, particularly with the programs to purchase excess swine, corn, and wheat, three of the most common agricultural products in the region. Once agents informed locals of these new opportunities for federal assistance, they attempted to enable farmers to become eligible for subsidies by keeping them in line with federal regulations. Residents of Baca County did quite well; agent R.E. Frisbie counted 725 farms under the hog reduction program and another 1,040 farmers who agreed to sell cattle and/or sheep to the federal government, as well as 1,136 farms limiting wheat production. Given that 1,420 farms existed in the county, most farmers complied with some aspect of the AAA programs and many participated in multiple programs. They obviously benefitted from

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<sup>153</sup> Theodore Saloutos, "New Deal Agricultural Policy: An Evaluation," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (September 1974): 396.

<sup>154</sup> Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension*, 97.

such involvement, as Frisbie counted \$265,000 in federal payments for the cattle and \$3,224 for sheep. Additionally, the AAA allocated extra funds to provide for the Extension Service and also for agents to hire locals to participate in the process of building compliance in rural areas. Part of that money went to agents' salaries, meaning that the federal government paid the agent's salary instead of the residing county, which had been a major point of contention among farmers.<sup>155</sup>

The numbers for Prowers County similarly demonstrate an increase in agent activity in 1933 and early 1934 with the rush to qualify farmers for AAA benefits. Indeed, the agents became so busy that the federal government allocated money for forty locals to work in tandem with the agent to distribute relief funds and get farmers aligned with the reduction programs. Their efforts proved largely successful. Farmers on 1,323 out of a total of 1,473 farms abided by some form of production reduction in Prowers County, whether of beef, sheep, swine, or corn and wheat. The bulk of the monies supplied corn and hog reduction, which garnered nearly \$117,000 from the federal government (about \$75,000 for the swine and \$41,000 for the corn), and the cattle purchase program that brought in roughly \$187,000 for locals. Indeed, agent A. J. Hamman claimed that nearly 90% of all corn acreage and 64% of all wheat acreage in the county was reserved from planting in 1934 so that farmers could benefit from the program. Hamman noted that a series of secret ballot votes at various county meetings showed that locals widely supported the AAA in spite of some early reticence about selling off produce at government-mandated prices and according to the government's

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<sup>155</sup> R.E. Frisbie, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, January 15, 1934 to June 25, 1934," 6-7, 19-20, Folder 45, Box 8.

schedule. Prowers farmers warmly embraced the AAA and its benefits, signing up for hog reduction at a higher rate than any other county in the state in 1933.<sup>156</sup>

Prowers County agent A.J. Hamman recalled his early experience with the AAA and noted that agents had a unique opportunity to help people in need. Hamman believed that “farmers had been in a declining market since about 1921 or 1922 and Washington had the money to relieve them”; plus, he believed that showing his constituents that the federal government could offer such assistance would pay dividends in earning farmers’ participation in federal programs.<sup>157</sup> He also knew how important it had been for agents to clarify policy to local farmers. Hamman remembered a number of occasions when locals misunderstood federal programs or other state representatives failed to adequately explain policy to area farmers. He remembered a specific example when a widow and her family “got the erroneous idea” that they had to sell all of the 200 head of cattle to the government. He assured her that she could keep her stock, all in good condition and on some of the best grass in the county, and watched as the relief came to her face – a common response among those he helped during his years as agent. Prowers residents roundly celebrated his assistance. Hamman mentioned a woman who wrote a poem about him and sent “two nice frying chickens” as well as a man who delivered a leg of mutton to the Hamman household in appreciation for Hamman’s help with the sheep buying program.<sup>158</sup>

Locals reacted to other aspects of the New Deal both in terms of assessing additional programs as well as thinking about what this newly introduced federal

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<sup>156</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, January 15, 1934 to November 30, 1934,” Folder 5, Box 67. The assessment that Prowers farmers were more willing to sign up than any others in the state comes from *Lamar Daily News*, October 28, 1933.

<sup>157</sup> A.J. Hamman, *My Long Journey*, 120.

<sup>158</sup> A.J. Hamman, *My Long Journey*, 129.

largesse might mean for their economy. For example, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) became one of the more popular New Deal programs in the region and the announced plan of constructing a camp in Springfield, the county seat in Baca, invited support in local newspapers (see Figure 7). Residents seemed to appreciate the potential for the CCC camp in terms of employing locals who needed work but also in terms of the likelihood that the camp would help local farmers by assisting them in tending to their acreage.<sup>159</sup> Other programs, like the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Civil Works Administration (CWA), helped alleviate unemployment by hiring Coloradans for infrastructure projects. The WPA employed nearly 150,000 Coloradans between its inception in 1933 and its conclusion in 1942.<sup>160</sup>



**Figure 7: "Prowers County, Lamar, Enrollees in Civilian Attire." Photo of CCC members in Prowers County, presumably on leave from the camp in Springfield in Baca County and waiting for work. Courtesy Colorado State Archives.**

These programs designed and built buildings, airports, roads, schools, post offices, courthouses, firehouses, bridges, and gymnasiums across the Colorado Plains.

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<sup>159</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, June 15, 1933. That date included some of the most glowing support for the CCC but various editions of that paper throughout the summer of 1933 likewise argued in favor of the program.

<sup>160</sup> Abigail D. Christman, "The Legacy of the New Deal on Colorado's Eastern Plains" (Denver, CO: Colorado Preservation, Inc., 2008). The statistic about employment comes from page 5.



In these ways, the New Deal not only hired up the region's unemployed it also slowly changed the area's landscape.<sup>161</sup> Several buildings still stand, including the Lamar Post Office and Wiley Rock Schoolhouse in Prowers County and the Springfield City Park in Baca County (see Figure 8). Various organizations also participated in water management projects, ranging from building sewage treatment plants to digging irrigation ditches. In some cases, the county actually looked for federal projects and then sought out federal assistance. For example, Prowers County officials applied for a housing project for the "indigent and destitute of the county" that it would maintain through county taxes after the federal government paid for its construction. The WPA obliged and worked on the project in 1937 and 1938. The finished product, named the Prowers County Welfare Housing, housed "elderly people ineligible for pension checks" as well as both single and married people in its various rooms.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the New Deal's impact on the build environment, see Phoebe Cutler, *The Public Landscape of the New Deal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) and Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>162</sup> Abigail D. Christman, "The Legacy of the New Deal on Colorado's Eastern Plains," 21.



**Figure 8: WPA Project, the Wiley Rock School, Wiley, Prowers County, Colorado. Courtesy [www.secoloradoheritage.com](http://www.secoloradoheritage.com)**

In addition, southeastern Colorado residents considered the possibility of designing and implementing policies and programs specifically for their needs. Locals' request to establish an Arkansas Valley Authority based on the blueprint provided by the Tennessee Valley Authority represented the most compelling example.<sup>163</sup> The Lamar Chamber of Commerce introduced the idea that the centerpiece of such regional development could be the Caddoa Dam, which could provide irrigation to local farmers by storing Arkansas River water in a reservoir to be used during dry periods. Such irrigation was indispensable, some argued, though "it might be an exaggeration to say that the Arkansas and its tributaries are to the Arkansas valley what the Nile is to Egypt."<sup>164</sup> In this climate of federal intervention and largesse, locals like Fred Betz, editor of the *Lamar Daily News*, tried to convince politicians to subsidize (or outright cover) construction. Betz contended that the Caddoa Dam represented "Colorado's

<sup>163</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 8, 1934.

<sup>164</sup> Joseph O. Van Hook, "Development of Irrigation in the Arkansas Valley," *The Colorado Magazine* 10 (1933), 11.

greatest opportunity to share in the expenditure of the public works funds” and promised “an adequate water supply for the irrigated lands of the district, which in turn will mean the future prosperity of the community.” He realized that while many locals wanted to construct the dam, it would take “united support of the citizens of this entire region” as well as concessions by the federal government to finance the build.<sup>165</sup>

Debates about the likelihood of construction and the various benefits it promised for local residents continued well into the 1930s; importantly, however, what had been a rather nebulous and inchoate discussion of what could happen “if” the dam could be built suddenly became much more distinct and coherent, an issue of “when,” with the inception of New Deal spending. Indeed, locals understood this switch and many started to embrace federal intervention.

Unfortunately for farmers in southeastern Colorado and proponents of the New Deal more broadly, there was not much that the early New Deal programs could do to remedy inclement weather that had taken hold of the region by the late 1920s. Indeed, life-long Baca County resident Ike Osteen remembered a surplus wheat crop in 1931 even though 1930 was a “spotty year for moisture.” Osteen noted with dismay that such surplus simply drove down the price so what had been 68 cents/bushel in 1930 became 25cents/bushel by 1931.<sup>166</sup> Prowers County agent Frank Lamb’s assessment of the weather supported Osteen’s memory of it being a year of sparse rain. Lamb noted that farmers had produced remarkably in 1930 and 1931 even those most farmers faced

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<sup>165</sup> Fred Betz, “The Editor Speaking...,” *Lamar Daily News*, July 27, 1933.

<sup>166</sup> Osteen, *A Place Called Baca*, 170.

“extreme droughth [sic] in most fields by 1931.”<sup>167</sup> The wind and dust that increased in both frequency and severity only compounded the problem for locals, who faced regular dust storms throughout 1932 and beyond. A 1933 article in the *Springfield Democrat Herald* entitled “Storm does Many Freak Stunts In Baca County Monday Afternoon” cited “old-timers” who “reported dust and dirt in places where it had never penetrated before” after one of the more severe early storms. The paper referenced locals who turned on lights in the afternoon and left cars idle on the side of the road as dust covered Springfield in a blanket of darkness.<sup>168</sup> Such “old-timers” had assuredly witnessed droughts and dust storms ravage the countryside before, but even those who had lived their whole lives on the Plains had never seen anything like the storms that became commonplace over the remainder of the 1930s. Increasingly, the New Deal sought to remedy the Dust Bowl and the deal with the problems it caused, but it maintained a focus on county agents to bolster local support for and embrace of federal policy.

•Conclusion•

Fortunately for local farmers, they had reliable county agents and a generous federal government to help them weather the worst of the Depression. Farmers had become accustomed to working with and relying on county agents by the time that the dust storms hit in 1934 and 1935. The agents maintained a steady presence in rural communities after Roosevelt’s election, meaning that farmers had a consistent resource to answer questions, offer advice, or even hear complaints. Certainly, agents had already established their roles in rural counties elsewhere across the nation after the

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<sup>167</sup> Frank R. Lamb, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 1, 1930 to November 30, 1931,” Folder 64, Box 66, and Frank R. Lamb, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1931 to December 1, 1932,” Folder 1, Box 67.

<sup>168</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, May 25, 1933.

Smith-Lever Act passed in 1914, but only the convergence of depression, an active federal government, and a desperate citizenry finally caused southeastern Coloradans to embrace the Extension Service and its employees. The Act established the need for an extension program to spread expertise and resources across the country. It is fair to suggest, however, that the policy makers never anticipated seeing the Act have such an expansive budget or the kind of impact it had under the Roosevelt administration.

FDR's programs proved successful in part because he used the agents more than had his predecessor Herbert Hoover. Hoover used the Extension Service to a limited extent when his administration pushed agents to build relationships with private county organizations and national associations like the Farm Bureau. Yet, this associational approach meant offering minimal federal assistance and instead deferring to local, county, and state mechanisms. Put another way, the Hoover administration chose not to use many federal resources in the face of the crisis. For agents, this meant that they focused on building support in their communities and they worked to extend the limited federal assistance to farmers. Frank Lamb, for example, pushed farmers to try to attain federal credit and to seek federal seed loans through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. By Lamb's reckoning, however, the Great Depression required more from Washington.

The agents' extensive purview during the New Deal worked to farmers' advantage – and agents' too. This became most apparent in terms of the financial influence agents wielded in rural communities, influence that proved decisive in keeping farmers on their land during the lean years. The agents cooperated with local farmers to ensure compliance in federal production reduction programs and effectively

opened the federal coffers to farmers. The programs were often complicated and challenging for farmers to understand. Consequently, the agents held community meetings, traveled to farms, and distributed pamphlets to inform people about the programs, the new agencies that administered them, and their new responsibilities working with the expanding state. Certainly, agents made a decent living in the process, but their relative worth in pushing federal programs and filtering money into the community far surpassed their salaries. The agents successfully came to represent an interlocutor between the federal and the local levels and they also pushed to protect their constituents. As a result, locals came to understand their value and embraced them as advocates for their best interests.

The agents also influenced rural America by building relationships with farmers and laying the groundwork for later dealings. Success in promoting early New Deal policy garnered public support that helped pave the way for success for subsequent programs. The agents, and therefore the federal government, thus had a solid foundation in place by 1934, a foundation that made locals a bit more willing to consider later New Deal programs. This trust proved crucial when New Deal policy started emphasizing conservation as a means to cut production and conserve resources. Such support became vital to the construction of a New Deal conservation state, as the only way that such programs gained any credibility or made any impact was through public participation. Put another way, the agents took root in the countryside because they performed their duty dispensing federal money, and their early success convinced farmers to put more stock in the New Deal. Then, once agents had established such a firm foothold in rural communities they could start promoting land use changes, land

retirement, changes to the tenant system, and other more sweeping reforms that looked to dramatically alter agriculture on the Great Plains. The first years of the New Deal thus proved crucial, not only because so many farmers needed an active federal government for financial assistance, but also because the early years marked such a transition from the Hoover administration and paved the way for subsequent policy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dirt

Colorado Extension Soil Conservationist T.G. Stewart offered a “Historical Review of the Soil Conservation Problem in Colorado” to explain precisely how Colorado farmers had ended up facing the challenges engendered by the Dust Bowl. “It is probable,” he wrote, “that the soil conservation problem began in Colorado with the plowing of the first acre of land about 1839.”<sup>169</sup> He was fairly new to the field of soil conservation when he wrote the review of soil conservation in the state, having just transferred from his post as an agronomist for the Extension Service. Over his career in the Extension Service he gained extensive knowledge about farming in the state and understood the challenges to successful agriculture in Colorado. The Dust Bowl marked a whole new animal, however. He noted that the drought’s severity, the wind’s destruction, and the land’s inability to hold any moisture brought the issue of conservation to a head as early as 1935: “In brief, Mother Nature selected this year to tell us we had a real soil conservation problem in the State of Colorado, the results of several decades of misuse of land or use of land without any plan.”<sup>170</sup> Stewart’s post as Extension Soil Conservationist offered him significant credibility once he decided to sound the clarion call for soil conservation. He presided over an expansive state effort to promote soil and water conservation to remedy the Dust Bowl and ensure that nothing like it ever hit the state again. He pushed for responsible land stewardship in

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<sup>169</sup>T.G. Stewart, “Historical Review of the Soil Conservation Problem in Colorado,” in “Annual Report of T.G. Stewart, Extension Soil Conservationist, December 1, 1938 to November 30, 1939,” 1, Folder Soil Conservation Specialists Report 1939, Box 127, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>170</sup>T.G. Stewart, “Annual Report of T.G. Stewart, Extension Soil Conservationist, December 1, 1938 to November 30, 1939,” 21, Folder Soil Conservation Specialists Report 1939, Box 127, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.



hopes that Colorado farmers could protect their topsoil – “the most important thing in Colorado and in the world—more valuable than all of the gold plus all of the silver plus all of the oil plus everything else in the world.”<sup>171</sup> Although he utilized such dramatic flair to the point of hyperbole, Stewart usually expressed the need to conserve resources more bluntly. He argued that the Dust Bowl forced farmers’ hand to deal with soil erosion. “There is no more West to go to—no new land of consequence,” he argued. “Therefore,” he continued, “unless those who operate the land begin to consider the soil conservation problem, our grandchildren will have farms of little value to occupy. We are using and wasting more of our soil resources than belongs to this generation.”<sup>172</sup>

Drought had ravaged southeastern Colorado for nearly a decade by the time that Stewart intoned the need to conserve resources for future Coloradans in 1939. By 1939 the storms and depression combined to psychologically, emotionally, and even physically beat and batter area residents. Consider that the *Lamar Daily News* noted in 1934 how “Southeast Coloradans” were “nearly driven to distraction for lack of moisture” and “had taken recourse to superstitions, legends and ancient rituals of late to persuade the rain gods to smile upon them.”<sup>173</sup> Concerned weather-watchers offered potential solutions to local weathermen, advising them to shoot a canon into the air to strike a rain-filled cloud or fly dynamite to the clouds via a kite or send a formation of airplanes to penetrate the clouds.<sup>174</sup> Farmers often banded together to offer community prayers and local newspapers routinely advised people to request such divine assistance

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<sup>171</sup> T.G. Stewart, “Annual Report of T.G. Stewart, Extension Soil Conservationist, December 1, 1938 to November 30, 1939,” 103.

<sup>172</sup> T.G. Stewart, “Permanent Agricultural Program for the Southern Great Plains,” 26, Folder Soil Conservation Specialist Reports 1937, Box 127, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>173</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, June 16, 1934.

<sup>174</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, July 26, 1934.

on their own as well.<sup>175</sup> Their conviction that the clouds held rain and it would fall with some human invention, to say nothing of appealing to a divine power, demonstrates farmers' search for an end to the drought. Locals hoped that every brief shower or dusting of snow promised the conclusion, and on occasion they even welcomed excessive rain that flooded basements and drowned cars.<sup>176</sup> In an almost unbelievable case of irony, a federal investigator sent to the region to investigate the drought's impact found himself caught in a deluge so severe that his automobile got stuck in wet sand and he was nearly swept away by rising waters. Such heavy rains had a tendency to wreak their own havoc because nothing on the ground could hold it and the soil remained so packed, so hard, that it could not soak up the moisture. Consequently, the rain behaved like a glass of water being spilled onto the table; it had nowhere to sink it so it simply dispersed across the surface of the land. The effect produced flooding in the region on more than a few occasions.<sup>177</sup> As a result, even the occasional severe rain storm failed to solve the drought problem and exacerbated the strained relationship that locals had with their environment.

Droughts and even dust storms had tormented Plains residents for generations and would again in the 1950s and 1970s, but never to the level of the Dust Bowl. The causes of the Dust Bowl were many—humankind's willingness to plow any and everywhere which loosened the grass and exposed the topsoil; unusually high temperatures and scant rainfall that dried out the land itself; regular and devastating wind storms that picked up the loosened dirt and blew it across the continent; and soil types more susceptible to erosion—and tens of thousands suffered as a result of the

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<sup>175</sup> See for example, *Springfield Democrat Herald* May 02, 1935, May 09, 1935, and April 02, 1936.

<sup>176</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, June 16, 1934.

<sup>177</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, August 30, 1934.

storms that lasted the entire decade. The dust killed livestock, decimated crops, and jeopardized area residents' health through increased rates of emphysema, dust pneumonia, and other respiratory afflictions caused by inhaling dust particles (see Figure 9).<sup>178</sup>



Figure 9: "Dust storm. Baca County, Colorado." Photo by D.L. Kernodle, 1936? Courtesy Library of Congress.

Residents in the area had two choices: stay and struggle to survive the storms or move out of the area and chance finding employment and a new home. Thousands chose the latter option and left the region. Indeed, population declined in Colorado and across much of the Great Plains over the 1930s. The number of residents in both Prowers and Baca Counties dropped over the 1930s and eroded dramatically from 1930 to 1936. The number of Prowers residents fell from 14,762 in 1930 to 12,304 in 1936,

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<sup>178</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, April 18, 1935, April 25, 1935; Ike Osteen, *A Place Called Baca* (Chicago, IL: Adams Press, 1979), 176; R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, Inc., 1981), 52-53.

and Baca inhabitants declined from 10,570 to 6,207 over that same period.<sup>179</sup> Many of these folks migrated west to places like Los Angeles and others moved around the Plains or to urban areas like Denver, where they thought they might be better able to take advantage of federal relief programs.<sup>180</sup> The dust and drought compounded already evident problems throughout this part of rural Colorado, especially in Baca County, and served as the final straw for many eventual migrants to leave the area. Robert T. McMillan, an Assistant Economist with the Resettlement Administration assigned to assess Baca County to determine the poverty level, the need for relief, and the overall impact caused by drought and depression, nearly half of all dwellings in the county had been abandoned by 1936. He claimed that the county was slowly filling up with ghost towns.<sup>181</sup>

Residents who stayed in the region faced drought, depression, and, according to McMillan, declining morale and community support. McMillan found that life in Baca was particularly “deplorable” because “inferior housing, low consumption of material goods, meager community life, and general morale” as well as basic diet and hygiene were unsatisfactory.<sup>182</sup> His study concluded that 40% of farm families “reported no participation in church, farm organizations, lodges, clubs, or movies.” Such inactivity made the population decline look even more severe. Fortunately, they increasingly had access to, and eventually came to rely on, federal subsidies to keep them afloat. Federal

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<sup>179</sup> Myron P. Gutman, Great Plains Population and Environment Data: On-Line Extraction System [Computer File], (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan [producers], 2005).

<sup>180</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, October 27, 1938.

<sup>181</sup> Robert T. McMillan, “Social Problems of Farm Families in Baca County, Colorado,” Report I, Sociology Section, Land Use Planning Division, Resettlement Administration, Region XII, Amarillo, TX, 1937, 13; Folder Baca County Sociological Study; Box 1 General; SP 10 Records Relating to Land Utilization 1936-1939; Records of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>182</sup> Robert T. McMillan, “Social Problems of Farm Families in Baca County, Colorado,” Report I, Sociology Section, Land Use Planning Division, Resettlement Administration, Region XII, Amarillo, TX, 1937, 10-11.

and state financial assistance became crucial to keep farmers on their land and to employ townspeople as well.

Programs and agencies like the AAA, the Resettlement Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Soil Conservation Service epitomized the Roosevelt administration's response to the crises. Taken as a whole, these new programs tried to accomplish two goals. First, as we saw in the last chapter, the government offered financial assistance in the form of subsidies to sustain farmers. Second, New Deal policy promoted new ways of thinking about the relationship between the farmer and the land; New Dealers and county agents argued that agriculturalists needed to critically reconsider how they farmed and where they farmed. New Deal programs tried to promote such consideration by subsidizing conservation, resettling farmers who had been on submarginal land, and retiring land that New Dealers believed should not be under production.

Baca County residents greeted this new emphasis on conservation with more enthusiasm than their neighbors to the north, especially when it came to soil conservation. While Prowers County farmers generally accepted the need to protect the soil on at least a theoretical level, they proved less willing to participate in erosion districts, voluntarily terrace their lands or plant shelterbelts, or abide by most of the soil-saving guidelines provided by the county agents and federal administrators. The soil erosion in Baca was much more severe than it was in Prowers for several reasons. The Baca County soil was more susceptible to erosion, the expansive wheat operations in Baca during the 1920s led to the Great Plow Up that loosened soil by plowing under the native grasses, and irrigation in Prowers meant that more farmers could manage the

moisture levels in their soil better than farmers in Baca. Irrigation provided a safety net, and while the drought and depression affected irrigated farmers, dryland farmers faced much more widespread and relentless erosion. For example, Baca received federal and state attention as a drought area throughout the 1930s while Prowers did not warrant such consideration from the state in 1932. In essence, the drought forced Prowers farmers to rethink their land use regimens, but the Dust Bowl affected Baca farmers more immediately, more seriously, and more directly. Put simply, the situation in Baca constituted a more dire and immediate problem so the response from both farmers and state employees proved more urgent and more comprehensive.

The dual crises of Dust Bowl and Great Depression mandated action and the New Deal provided an avenue to implement a new national conservation regimen. This chapter addresses the combination of local, state, and federal actors that implemented a three phase plan to deal with farmers' misuse of land. It looks at the origin and execution of submarginal land purchasing programs that various New Deal agencies instituted to retire such land and keep farmers from farming it. It then moves to investigate how soil conservation methods and techniques influenced land use practices in Baca County. That section focuses extensively on farmers' adoption of soil conservation districts, a mechanism that allowed local management of a soil conservation program. Finally, the chapter examines New Dealers' concerns about the relationship between acreage and successful farming on the Plains. In other words, the New Deal conservation state pushed for a broad and critical assessment of farming in an arid environment. Many experts pointed to the Homestead Act and its allotment of 160 acres as the cause of such problems because farmers on the Plains needed more land to

diversity their crops, leave some fallow, and own enough livestock to broaden their economic base. In effect, the Dust Bowl compelled New Dealers to consider whether small family farms could make it on the Great Plains or if only more sizeable and established farmers had a chance. The idea of protecting the land was itself not a novel idea, but because the New Deal worked to conserve soil on a national level and on private lands, because New Dealers acted on the theory that the best way to shore the rural economy was to balance production with conservation, and because New Deal programs allowed locals to opt in voluntarily, the New Deal marked a new chapter in land use on the Colorado Plains.

Locals played a significant role in shaping resource conservation in southeastern Colorado, illustrating that everyday citizens in fact played a part in constructing, employing, and critiquing New Deal policy. Indeed, the formation of soil conservation districts as a result of the Colorado Soil Conservation Act of 1938 represented the key moment in the fight against erosion. The districts relied on agents to coordinate and manage conservation efforts but gave local farmers autonomy in terms of deciding where and how to focus on conservation. In other words, rather than abide by directives given by the Soil Conservation Service or another federal agency, the agents and farmers cooperated to execute a conservation strategy tailored to their county and did so of their own volition. Districts caught on immediately in Baca County, and, as a result, Colorado fields present a prime location for assessing how farmers both shaped and responded to state intervention and how they used conservation measures to stabilize their land and their economy. In that way, the dryland region of Baca and Prowers

represent the front lines of the New Deal's fight to rehabilitate the land and thus revitalize the American farmer.

•Poor Land, Poor People•

The New Deal was a watershed moment in American environmental history, in part because federal and state programs and agencies incorporated new sciences like ecology and soil conservation into their approaches and in part because the federal government extended its influence onto private lands in hopes of controlling how citizens used resources. Both occurred in the Dust Bowl region where misuse of the land and overproduction produced dramatic, and indeed tragic, results. Donald Worster's seminal study of the Dust Bowl identifies many of the main players and some of the most important questions regarding the causes and consequences of such ecological devastation. It also rightly considers the New Deal an opportunity for sweeping agricultural reform across the Great Plains. In his final reckoning, Worster believes that the farmers and New Dealers charged with initiating a move away from maximizing production failed to address how agricultural capitalism promoted overproduction and compelled farmers to produce regardless of the environmental costs. In other words, farmers repeated the mantra of production and in the process initiated the Great Plow Up and subsequently caused the Dust Bowl, but New Deal conservation policies failed to dissuade them from emphasizing production in spite of the obvious consequences.

For all of its positives, however, Worster's book fails to address a couple of points about the 1930s in southeastern Colorado. Worster pays no attention to county agents or the Extension Service as instruments of the state and purveyors of New Deal



conservation. His focus on national conservation and land use debates misses the impact that soil conservation districts and agents had in promoting conservation and enabling farmers to move away from a sole emphasis on production. He adeptly discusses the views that prominent New Dealers like Rexford Tugwell and Lewis C. Gray had on land use but, despite his two-county analysis, does not appreciate the ways that locals participated in building the conservation state. By looking at the agents and their relationships with local farmers we can better understand how and why farmers started to address soil erosion and why they started to reconsider a “production at all costs” mentality. Indeed, even when war broke out and the nation called on farmers to produce for war, Baca farmers demonstrated a proclivity to balance production and conservation. Farmers in Baca adopted technical fixes as a way to combat soil erosion and continued to practice those methods beyond the 1930s. Worster is right to the extent that farmers always wanted to prosper and most often thought about the bottom line, but the emphasis they put on immediate financial success waned as they started to consider long-term economic performance. Moreover, farmers’ perceived need to make money quickly, regardless of the environmental cost, also declined because of federal subsidies. By instituting an economic component to conservation, the New Deal paid farmers to manage soil erosion or conserve water – the subsidies enabled farmers who wanted to practice conservation the financial flexibility to adjust their land use practices through the 1930s and beyond. In essence, he does not account for the success that farmers and agents in Baca County had in initiating and executing a soil conservation strategy during the New Deal and how they continued to protect the resource into World War II.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979).

This adaption and acclimation among Colorado farmers resembles part of Geoff Cunfer's argument about the persistence of agriculture on the Great Plains. Cunfer rightly argues in favor of a middle ground between Worster's declensionist view and the more progressive views proffered by historians like Paul Bonnifield.<sup>184</sup> While humans deserved some blame for causing the Dust Bowl, the history of agriculture in the region demonstrates a level of adaptability and perseverance as well. Importantly, Cunfer also accepts the persistence of agriculture on the Plains, suggesting that the 1930s did not lead to a terrible demise for farmers and farming as Worster sometimes implied. While his assessment of the literature is accurate, Cunfer fails to recognize the indelible impact that the Dust Bowl had on the American psyche, economy, and federal policy. Cunfer considers the period from 1920 to 2000 to be one of relative stability, as farmers generally used the same styles and appropriated new techniques to navigate their way in an environment largely defined by aridity.<sup>185</sup> His study of land use patterns neglects the impact that policy, community initiative, and the county agents had on the ways that farmers farmed during the late 1930s and beyond. The system would never be stable, but farmers started to better appreciate the need to balance conservation and production in response to the Dust Bowl.

The Dust Bowl engendered a broad reconceptualization of problems within American agriculture – something that Cunfer misses and Worster underappreciates. New Deal agricultural policy acted on the premise that poor land led to poor people and

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Worster's book is the best environmental history of the Dust Bowl and remains one of the most important works in the discipline.

<sup>184</sup> Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).

<sup>185</sup> Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2005), 6.

that improper technique jeopardized the soil's health. As a result, county agents and federal experts looked to stabilize the agricultural economy by improving land use practices and by identifying land that should not be under production. For example, the Great Plains Drought Area Committee that FDR summoned in 1936 to survey the Dust Bowl, determine the main causes, and develop possible solutions, called for "readjustment and reorganization" to remedy Dust Bowl conditions (see Figure 10).<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Great Plains Drought Area Committee. *Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee, August, 1936*. (Washington, D.C., 1936) see <http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm>. Sarah T. Phillips examination of the relationship between poor land and poor people, and the New Deal focus on rehabilitating the land to restore economic stability, was an important template for this dissertation. She does an excellent job tying economic recovery to conservation and then illustrating how such thinking developed during the 1930s. See Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



**Figure 10: "Meeting on courthouse steps. Baca County, Colorado. Drought committee, July-August 1936." FDR's Great Plains Drought Area Committee stopped through Springfield in Baca County during its investigation of the Dust Bowl. Courtesy Library of Congress.**

Colorado Agricultural Extension Agency Director F.A. Anderson agreed that Colorado farmers needed to think about readjustment and rehabilitation – critically reassessing where farmers farmed and acknowledging that some land should be free from production or needed rehabilitation through conservation. He supported the committee's contention that farmers had to reconsider both how and where they farm in

order to better account for environmental constraints.<sup>187</sup> The federal committee and Anderson agreed that farming on submarginal land represented a main cause of the Dust Bowl and a key concern going forward. The various buzzwords, whether readjustment or reorganization, essentially called upon farmers to consider where and what they planted. They believed that some land should not be under production and in some cases needed rehabilitation or even outright retirement, but farmers effectively tried to bring all land under the plow. Consequently, county agents and federal experts hoped to educate farmers on the need to consider the land's health and ability to hold crops before they cultivated it. They tried to introduce farmers to the issue of farming submarginal land and then they focused more intently on what to do about the presence of such land on the Plains.

The label "submarginal land" emerged frequently in correspondence, institutional memoranda, newspaper coverage, and agents' records from the 1930s, yet multiple definitions of the word existed and its meaning changed depending on who used it. Fundamentally, agreement existed about the need to protect land that experts deemed "submarginal" but they did not define such land in the same way. As John Opie points out, "the word 'submarginal' remained poorly understood by government agencies, the public, and the affected farmers; it was not measured by soil quality or water quality, but by the more complex capacity of the farmer to sustain himself on his land."<sup>188</sup> The complex rubric to determine submarginality incorporated soil type and quality, potential crops grown on the land, and relative health of the soil when assessed, but at its core the determination often reflected the land's potential economic productive

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<sup>187</sup> F. A. Anderson, "The Editor Speaks," *Lamar Daily News*, August 29, 1938.

<sup>188</sup> John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land*, Second Edition (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 100.

capacity. L.C. Gray, one of the most prominent New Dealers to consider land rehabilitation and retirement as head of the Division of Land Economics within the U.S.D.A. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, hinted at one of the underlying problems with the category of submarginality. Gray argued that “little, if any, of the land in the Great Plains is ‘submarginal’ in the sense that it is not adapted to agriculture of some type under proper conditions of tenure and size of holdings.” In other words, ownership and acreage helped determine what happened to land, such that 160-acre homesteads under intensive cultivation and home to soil exhaustive crops like wheat would more often turn submarginal than a 500-acre farm where some land had been left fallow and the farmer diversified his crops. Use determined submarginality as much as the soil itself. In response to that assessment, Gray believed that the federal response to submarginal land should be to “make possible a change in the type of agriculture” by identifying how farmers farmed and reassess agricultural practices that increased the land’s vulnerability.<sup>189</sup>

Gray thus identified the tendency for farmers and federal experts to overuse the term “submarginal” to apply to any land subject to or already effected by erosion. As he claimed, the federal government often considered “nuisance” lands, “lands peculiarly subject to wind erosion which are therefore the point of origin for great quantities of silt, sand, and dust that injure other lands and are a source of great discomfort to the residents of the region” to be submarginal.<sup>190</sup> For example, Gray pointed to supposedly submarginal lands that worked perfectly for grazing; consequently, he argued for a

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<sup>189</sup> L.C. Gray, “Federal Purchase and Administration of Submarginal Land in the Great Plains,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 21, no.1 (Feb., 1939): 123. See also L.C. Gray, “Research Relating to Policies for Submarginal Areas,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 16, no. 2 (Apr., 1934): 298-303.

<sup>190</sup> Gray, “Federal Purchase and Administration of Submarginal Land in the Great Plains,” 130.

reassessment of land use that better reflected an accounting of productive ways to utilize specific plots of land. This meant a careful assessment of where and what to farm that utilized modern science and land planning to determine. In short, in spite of what farmers may have hoped for, farming was not always the answer and some land lacked the means to support crops or proved better suited for alternate uses. Farmers decided to break such land for crop production despite such problems, and they engendered a cycle of exploitation that loosened topsoil and made such acreage so vulnerable to blowing.<sup>191</sup> Much of this land had been broken according to market demand, such that farmers bought and expanded onto lands that they hoped could produce the desired commodity, even when they had no way to determine whether it could.<sup>192</sup> In that way, submarginal could be used to describe any land deemed unable to meet farmers' expectations; yet even expectations often became confused. As John Black noted, the issue of unproductive versus productive and poor versus good land often depended upon a definition of net or gross value, resale potential, acreage, and utility. Echoing Gray's point that submarginality depended in part on use, Black actually posited that submarginal land did not exist; land could be unproductive and there could be "submarginal use of land" but the land itself could be productive depending on the circumstances. In that sense, farmers' practices determined productivity as much as where they farmed mattered.<sup>193</sup>

In spite of differences in how people defined submarginal land, most observers like F. A. Anderson, L. C. Gray, and M.L. Wilson, argued that stabilizing the

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

<sup>192</sup> For a concise explanation of the economic interpretation of submarginal land, see Vernon Webster Johnson and Raleigh Barlowe, *Land Problems and Policies* Reprint Edition (New York, NY: Arno Press, Inc., 1979).

<sup>193</sup> John D. Black, "Notes on 'Poor Land,' and 'Submarginal Land,'" *Journal of Farm Economics* 27, no. 2 (May, 1945): 361.

agricultural economy meant addressing the misuse of land not fit for intensive cultivation. In effect, their philosophy reflected the mantra of “poor land, poor people,” the notion that farmers’ poverty led to land degradation and denuded land produced economic turmoil. M.L. Wilson was especially sensitive to rural poverty. Wilson spent most of his career trying to understand the causes and consequences of rural poverty while working in various stops as Montana’s first extension agent, chief economist for the AAA, director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, and eventually Director of the Extension Service within the USDA.<sup>194</sup> Wilson postulated that “as we look into the future, and think in terms of the future of democracy, of the kind of rural life that our social philosophy sanctions and of the complexities and difficulties involved, low-income farming becomes our Number One agricultural problem.”<sup>195</sup> While multiple variables caused or aggravated rural poverty, Wilson argued that land use mattered most and that “rural poverty tends to be concentrated in areas where the natural resources are exhausted.”<sup>196</sup> For Wilson and others, submarginal land only represented one part of the problem; farmers needed to adopt new land use strategies and emphasize conservation or else the issue of rural poverty would spin out of control.

Baca County provided an ideal test case for the hypothesis that rural poverty and the misuse of land remained inextricably linked because, unfortunately, both prevailed in the county during the 1930s. As Assistant Economist for the Resettlement Administration (RA), Robert McMillan spent time in Baca County studying rural

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<sup>194</sup> For a brief biography of Wilson, see the historical note included in the introduction to his papers at Montana State University via <http://www.lib.montana.edu/collect/spcoll/findaid/2100.html>

<sup>195</sup> M.L. Wilson, “Problem of Poverty in Agriculture,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 22, no. 1 Proceedings Number (Feb., 1940): 10.

<sup>196</sup> M.L. Wilson, “Problem of Poverty in Agriculture,” 13.



poverty and its causes among farmers; McMillan identified many of the social problems that plagued county residents and explained the declining population. He also looked to land use as a cause of rural poverty in Baca. Repeating an iteration of the mantra of “poor land, poor people,” McMillan identified the signature cause of most of the problems in Baca County. As he put it, there was a “close relation of marginal families to marginal lands” and “poor families are located on land which will not produce a living.”<sup>197</sup> Yet, the situation proved complex, because while it became apparent that the New Deal federal subsidies helped farmers mitigate some of their economic problems, McMillan contended that federal handouts were not an adequate response to rural poverty. He posited that “federal subsidies have served to cushion the impact of drought intensity” but that government funding had inflated peoples’ sense of their standards of living by artificially raising their incomes.<sup>198</sup> Furthermore, McMillan argued, the subsidies were not enough to totally alleviate the issue of poverty in an area so devastated by drought and dust. He found that a quick survey of farm families in Baca showed that they were unable to “meet their (financial) obligations even with government assistance.”<sup>199</sup> Consequently, he contended, farmers misused the land as they tried to “recoup their losses and meet interest and taxes by speculating on cash crops.”<sup>200</sup> The dire economic situation bred reckless production because farmers attempted to stay out of debt or pay off old debts through maximizing their production regardless of how that impacted their land’s arability.

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<sup>197</sup> Robert T. McMillan, “Social Problems of Farm Families in Baca County, Colorado,” 38.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

McMillan and several New Deal agricultural experts posited that tenancy exacerbated the problem, as did the presence of many small time operators who lived on plots of less than 400 acres. The issue of tenancy has been largely forgotten in Dust Bowl historiography. While tenancy has been an important part of historians' work on the American South, very little has been done to address the relationship between tenancy and land degradation in the West even though evidence suggests that tenancy often exacerbated soil erosion. To his credit, McMillan believed that both groups were prone to poor stewardship. McMillan found that most tenants had moved to Baca after 1926, but very few of them were likely to spend much time in the community so they had little chance to contribute economically or socially. He conjectured that their relative stability depended on the length of time spent in the county, which meant that most new tenants had little to no stability in their lives.<sup>201</sup> In fact only 11 of the 193 operators interviewed for his study actually "gave Colorado as the state of birth," as most came from Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas.<sup>202</sup> In effect, Baca became a hotspot for wheat production after World War I so a massive influx of speculators bought land in the county and then contracted with tenants to service their acreage. Locals called most of these speculators absentee owners because they had no desire to resettle in the county and instead lived in mostly urban areas, many in Kansas and Nebraska. As a result, potential tenants came from all over the Southern Great Plains. McMillan thought that the recent arrivals actually contributed to local problems because they "have moved excessively since coming to the county; have located on small farms; have retained a tenancy status; and have followed a cash crop system of farming."

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 43-44; quote from page 43.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 38.

McMillan actually went so far as to call these migrants “problem” families because he found them mostly impoverished, without ties to the local community, and quick to move on. As a result, McMillan argued that longtime residents looked unfavorably on new arrivals.<sup>203</sup>

McMillan posited that proper land use planning represented the best way to remedy this divide by assisting tenants and small owners to sustain themselves during tough economic times. The key to steadying the agricultural economy was not to eliminate tenancy, necessarily. He believed that the system itself was mostly sound in that it allowed tenants an opportunity to move toward ownership (even if it was not guaranteed to present that chance). But tenancy aggravated land abuse because it did not assure stable financial relations between owner and tenant nor did it help small farmers, tenants, and part owners overcome indebtedness. As a result, McMillan believed, tenants often jeopardized the land’s health because they sought to maximize production, often to pay off debts or establish capital for eventual investment.

McMillan cited one-crop farming as a significant problem for Baca tenant farmers; market demand dictated what they grew, regardless of the land’s capacity for producing that crop, because they needed money. According to McMillan, “one-crop farming is the attendant evil of tenancy and small farms. Farmers on small farms are compelled through necessity to raise crops which will produce the largest returns per acre. Also the landlord is too often interested in collecting the greatest cash return from the land regardless of soil losses.”<sup>204</sup> Albert Cotton, member of the Land Policy Division inside the USDA during the early 1930s, explained it well in his assessment of farm landlord-

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 45.

tenant relations: “From the point of view of the general public, one of the most serious consequences of the widespread prevalence of farm tenancy is the rapid deterioration in tenant-operated farms.” He continued, noting that “this tendency has already become a serious menace to the nation’s soil resources” and “while many farm owners have adopted extremely bad land-use practices, naturally landowners who will receive the resulting benefits will be more likely to cooperate in future programs of soil conservation than tenants who must do the work but will not stay on the farm to receive the benefits.”<sup>205</sup>

The intertwining of tenancy and land degradation exemplified the “poor people, poor land” theory and compelled New Dealers and Extension agents to focus more intently on changing land use as a way to improve the agricultural economy. As McMillan noted, subsidies did not represent a legitimate, long-term, and sustainable solution to rural poverty. In other words, the land itself warranted attention. The federal government devised two strategies to provoke more focus on land: land purchase programs designed to buy up land experts had deemed submarginal and conservation programs that enabled farmers to take better care of their land.

The Resettlement Administration (RA) spearheaded one of the first federal efforts to ameliorate the submarginal land problem through a federal land purchasing program. The RA embodied the federal effort to utilize land use planning, a discipline that became more prominent over the course of the 1920s but eventually occupied a

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<sup>205</sup> Albert H. Cotton, Regulations of Farm Landlord-Tenant Relationships,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4, no. 4, Farm Tenancy (Oct., 1937): 520. The issues of tenancy and tenants’ treatment of land are more fully covered in Chapter 5.

central place in New Deal land use policy.<sup>206</sup> Brian Cannon contends that the RA represented a decisive shift in how Americans understood land use, a move away from the long-held notion that the West had an unlimited bounty and farmers could farm anywhere they desired and toward the realization that some land was not in fact arable. The central thesis that created the program revolved around rehabilitation; submarginal land could be retired and allowed to regrow native grass without being consistently broken by the plow while the government could relocate desolate farmers who had gone broke trying to eke out a living on degraded land. The RA removed farmers from vulnerable land and relocated them to resettlement camps, effectively government-created sites designed to afford each family a plot of land where they could efficiently produce and therefore sustain themselves. Two such camps opened in Colorado, the San Luis Valley Farms and the Western Slope Farms, and accommodated 200 families, most of them former residents of Plains counties hit particularly hard by the Dust Bowl. The entire resettlement project cost nearly \$9 million and relocated a total of 760 households on nearly 90,000 acres in the Mountain West.<sup>207</sup>

While southeastern Coloradans did not universally embrace the RA, evidence suggests that some appreciated the program for trying to help those in need of a new start. The editor of the *Lamar Daily News* celebrated its efforts at promoting conservation, in assisting families to make a living, and providing insightful farming

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<sup>206</sup> Sarah Phillips's work on the "New Conservationists" of the 1920s demonstrates the growing importance of land use planning as a way to reconcile land abuse and the depressed agricultural economy. See Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal*, 9-12, 21-45; Sarah Phillips, "FDR, Hoover, and the New Rural Conservation, 1920-1932," in *FDR and the Environment*, ed. Henry L. Henderson and David B. Woolner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 107-152.

<sup>207</sup> Brian Q. Cannon, *Remaking the Agrarian Dream: New Deal Rural Resettlement in the Mountain West* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 2-6.

techniques to increase production on marginal lands.<sup>208</sup> The paper also noted the importance of the \$2 million spent by the RA in Colorado to help farmers refinance mortgages or gain low interest loans to purchase their own property. The editor contended that the program was in fact not trying to push people off of their lands; it was designed to help them adapt to the environmental constraints found in arid regions and those who grew frustrated with the program misunderstood its intent.<sup>209</sup>

In spite of this support, however, it appears that the RA's effort to settle tenants had little immediate or significant impact on residents of Baca County. A total of eight tenants earned loans from the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the entity that effectively took over the RA in 1937 once the RA formally became part of the USDA.<sup>210</sup> Not only did a very small number of people directly benefit from the program and it slanted heavily towards the poorest owners and tenants as a way to alleviate the most extreme cases of poverty. That became a point of contention among locals, as did the level of bureaucracy that typified the RA's dealings with citizens. Cannon cites several cases of farmers' growing disgust, much of it because they had very little control over their participation in the program. Federal experts decided where to move resettlement families and when, so farmers often lacked any knowledge of their new land (and thus faced challenges adapting to climatic differences, new soil characteristics, and planting new crops).<sup>211</sup> Like many New Deal programs, citizens remained highly critical of federal involvement and fiercely resistant to federal control –

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<sup>208</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, October 18, 1935.

<sup>209</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, August 18, 1936 and January 21, 1937.

<sup>210</sup> Jack N. French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1939 to November 30, 1940," Folder 10, Box 67; Jack N. French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County," Folder 11, Box 67; *Lamar Daily News*, January 18, 1939.

<sup>211</sup> Cannon, *Remaking the Agrarian Dream*, 19-22, 59-62. See also J.E. Morrison, "An Evaluation of the Farmers Home Administration," 21, in Box 155; Folder Reports 1935-1950 (2); Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

farmers often voiced their concerns even when federal involvement promised significant benefit.

The RA introduced the idea that farmers on submarginal land needed attention, and, while it was not terribly successful in southeastern Colorado, it accelerated the trend of thinking about how to deal with the problem. Other agencies took up the mantle for resolving the submarginal land problem, and the initiation of federal land purchase programs had a much larger impact on Baca County than anything the RA could have accomplished. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) effectively took over for the RA in terms of its land buying program once the RA became the Farm Security Administration in 1937. L.C. Gray, who headed the BAE during the purchase program, had made his thoughts about submarginality known and devoted much of his energy to addressing the problem by dealing with the land rather than the occupants. Consequently, the BAE program focused more on retiring submarginal land to rehabilitate it and take it entirely out of production. The BAE effectively assessed county lands to figure if they were worthy of government purchase for retirement or if farmers had a legitimate chance to succeed cultivating it.

The BAE program left an indelible imprint in Baca County. The BAE proposal for Baca considered 289,200 acres, most of which sat in the southwest corner of the county and had not been productive crop land. Of that total the BAE deemed nearly 200,000 acres fit for federal purchase. The area included “186 occupied farmsteads, 19 rural non-farm residence, 99 unoccupied houses which are not in ruin, and 71 unoccupied houses which are in ruin”; the “proportionate number of abandoned houses which are not in ruin, is evidence of the fact that abandonment has been somewhat

recent.”<sup>212</sup> Only 51% of the nearly 200,000 acres proposed for purchase remained under operation while roughly 22% sat abandoned and 27% could be considered “open native pasture” which “should be classed as blown out native pasture as much of it now lies barren and is as subject to wind erosion as crop land.”<sup>213</sup> The federal effort to buy up both unproductive and abandoned land demonstrated its willingness to keep land that farmers had degraded – or land likely susceptible to eventual exhaustion – out of production and let it return to grass (see Figure 11).



**Figure 11: "Return to the grass," July 25, 1938. Retirement from production allowed many plots like this the chance to regrow native vegetation even after having been cultivated. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.**

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<sup>212</sup> Division of Project Organization, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, “Land Acquisition Plan for Southeastern Colorado Land Utilization and Land Conservation Project, Part IV,” (May 01, 1938), 3; Box 3 Colorado; Folder Land Acquisition Plan—Southeastern Colo.; SP 10 Records Relating to Land Utilization 1936-1939; Records of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>213</sup> Division of Project Organization, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, “Land Acquisition Plan for Southeastern Colorado Land Utilization and Land Conservation Project, Part IV,” 2-3.



A cross-section of the folks living within the proposal's boundaries further indicated why the government chose to execute such an aggressive purchasing program. The report cited 218 operators working within the proposal's boundaries and most of them struggled to eke out a living given the drought and depression. The relatively high number of tenants and small time operators explain why the average annual gross income of people living inside the BAE's proposal equaled just over \$1000, as most tenants and small operators did not fare well during the depression and drought years and especially those tending submarginal land. The report's findings suggested that the most profitable farms were not only large (over 400 acres) but also either livestock or general (meaning mixed crop/livestock) whereas the small, crop-only farms faced the toughest production challenges. Also not surprisingly, the most successful operators had the longest tenure on their present properties, implying that once the farm became established then stabilizing the family income could potentially lead to expansion or at least the ability to sustain one's earnings. Tenants and small owners obviously faced considerable obstacles to achieve stability, to say nothing of the chance that many could eventually prosper in this environment and within this framework.<sup>214</sup>

The BAE report effectively reiterated what McMillan had determined, but, with BAE backing, the federal government pushed the extensive and expensive purchasing program. Rather than let small time farmers and tenants to struggle while farming submarginal land, the government approached the most vulnerable farmers with a proposal to buy their lands or at least buy off their equipment. For tenants on submarginal land, federal purchase of owners' land freed tenants to move on to other endeavors, hopefully on more productive cropland or in other industries. Struggling

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 6.

owners hoped for the same opportunities. The BAE report for southwest Baca County suggested a price of \$2.50/acre plus an additional \$1/acre for improvements; the total was thus widely appealing among residents who supported the program. Nearly 60% of the operators interviewed about the program reacted favorably while only 7% looked at the program unfavorably, leaving some 33% without strong feelings either way. To cite two examples, A.C. Hoover noted that “this program is the only way to control land” and A.A. Yarborough remarked “the government should buy every acre.” Local tenant John Harper claimed that he “will probably leave if I could sell my equipment” – an indication that the program provided tenants a measure of freedom to determine how to remove themselves from a losing proposition and cyclical debt.<sup>215</sup> The BAE program had a considerable impact both on farmers’ mentalities and on their pocketbooks – it proved much more influential than the RA attempt to relocate farmers. Baca County Extension agent Raymond Skitt claimed that by 1938 the BAE had purchased 201,000 acres for \$635,000, a significant sum for an impoverished county and an ample demonstration of the federal government’s largesse during the New Deal.<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, federal purchase of these denuded lands effectively served other county farmers because land that had been exhausted, even abandoned, often regularly lost topsoil. That soil then blew onto neighboring farms and compounded problems that those owners faced trying to control erosion on their own land. The federal purchase

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>216</sup> Raymond H. Skitt, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1937 to November 30, 1938,” 40-42, Folder 50, Box 8, in Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Baca County Annual Reports, 1937-1938, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. All future citations for Colorado Extension Service records include only author, title of annual report, folder number, and box number.

and retirement program, then, provided a service for the seller and his neighbors and marked one of the more formidable components of New Deal agricultural policy.

While the prospect of selling one's land or equipment to the government might have appealed to a portion of the population, and in spite of the sizeable government expenditure locally, there was of course no chance that Washington could satisfy all comers. According to McMillan and the RA, the owners, tenants, their practices, and the entirety of the rural economy could be improved and consequently buffered from another Depression or ecological calamity with reasonable adaptation. Education about their practices, the nature of the rural economy, and the necessity of addressing their expectations proved key to allow for such adaptation. RA experts believed that education should combine with federal intervention to alleviate rural poverty - a theme that the Extension Service consistently promoted. They pushed for improving housing through federal loans, sustaining federal employment programs for public works (both within depressed counties as well as neighboring counties for migrants), raising standards of living by making sure federal agencies and farm organizations were sensitive to the rural poor, and promoting rural schools. The RA also promoted a number of changes to land use regimens that could help both tenant and farmer, and McMillan wholeheartedly agreed with the need to educate farmers about the necessity of conserving resources and protecting the land.<sup>217</sup> The RA and McMillan pushed for several adjustments, including: longer leases designed to compel tenants to take better care of the property; rent adjustments if tenants treated the land well through soil and water conservation; the government redistribution of tax delinquent land; provision of

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<sup>217</sup> Robert T. McMillan, "Social Problems of Farm Families in Baca County, Colorado," 133.

state and county debt reconciliation committees; and continuing the federal purchase program.<sup>218</sup>

McMillan's proposal thus advocated helping tenants and small owners while it also tried to convince farmers to think realistically about how they could survive the Plains environment. One way to do that was to help farmers remain vigilant about soil erosion, obviously on their own land but on their neighbors' plots as well. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of New Deal conservation was the way that New Dealers brought resource use into focus by including private lands rather than simply looking to conserve public resources in parks, forests, and elsewhere. In that way, the purchase plan had a dual purpose. On the one hand, tenants and small owners could use an avenue like the purchase program to cut ties with a losing proposition. On the other hand, the idea of buying up land left barren, with exposed fragile topsoil left open to a devastating wind, could help neighboring farmers who had already taken up the task of protecting their own plots from erosion. Constrained by obvious and highly contentious property rights, an individual owner could not assume responsibility for improving a neighboring farm by planting a shelterbelt or allowing for crop rotation and a fallow period.

New Deal policy started to complicate personal property rights by levying fines on owners whose inactivity or disregard for soil erosion threatened their neighbors' productivity. As Mark Fiege has argued with his study of cooperative weed control in Montana, observers during the 1930s started to appreciate "the incompatibility of human boundaries and forms of mobile nature – water, soil, and organisms –that those boundaries could not contain." In other words, nature, whether weeds or drifting

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

topsoil, would not conform to the “straight edges and right angles” that constituted the grid landscape common on the Great Plains.<sup>219</sup> This applied to both abandoned land as well as private property left unattended by negligent owners whose degraded land infringed on neighbors’ plots.

For Dust Bowl counties, the real issue was blowing land instead of weeds, and the New Deal conservation state exercised considerable power to address the issue. Such nuisance lands threatened everyone’s land, such that even those who tried to address soil erosion on their own property often had to deal with soil blown onto their lands from negligent neighbors as well as from abandoned land. For example, the RA report on Baca County showed that individuals owned nearly 900,000 acres while over 740,000 acres sat outside such “organized units” (i.e. abandoned or not privately owned) and were thus “subject to wind erosion and uncontrolled grazing, with the possibility that unless remedial measures are taken, there will be a repetition of the dust storms of previous years, and possibly a continuing growth of this menace.”<sup>220</sup> By contemplating action on this acreage, some abandoned and some left to pasture, federal officials showed a willingness to extend influence over unclaimed land and address the blowing land problem. Furthermore, with programs like the BAE’s purchasing plan and the same exercise under the RA, the federal government could effectively buy negligent farm owners out to protect surrounding acreages. In that way the government aimed to address the worst land, making it more likely that neighboring farmers might prosper without facing unnecessary obstacles like blowing dirt.

#### •Saving the Soil•

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<sup>219</sup> Mark Fiege, “The Weedy West: Mobile Nature, Boundaries, and Common Space in the Montana Landscape” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 24.

<sup>220</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, October 26, 1936.

In addition to utilizing federal purchase programs and resettlement to remove producers from submarginal land, New Dealers and Extension Service employees wrestled with what to do on lands that remained potentially productive and in the hands of private farmers. Concern for erosion on such private land led to a concerted federal, state, and local effort to push soil conservation among farmers. This sensitivity to soil erosion and the emphasis on getting all county farmers to protect the soil demonstrated the most important conservation-oriented development in Baca over the course of the New Deal. It took some work to convince farmers to value conservation, however, and county agents deserve significant credit for helping the federal government convince locals to pay particular attention to soil conservation.

By the early 1930s the notion of soil conservation was still fairly novel. The first federal agency devoted to controlling soil erosion, the Soil Erosion Service (SES) created in 1933, was a temporary organization designed to “serve as a jobs program, not to eliminate soil erosion.”<sup>221</sup> The Dust Bowl’s severity finally convinced lawmakers, and indeed the general public, that the issue of soil erosion was a public problem, what SES head and chief advocate for soil conservation Hugh Hammond Bennett called “a national menace.” After convincing Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes that he should run the SES, Bennett successfully lobbied Congress in 1935 to create the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) as part of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act. The SCS had a much larger budget and more personnel; it therefore had many more resources to combat soil erosion in

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<sup>221</sup>Ronald C. Griffin and John R. Stoll, “Evolutionary Processes in Soil Conservation Policy,” *Land Economics* 60, no. 1 (February 1984): 30.

American fields. Bennett used the SCS to implement a national conservation program designed to extend soil conservation across the country.

Soil conservation advocates received federal assistance through the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act from 1936. That Act effectively replicated parts of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in that it promoted production reduction as a means to control supply. In essence, that portion of the Act reflected the Roosevelt administration's effort to maintain some sort of production control despite the fact that the Supreme Court had rendered parts of the Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional. Yet the Act also pushed to conserve the soil. It subsidized farmers who planted soil-building crops instead of soil-depleting crops. The Act also authorized federal payments to farmers to install soil conservation practices on cropland. The Agricultural Conservation Program, the name given to the subsidy side of the Act, funded farmers directly when they reduced acreage or used SCS-approved practices to curb soil erosion. The program represented a sort of shared responsibility and national response to the soil erosion issue as public monies went directly to farmers for practicing conservation. In effect, the federal government passed two significant pieces of legislation nearly a year apart, both designed to address soil erosion and incentivize agricultural conservation.<sup>222</sup>

While the SCS eventually employed a purchase program, its main goal was to push soil conservation, namely to keep farmers on the land by promoting good stewardship. A SCS memorandum on the agency's relationship with other government programs announced its purpose succinctly: "The basic purpose of the Soil

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<sup>222</sup> Douglas Helms, ed., *Readings in the History of the Soil Conservation Service*, Historical Notes Number 1 (Washington, D.C.: USDA, 1992), 17, 21, 136.

Conservation Service, broadly stated, is to aid in bringing about desirable physical adjustments in land use with a view to bettering the general welfare, conserving natural resources, establishing a permanent, balanced agriculture, and reducing the hazards of floods and siltation.” It achieved these goals through “technical and material assistance” and “submarginal land purchase and development.”<sup>223</sup> In essence, then, the SCS was principally worried about how to revive abused lands, and it needed the farmers’ help to do so because only with their consent and assistance could erosion be managed on private lands. In addition to the educational component, the SCS and the Agricultural Conservation Program offered subsidies to farmers who participated in erosion control programs. That financial incentive helps explain the agency’s eventual success, because it is clear that the New Deal often succeeded only when spurring action through the promise of funding.

Unfortunately for Baca farmers, their soils offered tremendous opportunities to practice these methods because so much of the county had vulnerable soil, susceptible to erosion. John Underwood conducted a soil survey in Baca County in 1944 that covered about 75% of the county (over 1 million acres). Underwood’s analysis relied on a 1936 SCS study about the soil’s characteristics, including its physical makeup, its composition, its ability to hold moisture, and its susceptibility to erosion. The 1936 study was part of the SCS’s effort to conduct similar soil surveys in places across the country to construct a soil map of the nation’s lands. Underwood’s most surprising conclusion about Baca County soils was that it lacked the ability to maintain moisture.

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<sup>223</sup> “A Policy Statement on Relationships between the Soil Conservation Service and the Extension Service,” March 29, 1940; Box 6; Folder Erosion Control Work—Co. Agents Assembly; SP 5 Records of Regional Conservator H.H. Finnell, 1934-1942; Records of the Soil Conservation Service; Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.



Even though the soil itself was quite fertile, it lacked the means to hold water such that even some soil that could potentially be high in fertility could not be very productive in such an arid climate.<sup>224</sup> Underwood used what is called the “capability classification system” that shows “in a general way, the suitability of soils for most kinds of field crops.” It judges the soil’s limitations, the risk of damage when it is used, and the potential for rehabilitation. He noted that two categories of soil, class III and class IV, could be farmed with some success but only class III could truly support high levels of cultivation. Even though it stood as the more arable of the two categories, even class III land “must have intensive erosion-control or management practices for safe and permanent cultivation” because such lands “are highly susceptible to wind erosion.”<sup>225</sup> Class IV only offered limited cultivation potential and required intensive management, including extensive terraces and contouring to maximize rainfall retention. On the whole, Underwood argued, much of the class IV land should be put back to grass and likely used for a livestock feed-crop economy.<sup>226</sup> Other district land fell into class VI, class VII, or class VIII land and best qualified as range land, with a focus on revegetation or retirement since much of it had “dropped to low carrying capacity as early as the eighties.”<sup>227</sup>

A later soil survey for Baca County identified and summarized each class’s capacity to hold crops (see Table 1):<sup>228</sup>

Class I	Soils have a few limitations that restrict their use.
Class II	Soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or

<sup>224</sup> John J. Underwood, “Physical Land Conditions in the Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts” (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1944), 11.

<sup>225</sup> John J. Underwood, “Physical Land Conditions in the Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts,” 11.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 17-18, quote on 18.

<sup>228</sup> Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey of Baca County, Colorado* (Washington, D.C. USDA, 1973), 26.

	that require moderate conservation practices.
Class III	Soils have severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require special conservation practices, or both.
Class IV	Soils have very severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require very careful management, or both.
Class V	Soils are not likely to erode but have other limitations, impractical to remove, that limit their use largely to pasture, range, woodland, or wildlife.
Class VI	Soils have severe limitations that make them generally unsuited to cultivation and limit their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife.
Class VII	Soils have very severe limitations that make them unsuited to cultivation and that restrict their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife
Class VIII	Soils and landforms have limitations that preclude their use for commercial plants and restrict their use to recreation, wildlife, or water supply, or to esthetic purposes.

The bleak results from the classification process become even more daunting when one considers the amount of land deemed unfit for cultivation. The Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts accounted for 1,241,475 acres, and class III land, the type most amenable to agricultural production, constituted the least of the four main categories at 235,726 acres. The most land fell into the class IV category that Underwood deemed suitable for limited cultivation with an emphasis on production for livestock rather than market.<sup>229</sup> He tallied a total of 269,150 acres in the two districts that should be immediately restored to native grasses (about 21% of the total area) but almost half of that amount had already been put under the plow. Underwood, like many other observers who witnessed the level of erosion in Baca, realized that land use adaptation was necessary for farmers' survival. Underwood recommended a higher percentage of livestock farming, a move away from cash crops – and especially wheat – as well as a reduction in cultivated land, and a change in the land

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<sup>229</sup> John J. Underwood, "Physical Land Conditions in the Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts," 26-27.

tenure system to promote better stewardship among tenants.<sup>230</sup> This was, of course, a refrain that had become commonplace among New Dealers and Extension workers by the mid 1930s.

The SCS had the resources to help even though they faced a stiff task trying to convince Baca farmers that changes to their land use regimens were necessary. The SCS also set out to distinguish between land beyond repair and workable land in need of rehabilitation, and that distinction then became the basis for instituting either a purchase or conservation program for the corresponding acreage. H.H. Finnell, an agronomist and erosion specialist who served as Regional Conservator of the Southern Great Plains and head of Region VI Soil Conservation Service during the 1930s and 1940s, noted in 1941 that the SCS had been quite active in purchasing vulnerable lands in Baca County from 1936 to 1941. According to his records, the SCS spent nearly \$800,000 to buy 782 tracts of land totaling over 250,000 acres in Baca County. The SCS worked in tandem with other agencies to procure hundreds of thousands of acres in Baca, and its manic efforts illustrate how much the federal government was willing to spend to gobble up and retire submarginal land. Yet, while the purchasing programs represented a considerable federal expenditure, Finnell realized that the land purchase program did not represent a significant victory by itself. He admitted that he had a difficult time gauging the agency's success in Baca because 302 operators who had been working with the SCS moved out of the region. Finnell understood that several factors were at work in pushing people from the region, but the high rate of migration served as a reminder that the SCS had not done much yet to keep people on their land. Indeed, Finnell noted that migration had become so acute in some places that the "small towns

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

of Stonington and Richards have become ‘ghost towns.’” In effect, buying out individual proprietors helped salvage the submarginal land and hopefully sent the former operators on their way with some financial support. Yet, it proved insufficient to tackle the problem of land abuse and did little to redeem the remaining population.<sup>231</sup>

The SCS offered its resources to southeastern Colorado farmers almost immediately upon its creation by Congress in 1935. Its core agenda reflected a desire to support farmers and keep them farming, albeit under circumstances more amenable to resource conservation and sustainable production. According to Bennett, it was a “research and demonstration agency” that focused on constructing a “research program to determine the best and most economical methods of erosion control.” It used demonstration projects to show farmers the benefit of land use planning and various erosion control techniques. It worked on public lands to employ erosion control. It managed a number of CCC camps to help localities deal with erosion by providing labor and additional machinery. Finally, it worked with State Extension employees to reach local farmers, “to make the facts developed by our program available to farmers everywhere, and to supervise and assist farmers and groups of farmers, wherever possible, in applying erosion-control practices to the land.” Bennett’s underlying hope, and the SCS’s primary goal, was to “make possible a fundamental change, farm by farm, and for agriculture as a whole, from an exploitive type of farming to a conservative type.”<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> H.H. Finnell, letter to Dr. Austin L. Patrick, n/d; Folder CO-38-22 S E Colorado, Springfield, Colo.; Box 9 LU Corres. – 1941-42—KA-38-21-Elkhart, Morton County, Kans.; SP 5 Records of Regional Conservator H.H. Finnell, 1934-1942; Records of the Soil Conservation Service; Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>232</sup> H.H. Bennett, “Statement by H.H. Bennett,” 1; Untitled Folder; Box 1; SP 19 General Correspondence 1935-1936; Records of the Soil Conservation Service; Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

Indeed, SCS representatives promoted a number of methods and techniques that helped farmers address soil erosion. For example, SCS employees (and other advisors including county agents) pushed stripcropping, a technique that meant to provide a natural barrier to wind and water erosion by growing crops parallel to the land's contour to mitigate runoff and blowing. The central idea involved farming at right angles to the natural slope to lessen erosion and protect fertility. Planting cover crops similarly helped arrest erosion because the low-rise crops were usually drought resistant and held the soil in place with their roots. Farmers planted cover between crop rows or as part of a rotation regularly to protect against erosion and replenish soil fertility. Efforts like this included the furrow, where farmers plowed deep enough troughs to catch water, keep it, and diminish the likelihood of run-off (Figure 12). They also constructed terraces to halt erosion; the terrace popped up across the contour to intercept runoff and corral water when possible (Figure 13). They planted shelterbelts to serve as windbreaks and soften the gusts that tore through the Plains (Figure 14). Generally speaking, each of these techniques aimed to save both soil and moisture, satisfying the two most important goals Plains farmers had to meet to sustain their livelihoods. Additionally, the Agricultural Conservation Program and other federal policies subsidized much of this activity, which effectively rewarded them for helping themselves.



**Figure 12: "Soil erosion conservation," July 25, 1938. The picture shows furrows designed to hold water, thereby conserving the moisture and preventing runoff. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.**



**Figure 13: "Soil erosion - better crops on terrace," July 26, 1938. The picture shows crops grown on a gradual terrace system to mitigate erosion. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.**



**Figure 14: "Dry land shelterbelt," July 7, 1938. This man stands in front of a maturing row of trees designed to cut down wind erosion. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.**

The SCS deserves credit for stressing the need to conserve soil and building support for conservation, for sending experts into the field with financial support, for providing machinery to farmers, and for their purchase program. Yet, local farmers who took the banner of soil conservation and the county agents who helped in that regard merit attention as well, as do state measures designed to build on the foundation the SCS provided in building support for conservation. The Colorado Soil Conservation Act that became law in 1937 constituted the best example of state and local efforts to lead the charge against erosion. Its passage showed that the concern for soil conservation did not reside solely in Washington D.C., although the SCS actually pushed for such legislation so that the state governments could share some of the collective burden for education and funding conservation projects. FDR impressed upon governors that states should initiate legislation to control erosion, and he signed

the USDA-sponsored Standard Soil Conservation Districts Law that allowed for local and state representatives to deal with the problem. The legislation reflected the desire to let farmers establish a soil conservation district as a locally-led body to control erosion while stoking support in their communities for federal and state erosion control programs. In effect, the law extended federal assistance to local districts as a way to ensure that locals, the ones most familiar with local conditions and environs and thus best suited to lead the fight against erosion, had enough support to conserve their resources. The districts thus married local autonomy with federal financial and instructional support, constituting an impressive and powerful weapon against erosion.<sup>233</sup>

Instability in the Colorado agricultural economy and the prevalence of dust storms and drought along the Colorado Plains finally pushed the state legislature into action in 1937. The Act's authors noted that wind and water erosion affected "approximately six million acres, or one-tenth of the total area of the state." Those losses, "caused largely by improper farm and range practices," specifically the attention to cash crops even when such attention exhausted soil, unwillingness to let land sit fallow or rotate crops, and general malaise toward conservation, could only be remedied through united federal and state efforts that enabled to conserve resources. Only with such legislation empowering local boards could the legislature "insure the health, prosperity and welfare of the State of Colorado and its people."<sup>234</sup> The consequent Soil Conservation Act resembled an Extension Service procedural document from 1935 that

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<sup>233</sup> The explanation about FDR's involvement and the push to get local boards involved comes from "75 Years Helping People Help the Land: A Brief History of NRCS" access through the National Resources Conservation Service website: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>

<sup>234</sup> Colorado Soil Conservation Act, Soil Erosion Districts, Colorado House Bill 258 (1937), 1169-1170.



emphasized community organization and common sacrifice to combat erosion. The 1935 memorandum emphasized the need for county agent and SCS cooperation and that both understood “that little immediate good can be accomplished by working with isolated individuals.” Instead, successful and meaningful conservation required “organized associations covering an entire erosion area.” Advisors should focus on those areas where land had the potential for profitable agriculture or when submarginal land threatened such areas, meaning to sustain successful farmers and rescue the vulnerable ones. Otherwise addressing denuded land only drained resources.<sup>235</sup> The directive outlined the push for education as a means to ensure farmers’ participation in the program and their willingness to practice erosion control “over a period of years” instead of simply conserving soil as a temporary response to Dust Bowl devastation.<sup>236</sup> The Colorado Soil Conservation Act reflected the sense of cooperation, the Extension Service’s centrality to conservation, and the need for local input that Extension had outlined.

As written, the bill appeared comprehensive in addressing not only the need to concentrate on erosion but also in establishing the parameters to allow local boards the jurisdiction to conduct their business. A central board in Denver managed the statewide efforts to create districts and presided over any potential legal matters emerging on the local level. If, for instance, neighbors quarreled or litigation arose when individuals tried to opt out of district programs or grew tired of participation then the local boards

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<sup>235</sup> “Memorandum of Procedure for the organization of Soil Conservation Associations and the Development of a soil and Moisture Conservation Program in Colorado,” n/d, 32; Folder Digest of Federal Farm Programs in Colorado; Box 155; Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. The loose paper is not dated but its content and location in the box suggest it was written in 1935.

<sup>236</sup> “Memorandum of Procedure for the organization of Soil Conservation Associations and the Development of a soil and Moisture Conservation Program in Colorado,” 33.

could consult the state board. Beyond such conflict mediation, the state board left most of the responsibility for the day-to-day operations to locally elected conservation district boards. The state board's four person composition revealed a blend of experts and agencies indicative of New Deal land use reform: two members of the State Planning Commission, the Director of Extension, and the Director of the Experiment Station in Fort Collins.<sup>237</sup> The presence of land use planners, extension personnel, and agronomists shows the prominent place that Extension had in conservation efforts as well as the push to consider local needs in developing a conservation program. New Deal agricultural programs utilized the same formula, relying on local expertise as well as planners and organizers to encourage farmers' engagement with conservation programs, all run through the Extension county agent. In that manner, the board's composition reflected the broader push to tackle land use problems in response to the Dust Bowl.

The Act provided local boards some autonomy by promoting, but not compelling, district formation and by bequeathing locals the power to direct district business. Indeed, any five residents could petition the state board to create a district and once the board approved then locals voted on whether they wanted to establish a district. If a basic majority voted in favor then the district proceeded with electing a supervisory board; as with the state board, the local representative of the Extension Service had a permanent place in that body. The local boards included judges to hear and decide on local matters, including appeals, as well as supervisors who oversaw the district operations. These supervisors had an expansive purview but had the financial and organizational support of the state and county governments, which undoubtedly

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<sup>237</sup> Colorado Soil Conservation Act, 1169-1170.

made their responsibilities more manageable. Once farmers sanctioned district formation then the local district board effectively governed farmers within the district's borders. In sum, individuals looking to practice and promote soil conservation now had an organized, well funded, and resolute resource to combat erosion in their county, and had a level of autonomy and control they had never enjoyed working with the SCS or AAA.<sup>238</sup>

The Colorado legislation empowered the local board to extend its influence over almost any aspect of local agriculture if it determined something or someone had a detrimental impact on erosion control. This meant rather typical responsibilities like assessing local soil conditions and identifying the most vulnerable areas, conducting demonstration projects to show farmers how to best inhibit erosion, and constructing structures or facilities to arrest erosion. The board could “furnish financial or other aid” to “any owner or occupant of lands within the district in the carrying on of erosion control and water conservation practices within the district.”<sup>239</sup> Therefore, it could provide access to “agricultural and engineering machinery and equipment, fertilizer, seeds and seedlings” or anything else that might be of use to local farmers. It could also look to the federal or state government for further assistance, either applying for grants or appealing for loans directly, if the local district faced economic strains.<sup>240</sup> With such support and an appreciation for local concerns, the district then designed to design a system to care, treat, and improve local lands within the confines of a reasonable budget.

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 1173-1177, 1189-1190.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 1179.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 1180.

The Colorado Soil Conservation Act offered boards surprising power in that the districts had the ability to implement erosion control techniques on *any* lands within the district, including privately owned parcels. According to the Act, the local board had the authority “to acquire, or acquire control of, by purchase, exchange, lease, gift, grant, bequest, devise, or otherwise, any property, real or personal, or rights or interests therein” if that property sat within the district and could be afforded.<sup>241</sup> The freedom to purchase or lease any eroded lands, and the authority to devise a conservation plan and then institute it on that land, gave the board surprising power to wield over residents within the district’s borders. Any owner within their jurisdiction effectively found his or her property rights amended by the state law; the board had the right to enter anyone’s personal acreage and “do such work as may be necessary in their opinion to prevent the erosion of its soil or damage to other lands within the district.” The law required the board to submit a letter in writing to the owner letting him know of their intention, after which point they could do anything they deemed necessary to prevent erosion or repair damage for the next calendar year.<sup>242</sup> The owner had a chance to appeal to the local and state boards but verdicts favoring the district or that found owners who failed or refused to abide by the district’s rules and regulations “shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction shall be punished by a fine of not more than One Hundred dollars.”<sup>243</sup>

The legislation thus allotted considerable power to local boards and provided them with legal rights to proceed as they saw fit in corralling absentee owners, negligent tenants, or resistant landowners who lived within the district. Once it became

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 1179-1180.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 1186.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 1188.

clear that the districts had such power then farmers tended to view their formation more favorably. Indeed, the decision to create a board in Baca in 1938 garnered significant praise across the region. The *Garden City Daily Telegram* noted in “All Eyes on Baca County” that the residents’ vote “contains a word of encouragement to western Kansas.” A simple majority could establish the district in Colorado, whereas a 75% vote was necessary in Kansas, something the paper lamented. The paper implored Kansas farmers to take note.<sup>244</sup> The *Pueblo Star Journal* applauded the vote and claimed that landowners “have drawn up battle lines for a fight against the ravages of wind and erosion in one of the most severely stricken sectors of the nation’s dust bowl.” The importance lay in their collective decision to fight erosion, a testament to them and the possibility that other farmers may eventually unite, combining “courage and determination” with “all available scientific information” and setting a standard for other agriculturalists.<sup>245</sup> The *Rocky Mountain News* heralded the decision as a step to restore the land, remedying the consequences levied by previous farmers who denuded the land for the sake of “progress.”<sup>246</sup>

As much as newspapers supported conservation or legislative permission allowed for it, however, the onus for forming districts and promoting conservation still rested with farmers. To their credit, Baca farmers took up the mantle of conservation and established three separate districts between 1938 and 1941. The district formation demonstrates a few key points about the importance of conservation during the period as well as the sometimes fickle relationship that locals had with the expanding state. The districts effectively showed how farmers were willing to unite in common cause,

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<sup>244</sup> “All Eyes on Baca County,” *Garden City Daily Telegram*, n/d.

<sup>245</sup> “Dust Bowlers Gird for Action,” *Pueblo Star Journal*, n/d.

<sup>246</sup> “Self-Help in Baca County,” *Rocky Mountain News*, n/d.

tying their individual fate to their neighbors in a show of solidarity in the fight against erosion. In terms of their relationship with the federal government, however, while the districts offered some evidence that farmers could align themselves with Washington many agriculturalists were unwilling to abide by every bit of federal policy or federal employees' advice. Participants regularly criticized federal conservation efforts and chastised federal agency directors like Hugh Hammond Bennett when they felt like the government caused unnecessary delays or obstructed their efforts or tried to exert too much authority. Locals seemed very much aware of their responsibility as well as their opportunity to manage conservation efforts in their districts. Indeed, the district marked an unusual combination of federal support and local control that resulted in a surprisingly effective showcase of how to fight soil erosion in an environment decimated by the Dust Bowl. By 1941, the three districts combined to include 1,324,040 acres (more than 75% of county land) and organized with over 700 of the 906 farmers in the county. As author of the state report, Hamman congratulated Baca farmers for such widespread support.<sup>247</sup> Their compliance suggests the broad appeal that soil conservation via the district model had for Baca farmers as well as their willingness to conserve resources to protect their best interests.

Local farmers seemed to embrace the new possibilities to combat erosion provided by forming a district, and with the first two districts up and running by 1938 the issue of erosion unquestionably became the number one agricultural concern in Baca. The Western Baca County Soil Erosion District supervisors identified both the central problems and potential solutions they faced when they announced their

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<sup>247</sup>A.J. Hamman, "Soil Conservation Specialists Report, 1941," Folder Soil Conservation Specialist Reports 1941, Box 127, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

intentions for the district. The board claimed that “the difficulties in the District are the result of the plowing of lands not adapted to the production of cultivated crop” and “the use of lands for which they are not naturally adapted has been a large factor contributing to the severe wind erosion of soils in the District.”<sup>248</sup> The members faced “poverty, heavy indebtedness, enormous relief costs, and other economic and social difficulties, and the picture in many localities is a most discouraging one. Everything seems to be ‘gone with the wind.’”<sup>249</sup> The board pushed education, a new tenure system that supported tenants and encouraged tenant conservation, the end of speculative farming, and federal financial assistance when necessary. It hoped for a “complete readjustment of the agriculture of the District” to better account for aridity and farm size, to promote crop diversification and not cash crop-only farming, and to encourage resident operator involvement and cooperation.<sup>250</sup> Board members believed that “the success of the whole program rests upon resident operators. Without their interest, initiative, industry, and cooperation, the technical and financial assistance furnished by the Government will accomplish little.”<sup>251</sup>

To its credit, and in response to the tall task before them, the board encouraged participation and enthusiasm by extending some of its financial and instructional power to district farmers. The districts effectively executed a policy of purchase and protection, the gist of New Deal agricultural policy only in microcosm. For example, the districts tried to gobble up susceptible lands by buying them with federal and state financing and then either re-letting them to folks willing to remain vigilant against

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<sup>248</sup> Office of Board of Supervisors, “The Western Baca County Soil Erosion District,” (Springfield, CO: 1938), 58

<sup>249</sup> Office of Board of Supervisors, “The Western Baca County Soil Erosion District,” 57.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 65.

erosion or selling them to farmers willing to participate in the district. In that way the districts received a return on their investment from the renter or buyer and simultaneously ensured that the lands enjoyed proper and conscientious stewardship. For example, the West Baca district leased nearly 50,000 acres in 1938, listing almost half of that to cover crop and additionally removing a portion of that total from production entirely. It then sublet almost 10,000 acres to private operators who had agreed to secure the land against further erosion. Furthermore, association with the SCS allowed district farmers access to both labor and machinery, providing the opportunity to plant trees or build trenches to protect against blowing.

The SCS and district goals presented the Extension Service further opportunity to influence agriculture in the region by helping to foment farmer enthusiasm. In fact, the SCS leaned heavily on Extension in order to get its word about soil conservation across to local farmers and agents had been pushing for reforms since at least the late 1920s. County agents had been working with local farmers to protect against erosion since before the Dust Bowl, but that catastrophe obviously heightened attention to conservation. Agents approached local farmers in different ways yet agents most often remained passive, acting as educators and advisors to folks who sought their assistance. They broached subjects like soil conservation but also invoked agronomy and land use planning to persuade farmers to think more seriously about their land's health. For example, the Extension Service published and distributed a pamphlet entitled "Keeping the Farm at Home" in 1935. The pamphlet reminded farmers how important proper practices were to protecting one's land, especially given how the primary audience found itself in the midst of the Dust Bowl. It emphasized the need to utilize the contour



when plowing and planting to take advantage of the soil to retain water if applicable or at least terracing on sloping lands, as “the most economical and effective method of reducing soil blowing on farms in eastern Colorado.” The pamphlet also highlighted the importance of crop rotation and the necessity of allowing some acreage to lie fallow to improve the soil’s recovery.<sup>252</sup> While only a few pages long, this example of Service literature exemplifies the ways that agents tried to help locals during the crisis. The key was to translate such studies into action and in that respect the agents worked especially hard to make demonstration projects and farm visits a vital part of their post.

The district model expanded agents’ role in promoting conservation and allowed them to be more active in the process. The districts afforded them the unique chance to facilitate conservation and participate in managing land use as a compatriot rather than as federally-appointed advisor like employees in the RA, BAE, SCS, and other agencies. Consequently, the Service deserves credit for helping locals establish districts. Baca County agent Raymond Skitt actually typed out the proposal for the West Baca district and submitted that form to the Federal Coordinator for the Southern Great Plains, Roy Kimmell (see Figure 15). In it he defined his role as a being responsible “to cooperate in the educational field, fostering desirable practices and proper use of land in retirement, restoration and general farm program.” In that way the agent’s relationship with locals changed very little, as the agents had been tasked with education about and management of land use reform since the program’s inception. What had changed was the newfound opportunity for locals and agents to combat erosion. Skitt outlined the importance of working with federal agencies, the need for federal credit extension to purchase land and to buy machinery, the necessity for the

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<sup>252</sup> Colorado State College, Extension Service, “Keeping the farm at Home” (Fort Collins, CO: July 1935), 4.

local board to work well with the federal bureaucrats, and the importance of keeping everyone in the district on the same page to provide a united front against erosion.<sup>253</sup>

The agent helped orchestrate such developments because of his standing on the district board.

The agents' role on district boards offered another way for him to immerse himself in the local community. In Skitt's case, he became familiar enough with the situation in Baca that he presented an economic diagnosis of county problems and outlined the ways that farmers could capitalize on federal and state funding. Most farmers lacked available capital to buy machinery to contour their fields or employ labor to terrace or build shelterbelts, so access to funding that the district model made available proved crucial for farmers to band together to share the burden of initial expenditures. As he noted, few farmers could expand to the point where they achieved enough crop diversity and maintained enough livestock as to allow for self-sufficiency. Most farmers needed low interest loans or credit extension to start the rehabilitation process. Extension was in a prime position to facilitate lending programs and Skitt informed his constituents of their availability. Even then, however, Skitt worried that farmers had no collateral: "the ability of operators to offer up tangible security for loans at this time, due to the general wind erosion hazard, is negligible."<sup>254</sup> He hoped that the SCS and Extension Service could work with other federal agencies to negotiate favorable loan terms for district farmers. He also reassured Roy Kimmel that farmers often needed financial assistance to practice soil conservation, a strategy that helped put

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<sup>253</sup> Raymond H. Skitt letter to Roy I. Kimmell, "Proposal Western Baca County Soil Erosion District," March 28, 1938; Folder Baca County Soil Conservation District; Box 15 Nov. 19, '36-Dalhart, Tex.—Soil Cons. Dists. Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator 1936-1942; Records of the Soil Conservation Service; Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>254</sup> Raymond H. Skitt letter to Roy I. Kimmell, "Proposal Western Baca County Soil Erosion District," 6-7.

the onus on the state and federal agencies to offer amicable lending terms to farmers.<sup>255</sup>

By doing so, Skitt again showed that conservation required a bit from the local, state, and federal levels, a kind of cooperation that often meant federal financing and local practice.



**Figure 15: "New dust bowl program for southwest. Washington, D.C., June 2, 1937." Picture of Sec. of Agriculture Wallace, Roy I. Kimmel, and Asst. Sec of Agriculture M. L. Wilson. Courtesy Library of Congress.**

Obviously, rhetoric explicating the need for conservation does not evidence its adoption by farmers; any emphasis on terracing or listing on the contour obviously did not matter much if farmers were unwilling to practice such techniques. Fortunately,

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 8. Author's emphasis.

Baca agents kept meticulous notes and tallies about how many people were impacted by conservation education, who proved willing to practice new methods, and how much those new methods helped local agriculture. The number of participants grew over time and farmers quickly became more willing to adopt conservation by the late 1930s. For example, Leo Oyler served as Baca agent from 1934 to 1938 and witnessed farmers' growing support for conservation. Oyler entered the job brimming with enthusiasm, as he finally earned a post with Extension even though he had been working indirectly with the Service for a time before his job in Baca started. From December 1935 to November 1936, he made more than 400 visits to area farms, conducted ten training meetings, published nearly 100 articles, some of which made their ways into local newspapers, wrote over 1700 letters, and held seventeen method demonstrations for almost 800 people. During that same time twelve local farms had planted trees for reforestation and to act as windbreaks/shelterbelts. More importantly, farmers had placed 478,000 acres under "terracing and erosion control."<sup>256</sup> The numbers increased the following year and Oyler used more specific labels and numbers for exactly what locals did to fight erosion. He claimed that farmers utilized some form of erosion control on 1.2 million acres in the county in 1936, using various methods like stripcropping, growing cover crops, terracing, and planting shelterbelts. These efforts presaged the district, an indication that the district helped continue farmers' efforts at inhibiting erosion and saving moisture.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Leo E. Oyler, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1935 to November 30, 1936," 1-6, Folder 47, Box 8.

<sup>257</sup> Leo E. Oyler, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1936 to November 30, 1937," 25-27, Folder 49, Box 8.

The momentum that Oyler noticed in 1935 and 1936 continued through the end of the decade, further suggesting that Baca farmers stayed on board with conservation. Raymond Skitt, who took over for Oyler in 1938, counted 1.25 million acres under some form of erosion control in that year, with farmers again planting cover crops and growing crops on the contour, but also retiring some lands to summer fallow, rotating crops constructing terraces, and building small dams to control potential floodwaters from further erosion. According to Skitt, nearly 66% of the almost 1800 farms in Baca were practicing some erosion control method and most utilized multiple techniques to save their lands from blow out. It helped that the county had multiple programs designed to arrest erosion. It also helped that some of the land fell under the soil conservation district's jurisdiction.<sup>258</sup>

Other programs also made some headway promoting conservation while Oyler still presided as county agent. The aforementioned Agricultural Conservation Program and the Wind Erosion Program both fought to conserve soil by organizing farmers' efforts in that regard. For example, the Wind Erosion Program from 1936, run by the Extension Service, paid unemployed residents to contour plots or build terraces or plant shelterbelts, promoting conservation while helping to alleviate some of the unemployment rampant among townspeople in Baca. The Program used federal funding to execute an emergency listing program that did not require much oversight or coordination. Guy Dickerson applauded the program and claimed that Baca farmers were impressed: "Talk to anyone in this county and the answer is about the same, i.e., 'Best program we ever had. Quicker action with less red tape, More good for the

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<sup>258</sup> Raymond H. Skitt, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1937 to November 30, 1938," Folder 50, Box 8.

money spent; less cost for overhead. The only way we could have worked our ground.” Oyler noted that “the emergency listing program has been the most worthwhile program of any yet submitted and probably with less money spent in administration of any of the programs.”<sup>259</sup> In short, federal funding, low overhead, and action translated to a broad base of support; bureaucracy, red tape, and too many experts only slowed progress. As long as they agreed with the program and the benefits proved tangible, Baca farmers seemed to jump on board.

Notably, similar developments occurred in southern Prowers County but there seemed less urgency among Prowers farmers to adopt conservation measures. Even though the first soil conservation district only emerged in Prowers in 1943, dryland farmers tried to utilize the resources at their disposal with the help of county agents like A.J. Hamman and Jack N. French well before that year. Hamman, Prowers County agent from 1934 to 1937 and then Soil Conservation Specialist for the Extension Service, tallied a significant number of letters, bulletins, and demonstration/training meetings in 1936. He claimed that twenty-seven families had planted shelterbelts to protect against wind erosion and that nearly 140,000 acres fell under terracing and listing programs to defend against soil loss.<sup>260</sup> Dryland farmers needed government subsidies to keep them afloat, Hamman noted, but their embrace of conservation measures and federal programs to that end had made some difference. French’s summary showed that the number of farmers who employed such tactics increased over the next couple of years. The number of farms using shelterbelts, making

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<sup>259</sup> “Wind Erosion Control Program, Colorado Report, November 30, 1936,” 5; Folder 3 Report Wind Erosion Control Program; Box 156; Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>260</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 01, 1935 to October 31, 1936,” Folder 7, Box 67.

improvements for wildlife, growing crops on the contour, and rotating their crops grew from 1937 through 1941, an indication that some Prowers farmers slowly started to practice conservation on their lands..<sup>261</sup>

While the numbers of conserving farms rose in Prowers County, financial motivation may have played a part in convincing farmers to practice soil conservation. For example, French noted that the federal investment on farms in Prowers County through the Agricultural Conservation Program neared \$200,000 in 1938.<sup>262</sup> It remains difficult to determine if these subsidies either enabled farmers to conserve or enticed them to practice such methods; it appears a mix of the two. Early New Deal policies like the AAA seem to have cut production by leveraging subsidy payments as the only means for farmers to make money. Therefore, the funding seems to have enticed farmers to cut production and think about the broader relationship between supply and demand. Similarly, there is a chance that early conservation programs like the SCS used money to lure farmers into conservation. As Skitt noted, the district announced, McMillan posited, and farmers decried, the depression hit agriculturalists extraordinarily hard and left few with any means to do much beyond survive. Those without capital to plant shelterbelts or buy a contour plow or invest in crop diversification had no way to protect themselves from erosion. As much as county agents and federal experts offered advice and instruction, farmers who lacked the means to act had no opportunity to implement land use adaptation. Crucially, most of the New

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<sup>261</sup> Jack N. French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1937 to December 01, 1938," Folder 9, Box 67.

<sup>262</sup> Jack N. French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1937 to December 01, 1938," Folder 9, Box 67.

Deal programs included subsidies or made low-interest financing available, thereby enabling farmers who wanted to protect their resources.

The districts demonstrated that federal and state support enabled rather than enticed farmers to conserve resources. After all, practicing good stewardship took time, energy, and patience, whereas selling pigs to the government or not planting part of one's acreage to wheat required little physical or mental investment. Conservation was a calculated choice, and while perhaps a few farmers abided by federal programs for conservation solely because of the payoffs, it is not evident that the money offered enough enticement to compel compliance. Indeed, that is why the districts represented such an important step in the establishment of the conservation state. The district law expanded the parameters within which farmers could maneuver to protect their lands, and gave them leverage to control soil erosion within their districts. The state also provided openings for farmers to pool risk, as they did with the soil erosion districts. They amassed capital, giving them a larger fund for investment in machinery and labor to address erosion concerns. The state and federal government offered additional funding and made experts available to help district members. If farmers wanted to stall erosion, and widespread district participation suggests that enough Baca farmers felt strongly about doing so, then federal intervention made it possible. Yet, participation in the district required a popular vote and enrollment never amounted to some sort of direct payment. In other words, district members joined of their own accord, not because the government offered them a subsidy to get involved. In the case of the districts, then, federal influence enabled conservation.



The districts also afforded members unprecedented power in patrolling owners within district boundaries and marked an important step in the maturation of land use policy during the 1930s. The soil conservation district offered generous flexibility for members to ostracize and even penalize residents and owners who did not abide by the district's ruling. At the same time, the district's power came into question when the West Baca Soil Conservation District mandated that no resident within the boundaries break new sod during 1938. The board of supervisors voted to restrict expansion as a way to inhibit soil erosion; they clearly understood that extensive sod breaking and tearing up the topsoil had contributed to their present plight. Essentially, they wanted to restore and rehabilitate denuded land and address erosion throughout the district, mostly by drumming up support and, if necessary, by compelling compliance. In effect, all owners within the district had to practice conservation to not only improve their land but protect their neighbors' interests as well. The district board announced this proposal as emblematic of its intentions that no one should break new land without approval from the Board of Supervisors, no restored land should be broken without such approval, and all land should be treated for erosion. If an owner proved unwilling or unable to follow through with those provisions then the district could act. One such case of the district seeking redress from a negligent owner exemplifies the push by conservators to protect themselves from neighbors' blowing land.

The challenge to district authority came during late spring 1940. In essence, the episode exposed two very different versions of property rights and also illustrated the board's authority over landowners within the district. The West Baca Board of Supervisors sent a letter to Lauriston Walsh informing her of a potential \$100 fine

because she had broken new sod, flaunting the mandate proffered by the board in 1938 and still applicable in 1940. Mrs. Walsh's response to Jas O. Dougan, Secretary-Manager-Treasurer of the West Baca district, argued that the government must somehow reimburse owners for restricting the ways they chose to use their own property. Dougan replied, explaining the importance of "the future benefit of this land" and his intention to "protect your investment as much as possible since a few years of wind erosion would remove the only top soil you have" and decimate the acreage.<sup>263</sup> Walsh rebuked Dougan's initial request and explained that she had every intention of caring for the land and protecting it from erosion; she lived in New York but promised that she would "see to it that the responsibility for its control is definitely placed in the hands of one of your local residents."<sup>264</sup> Walsh added that she had never voted to establish the district and therefore deserved some chance to defend herself from the Board's arbitrary decision constricting her rights as a property owner.<sup>265</sup> Dougan's final letter defended local farmers and their efforts at combating erosion by indicting Walsh for being an outsider: "Of course you realize the fact that the Board of Supervisors of this District is composed of land owners who have *remained* in this county for many years and who are interested in making *their home here*. They *are* those who have faith

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<sup>263</sup> Jas. O. Dougan letter to Lauriston Walsh, April 12, 1940; Folder Baca County Soil Conservation District; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>264</sup> Lauriston Walsh letter to Jas. O. Dougan, April 11, 1940; Folder Baca County Soil Conservation District; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>265</sup> Lauriston Walsh letter to Jas. O. Dougan, April 16, 1940; Folder Baca County Soil Conservation District; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

in Baca County and because of this faith they are determined not to permit stabilization work that has been accomplished to be destroyed.”<sup>266</sup>

The exchange spoke to larger problems at play during the early stages of the New Deal conservation state. Dougan’s emphasis on Walsh as outside illustrated a fundamental tension between locals and outsiders that existed in many rural locales. Long-time county residents generally held absentee and large owners responsible for not maintaining their farms. In fact, ample evidence of animosity between locals and outsiders emerges in agent records as well as local newspapers.<sup>267</sup> Controlling these supposed outsiders, often labeled “suitcase” farmers, meant enabling some mechanism to penalize negligence as a way to motivate the owner. The number of suitcase farmers in southeast Colorado and southwest Kansas, the area Leslie Hewes called the “Suitcase Farming Frontier,” increased dramatically after 1920. These owners usually owned large tracts of land and focused extensively on wheat; they had sufficient capital to fund intensive, mechanized wheat farming and consequently they became easy scapegoats for causing soil erosion.<sup>268</sup> Yet the theme of trying to control private land through a public mechanism like the district was in fact central to the eventual vote in favor of the district, and presumably at the heart of why Dougan chastised Walsh. Indeed, one of the more notable regional meetings on drought and the Dust Bowl, held in Dalhart, Texas, in November 1936, gave Plains farmers the opportunity to discuss both the main problems and potential means to stabilize regional agriculture. The Colorado delegation

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<sup>266</sup> Jas. O. Dougan letter to Lauriston Walsh, n/d. Author’s emphasis in original; Folder Baca County Soil Conservation District; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas. Italics in original.

<sup>267</sup> See for example Raymond H. Skitt, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1938 to November 15, 1939,” 5-6, 44, Folder 50, Box 8; *Springfield Democrat Herald* April 26, 1929 and June 13, 1935.

<sup>268</sup> Leslie Hewes, “Early Suitcase Farming in the Central Great Plains,” *Agricultural History* 51, no.1 (Jan. 1977): 23-37. Hewes speaks to Colorado specifically on pages 32-37

complained that the biggest issue confronting Plains farmers was their inability to control negligent owners' lands. It implored the state legislature and carried support from other delegations to pass a law to declare submarginal land "a public menace." They wanted to employ some "method by which an owner-operator or community can compel the owner of the land to prevent his soil from damaging adjacent land by approved methods of control."<sup>269</sup> The Colorado Soil Conservation Act included similar language, as did the proposal for the West Baca district.

District board members proved more than willing to exert their authority over district members and they also frequently challenged the federal government. Locals felt free to chastise government employees or indict federal programs for not meeting their expectations. For example, and unfortunately for H. H. Bennett and the SCS, local farmers hesitated to give full approval to the SCS and to federal intervention in their affairs more generally. To many observers, the federal effort levied by the SCS and other federal agencies often seemed misdirected and misguided. To them, federal involvement appeared the equivalent of outsiders using book knowledge to teach locals with farming experience; the supposed experts had little to share about conditions or climate or crops that could assist the seasoned farmer. This criticism echoed earlier arguments against the county agents as interloping experts taxing the county budgets without offering anything of substance in return. In both cases the argument that westerners have always resisted federal or state control and instead have preferred, often demanded, to announce their individualism and freedom from such constraints

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<sup>269</sup> "Public Hearing of Southern Great Plains & The President's Great Plains Drought Committee," Dalhart, TX, November 18 and 19, 1936; Folder Southern Great Plains Region; Box 1 General; SP 10 Records Relating to Land Utilization 1936-1939; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

rings true. At the same time, just as locals eventually warmed to the agents, they embraced certain components of the SCS message rather than dismissing the agency all together. That selective approach proved a prominent characteristic of how Baca farmers approached federal intervention throughout the 1930s.

Letters from district members evidence this selectivity and the whole process of district formation demonstrated farmers' reticence to completely embrace federal or state activity. Put another way, farmers did not appear to accept anything quickly or completely without some reservations, regardless of the program. For example, the original vote to establish a soil conservation district in Baca County lost when only 24% of 585 farmers voted in favor of district formation. In reviewing the vote, the state coordinator of the SCS, K. W. Chalmers, wrote to another employee within the USDA, Coordinator Roy Kimmel, with his reaction to the district's defeat. Chalmers explained that residents had "been somewhat spoiled by Federal grants" and "they do not feel that there will be any change in the Administrative policy with respect to Baca County whether or not they have a district." Moreover, personal and regional animosities carried significant weight. Sectional controversy between Springfield and the rest of the county, personal jealousies between proposed members of the directing committee, accusations directed at county supervisors and Agricultural Conservation Program Committee members, and a general distaste for the "dictatorial policy" instituted and controlled by Washington, combined to convince residents that establishing a conservation district carried too many potential problems.<sup>270</sup> Obviously, Baca farmers

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<sup>270</sup> W.K. Chalmers letter to Roy I. Kimmel, January 6, 1938; FD Baca County SC District: 1937-1939, Colo.; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo. SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

eventually voted to start the district, a fact that suggests the initial trepidation over federal oversight waned once farmers came to understand that they would manage the district with minimal federal intervention.

A letter written by J. H. Neal, President of the West Baca district, to SCS chief Hugh Hammond Bennett in July 1938 offered one of the more telling examples of farmers' attitudes towards federal involvement. Neal chastised Bennett for what he considered the SCS's failings and attempted to clarify exactly what SCS employees needed to do to "redeem themselves in the eyes of the people." The crux of the problem, according to Neal, was the agency's inability and unwillingness to tackle the issue of wind erosion, "the greatest menace of all," with necessary urgency. Neal claimed that "the Service" needed to spend more money buying up wild lands and putting people to work on stopping that acreage from blowing onto adjacent, private, land, instead of employing office and technical help or renting an office. The SCS spent too much money on personnel and tried to push the costs onto the farmer, by for example charging high rental fees of materials and machinery, which made it too expensive for the average farmer to employ the tactics that the SCS promoted. Neal seemed to accuse Bennett personally, contending that "your Service has gotten hold of the purse strings of Washington and are making an attempt to perpetrate your Department and to dominate all other Agencies of the individual states...Our people feel that your Service is too expensive, not practical and it is one of the most wasteful of people's money."<sup>271</sup> In a sense, Neal accused the SCS for an expansive budget that did

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<sup>271</sup> J.H. Neal letter to H.H. Bennett, July 21, 1938; FD Baca County SC District: 1937-1939, Colo.; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo. SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

not funnel money directly to the problem; instead, Neal believed, the SCS paid for a bloated staff and too much office space, charged too much for farmers to use machinery or labor, and could have used its money to better aid farmers in the fight against erosion. Certainly, we can see that Neal appreciated that the SCS had money and offered some help, but he thought that it could have used their resources in more productive ways.

W. O. Brown included similar complaints in a letter he wrote to regional SCS coordinator Al Hurt. Brown criticized the SCS for its unwavering conviction that it should be the final authority on all things agricultural. He claimed that the “SCS wants to run everything, but they’re too slow. They don’t do things at the right time.” He continued: “22 men in the office and 8 men in the field seems to be the method of SCS, and we just don’t approve of that way of working. If they would go on the land with tractors and start listing, they could redeem themselves.”<sup>272</sup> Further friction developed over a “Memorandum of Understanding” devoted to outlining the cooperation between the district and the agency. Again, the West Baca County representative worried that the SCS had become too powerful and too bureaucratic, sacrificing the county’s best interests in the name of authority. “Instead of various agencies cooperating and advising,” he offered, “the District is placed in the position of ‘advising’ with the Service having the final decision.”<sup>273</sup> Conversely, Guy Dickerson celebrated the Wind Erosion Control Program because it produced results without “red tape” and federal

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<sup>272</sup> W.O. Brown, transcript of telephone conversation with Al Hurt, July 2, 1938; FD Baca County SC District: 1937-1939, Colo.; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>273</sup> “Memorandum of Understanding,” no author, n/d. Folder Baca County SC District: 1937-1939, Colo.; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

obstructionism.<sup>274</sup> Farmers wanted as much control over conservation as possible and many felt most enthusiastic about conservation programs that allowed them such authority.

Evidence of some friction between SCS conservationists and local state-employed conservationists further demonstrated criticism of the SCS mission. A letter from District Conservationist F. R. Stansbury and Baca County Project Manager Norman Fuller, both men working out of Springfield, to W.R. Watson, Area Conservationist with SCS, detailed some of their concerns about the purchasing program. The letter expressed their ambivalence about SCS protocols. Fuller noted that “I begin to appreciate how a Balkan premier feels when he signs a treaty at Vienna” because, for all the good that SCS accomplished, the agency sometimes employed seemingly backward logic. For example, Fuller believed, revegetation on purchased land represented an important step in restoring native grasses, but he questioned “the feasibility of spending \$5.00 an acre on \$3.00 land in an effort to make it worth \$4.00” in resale. The SCS needed help to reach private landowners; in spite of its tremendous budget and the army of employees across the Plains, they needed individual compliance to make much difference. Indeed, Fuller and Stansbury identified one of the signature problems of New Deal policy – citizens needed to cooperate. The SCS lacked sufficient power to compel such participation or help all of those interested. Take the purchasing program, they argued: “There is no further fact that, even if this method [submarginal land purchase] should be successful, it still will offer no feasible solution of the problem for the hundreds of thousands of acres of private land on which private operators may

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<sup>274</sup> “Wind Erosion Control Program, Colorado Report, November 30, 1936,” 5.



wish to restore the grass cover.”<sup>275</sup> These complaints contained a similar theme, namely that top-down federal authority that did not account for locals or local circumstances, had no chance to succeed. This explained why the districts became so popular, even if district representatives continued to worry about issues like bureaucracy and red tape.

The local response to the Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Springfield constituted another example of the often tense relationship between residents and the federal government.<sup>276</sup> Over its nine year existence, the CCC employed three million young men in various tasks across the country. As Neil Maher has argued, Corps enrollees altered the natural landscape through their physical labor and in the process made the outdoors more accessible to everyday Americans as well as assisted other agencies like the SCS. The CCC hoped that such changes would make outdoor recreation more accessible to enthusiasts; the CCC assembled campgrounds, constructed hiking trails, and even built roads. The camp in Springfield actually spent more time helping local farmers by providing labor and machinery necessary for conservation. The CCC represented one of the more popular New Deal programs in Baca County as camp members quickly became part of the community, even participating in local softball leagues with business owners and other federal employees.<sup>277</sup>

The Springfield camp became an important cog in the machine to fight erosion from its introduction in 1935 through its closure in 1940. The SCS managed the camp

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<sup>275</sup> F.R. Stansbury and Norman Fuller to W.R. Watson, n/d, 2; Folder 731-Agronomy; Box 1; SP23 (BG) General Records. 1939-1941; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>276</sup> Two important examples of recent works on this developing thirst for outdoor recreation are Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sara M. Gregg, *Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, the New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal Landscape in Appalachia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>277</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, May 11, 1939.

and focused workers' efforts toward halting soil loss – the camp earned the nickname “Gusts O’ Dust” as a result. For example, camp residents planted shelterbelts, built dams and canals for water diversion, reseeded exhausted soil, and effectively served at the beck and call of the local SCS representatives.<sup>278</sup> Most of the workers hailed from Colorado, with many from either Baca or Prowers County. Additionally, other counties in southeastern Colorado like Bent and Otero were well represented in the camp rolls. Interestingly, many of the enrollees had Hispanic surnames like Avila and Martinez, suggesting a heavily Hispanic worker population at the Springfield camp.<sup>279</sup> Local farmers realized that a positive relationship with the camp could provide significant dividends, as the army of eager workers could be put to a number of tasks to improve area farmlands. The camp offered not only the labor but also, like the SCS, extra plows, tractors, and other technology to use in local fields. Rumor spread that the USDA considered shutting down the camp and a flurry of responses ensued, including an unsuccessful plea from Jas. O. Dougan of the Western Baca soil erosion district. Dougan implored Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace to reconsider moving the camp because locals so badly needed the help. The camp offered significant assistance to the district once it formed, and Dougan knew that removing the camp would frustrate conservation efforts. Dougan promised Wallace that county residents, while poor and in need of federal help, would “contribute as much as possible” to keep the camp in Baca. Dougan actually broached the idea of a second camp because he mentioned,

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<sup>278</sup> Alfred E. Cornebise, *The CCC Chronicles: Camp Newspapers of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), 38.

<sup>279</sup> A check of the CCC Collection illustrates these two themes among enrollees. Thanks to Gerald E. Sherard for taking the time to extract such information from CCC enrollment records and to the Colorado State Archives for making his lists available to the public. See [http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/archives/ccc/state\\_ccc.htm](http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/archives/ccc/state_ccc.htm) for additional information.

somewhat desperately, that the CCC camp was necessary to keep the soil district itself afloat.<sup>280</sup>

Such a plea and the often mixed response to the SCS and to Washington more generally should not be taken as an indication that southeastern Coloradans were forced to participate in federal programs or that they only turned to the government out of desperation. Certainly, no single reason existed to explain why farmers participated in organizations like the soil conservation district or built shelterbelts or listed on the contour or built field dams. Surely, the federal subsidies provided for cutting production or for letting part of one's acreage sit fallow for a season helped. The fact that the federal government offered grants to counties to buy machinery, gave farmers access to a labor pool like the CCC, educated agents on how best to reach out to farms or demonstrate soil conservation practices, and bought up submarginal land to remove it from production warrants attention. Undoubtedly, the federal government threw tremendous weight behind these programs as signal responses to the Dust Bowl crisis, and most farmers in southeastern Colorado would not have lasted through the 1930s without federal assistance. At the same time, the farmers were the ones most intimately involved in and those most responsible for changing their surroundings. That the locals' embrace of conservation was not universal should be expected, but it is necessary to appreciate that there was a significant group of people devoted to readjusting their land use patterns to improve their prospects.

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<sup>280</sup> Jas. O. Dougan letter to Secretary Henry A. Wallace, August 16, 1940; Folder Cooperation with C.C.C.—Colorado; Box 3 Colorado; SP 3 Records Concerning Cooperation with Other Agencies 1937-1941; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas; Hayden K. Rouse to A.E. McClymonds, August 14, 1936; Untitled Folder; Box 2; SP 19 General Correspondence 1935-1936; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

The point is that these individuals organized, demonstrated initiative in combating the erosion problem, used government help when it became available, and made a difference in the forecast for Baca agriculture. The districts also represented the lengths to which citizens would go to fight erosion. For example, once it formed, the West Baca Soil Conservation District enthusiastically pointed to land they wanted to buy in order to prevent further blowing and destruction. The supervisors tried to attain a federal grant but had no luck because they formed so early that no government agency had been authorized to provide financial help. Instead, they took loans from local banks to buy up lands, and to borrow or lease equipment, and they then formed a specific association within their district, the Sandy Soil Cooperative Erosion Control Association. That body could then turn to the Farm Security Administration for loans to continue buying submarginal land, improving it, and then leasing it back to district members. The district members effectively made do until 1940 when districts could turn directly to the FSA and AAA for financial aid; even after that, however, the Southeastern Baca district continued to borrow from local banks.<sup>281</sup> Eventually, the West and Southeast Baca districts garnered the promised state and federal support, which enabled the districts to cover nearly 1 million acres in Baca. That coverage ensured that the majority of farmers within the district's parameters had a governing body to turn to for help and an authority capable of checking production and practice to protect from erosion. Under such guidance and with such resources at the ready it is perhaps not surprising that the fight against erosion succeeded to such an extent even after a relatively small amount of time.

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<sup>281</sup> John J. Underwood, "Physical Land Conditions in the Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts," 30-31.

•Acreage•

Unfortunately, neither conservation nor the purchase program addressed the third main point that farmers suggested as a necessary change to Plains agriculture. As the Western Baca Soil Erosion District summary noted, the Homestead Act left its largest legacy in terms of constructing 160 plots as the accepted norm for land division on the Plains. The author contended that “The unwise policy of the Government’s rigid subdivision of lands is still felt today, as many of the farms and ranches are too small to support a family. Such subdivision should never have been allowed in the Southern Great Plains.” By so limiting settlers, the comparatively small plot size left homesteaders with few options but to maximize their plot’s productivity and try to make as much money as possible in the process. The 160 acres represented what Congress believed a family needed in a humid region, but it did not account for the challenges posed by an arid environment. The small plots lacked enough acreage to diversify their crop, if they wanted to market their commodities then they focused on cash crops, and they lacked the space to take on much livestock as a means to improve self-sufficiency. This meant most homesteaders tried to maximize profit by planting as much of a single cash crop as they possibly could and hoping that a good harvest could provide some capital. The turn to cash crops like wheat represented a step towards soil erosion because invariably the small owners had accrued some debt in buying machinery or other goods and needed to amass enough money to stay solvent so they plowed up most, if not all, of their acreage.<sup>282</sup>

Expanding operators’ lands to support a higher proportion of self-sustaining agriculture proved the most difficult change for New Dealers to implement in response

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<sup>282</sup> Office of Board of Supervisors, “The Western Baca County Soil Erosion District,” 59.

to the Dust Bowl. The notion that only large outfits could prosper on the Plains harkens back to explorers like Pike and Long who doubted the wisdom of settling the Plains; John Wesley Powell similarly noticed the obstacles that arid regions presented. Powell co-authored a study to determine the potential for settlement in the arid West, and in it he characterized the region as falling into one of three categories: irrigated, timber, or pasturage lands. Regardless of the classification, however, he argued that no significant farming be done anywhere away from a consistently viable water source. Settlement, he believed, should be tied to the availability of water, and Americans should not force themselves onto lands incapable of supporting agriculture. He contended that the smallest viable farm in the pasturage lands should equal at least 2,560 acres and rely mainly on livestock. Each such residence should also include access to at least some irrigable water for gardens and small scale agricultural production. Writing in 1879, Powell asserted that the homestead method proved inadequate to meet the demands of an arid West because it discouraged community reliance and stood in contrast to his “colony” plan whereby individuals organized to make regulations on pasture land, access water, share range land, and help each other flourish. While perhaps his position that each individual should have 2,560 acres looked unrealistic and proved unattainable for most farmers, Powell’s broader criticism of the Homestead Act is noteworthy. None of the subsequent amendments to the Homestead Act design on 160 acres came close to the size he promoted, meaning that anyone acquiring federal land through this legislation faced a terribly difficult task.<sup>283</sup> His astute assessment of the natural limits

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<sup>283</sup> Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region (U.S.), John Wesley Powell, Grove Karl Gilbert, Clarence E. Dutton, A. H. Thompson, and Willis Drummond. *Report on the lands of the arid region of the United States, with a more detailed account of the lands of Utah. With maps.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1879), 3-29.

posed in the arid region, itself a refrain of earlier sentiments that Pike and Long proffered about the region, represented an interesting and compelling refutation to the Homestead Act that many New Dealers and farmers echoed during the 1930s.

Extension Soil Conservationist T. G. Stewart noted that farm size represented one of the biggest obstacles to stability in the agricultural economy. It also contributed to the theory that poor land made for poor people since most struggling farmers found themselves on small (under 320 acres) plots. Stewart found that “It is not possible, under most conditions within the region, for an individual to earn a satisfactory income on small tracts of land such as 160 or 320 acres.” Stewart reiterated what the district report found and contended that “the small size of farms has brought about a cash crop type of agriculture, and has practically eliminated general farming or livestock farming in much of the region.”<sup>284</sup> Such monocrop agriculture degraded the soil and negated the likelihood that farmers could diversify production enough to even sustain their families during hard times.

The various Homestead Acts proved incredibly enticing, even though much of the land the government offered had no real chance to be productive because most of the best land had been taken already. Moreover, the size issue remained, because even 320 acres meant barely enough land for dryland farmers to plant some of the acreage while leaving the bulk fallow to conserve moisture and still having enough to plant crops for private use. The size limits and the competition for the best land meant that

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<sup>284</sup> T.G. Stewart, “Permanent Agricultural Program for the Southern Great Plains Region,” in “Annual Report of T.G. Stewart, Extension Soil Conservationist, December 1, 1936 to November 30, 1937” Folder Soil Conservation Specialist Reports 1937; Box 127; Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

homesteaders on 160 or even 320 acre plots put most of their land under the plow.<sup>285</sup>

Indeed, John Underwood suggested a dramatic reorientation for land users in Baca County, away from intensive cultivation and toward diversification with a focus on livestock. He argued for a move away from cash-crop farming because most of the small farms around 160 acres had focused solely on wheat and had failed as a result. He knew that the soil was paying the price.<sup>286</sup>

The authors of the Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee summed up this anti-Homestead fervor remarkably well when they identified the roots of Plains depression and soil erosion. They argued that “The settlers [those who moved into the tall grass prairies of the western Plains] lacked both the knowledge and the incentive necessary to avoid these mistakes [specifically overgrazing and overly intensive cultivation]. They were misled by those who should have been their natural guides. The Federal homestead policy, which kept land allotments low and required that a portion of each should be plowed is now seen to have caused immeasurable harm. The Homestead Act of 1862, limiting an individual holding to 160 acres, was on the western plains a stimulus to over-cultivation, and, for that matter, almost an obligatory vow of poverty.”<sup>287</sup>

T. G. Stewart and others identified a number of potential solutions and ways to augment small holders’ properties. He recommended changes in financing to make available lower interest rates for owner operators to establish “an economic unit” (i.e. agricultural plots that meet a certain level of income per acre to make farming viable for

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<sup>285</sup> Paul W. Gates, “Homesteading in the High Plains” *Agricultural History* 51, no. 1 (Jan., 1977): 121.

<sup>286</sup> John J. Underwood, “Physical Land Conditions in the Western and Southeastern Baca County Soil Conservation Districts,” 28-29.

<sup>287</sup> Great Plains Drought Area Committee. *Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee, August, 1936*, 6.



the owner instead of at a loss). Stewart noted that enough land existed in the counties “to supply economical units for each farmer residing there” but the government’s hands were effectively tied to offer such units.<sup>288</sup> That led to his second main point, that the influx and continued presence of non-resident operators negated the chance for residents to buy enough land to support themselves. He blamed the so-called “suitcase farmers” for not attending to their land, for dismissing their neighbors’ best interests, and for ignorance about their acreage. He ceded that no government agency could offer much assistance to force such operators to relinquish title or at least hire local management to protect their land, but he promoted some way of local control (enter the soil conservation district) over whether operators could break new land. He chastised absentee owners for speculation and in the process prioritized the local owner operator who he thought worthy of more land and more capable of proper stewardship. The transition from one owner to the other would have saved soil and offered a better chance for a higher proportion of local residents to expand their holdings and prosper on the Plains.<sup>289</sup>

As happened in Baca and elsewhere, the soil conservation districts could restrict owners from breaking new land, thus meeting one of Stewart’s goals in corralling absentee owners, but even their ability to challenge private property rights never broached the possibility of land transfer. Extending favorable credit rates to tenants and small operators represented the best that the government could do toward that end, and it proved largely successful in offering good rates. Yet the number of people who enjoyed such assistance never amounted to a dramatic transition in land ownership rates

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<sup>288</sup> T.G. Stewart, “Permanent Agricultural Program for the Southern Great Plains Region,” 21.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

in Colorado. The Extension Service did its part to facilitate widespread lending. For example, Claude E. Gausman, agent for Baca County, noted in 1940 that he had helped 169 farmers receive credit from federal programs like the Agricultural Conservation Program, and then tried to assist them to manage their finances to make good use of the funding.<sup>290</sup> Extension had tried to offer money to farmers whenever it became available under good rates, and the massive distribution of federal funding during the New Deal kept them busy identifying those most in need as well as those most likely to capitalize on the opportunity. Indeed, Gausman seemed to boast when he noted that FSA clients who had qualified for loans seemed to be more conscious of conservation because they had more to gain from attending to their land.

Unfortunately for proponents of expanding individual holdings to stabilize Plains agriculture, the government had no real leverage to compel farmers to expand and had no desire to adopt the financial burden resulting from excessive federal lending programs. For once, it seems, the weather stood on their side. Between outmigration, foreclosure, and abandonment, the combination of depression and drought wrought havoc in both counties by shaking up the population. Folks who survived the decade came out with fantastic prospects and many expanded their holdings by buying up neighboring lands. Put simply, the Dust Bowl initiated a trend whereby the whole number of farms declined but the average size of each farm increased. In essence, drought instigated the kind of reallocation of land that those who had bemoaned the limited size of homesteads had pushed for in hopes of stabilizing the agricultural economy. In spite of earlier efforts like the Expanded Homestead Act, the government

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<sup>290</sup> Claude E. Gausman, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, November 16, 1939 to November 01, 1940," Folder 52, Box 8.

had no legitimate and legal way to try to extend individual allotments without becoming directly, and problematically, involved. The Dust Bowl indirectly facilitated that transition. Many New Dealers lamented the decline in farmers but the expanded size afforded those farms that remained a better chance of diversifying their crops, employing livestock to balance production, and letting some acreage lie fallow. Fewer, more economically stable farmers meant a better likelihood for conservation and for the slow decline in extensive federal assistance. Put another way, the more stable and economically viable farms, those more likely to survive the worst years of the 1930s, had a better chance to come out of the decade and look to the future. Tenants, small operators, and other marginal farmers were more likely to leave, had less stability than their counterparts to start the 1930s, and proved less prone to stay through the decade. Consequently, the demographic shift could very well have promoted better stewardship of the land and induced a higher proportion of conservation practitioners in the region. The weather, then, initiated the federal response to the Dust Bowl and indirectly advanced the New Deal conservation state.

#### •Conclusion•

By 1941 and the onset of World War II, structures and organizations necessary to promote conservation had firm holds in Baca County. There is no way to measure the amount of soil “saved” by widespread adoption of conservation techniques, but the continued support for conservation districts suggests that locals embraced the New Deal conservation state well beyond the end of the 1930s. By the outbreak of war, three districts in Baca covered almost 75% of the county and by the end of the war two additional districts in Prowers County contained many of its dryland farms. The

relative autonomy and shared risk/sacrifice/benefits of district organization seemed to appeal to local farmers who maintained allegiance to district directives in spite of newly available opportunities to produce instead of conserve that came with improved weather and wartime mobilization. Soil conservation districts still exist across the region, standing as evidence of continued support for the blend of local governance and federal support that led to popular embrace during the 1930s and 1940s. They are testament to southeast Coloradans' willingness to adapt their land use and adopt conservation techniques.

While the conservation district may have represented the New Deal's biggest win against soil erosion, its efforts to buy up submarginal land also warrants attention. Through various agencies, including the SCS, BAE, and RA, the federal government spent money and time trying to assess what land should be retired, who needed to be moved off of that land and how, as well as what to do with it once the government had paid for it. Certain programs aimed to remove tenants and other small operators from such submarginal land, in part because of the idea that poor land made poor people. In other words, rural poverty would continue unless you moved the most vulnerable people off of the most vulnerable lands. These programs, some of which involved lending money to tenants, helping relocate them, or just buying out marginal owners, removed hundreds of thousands of acres from production. This land slowly returned to native grass and exemplified the push to retire denuded land. The purchase program remained an important weapon in the government's arsenal to promote rehabilitation until the early 1960s, when the government deemed such retired land part of the Comanche National Grassland in 1960. The federally-protected grasslands cover more

than 440,000 acres in southeast Colorado, nearly 250,000 of which lay in Baca County. As R. Douglas Hurt has argued, the federal grassland projects eventually “fostered a change or readjustment in agriculture on those lands from crop production and exploitative grazing to controlled livestock-raising and sound range management practices.”<sup>291</sup>

Although difficult to consider for many New Dealers, the third part of the Roosevelt administration’s approach to an unstable agricultural economy dealt with promoting large operators. Many New Dealers came to believe that every farmer should strive for a large, diversified farm to help him or her withstand such depressions and droughts that were undoubtedly going to recur in the future. The small holders, tenants, and agricultural laborers posed the most serious problems for the rural economy; those with the most land fared well considering the circumstances. Yet for all of its influence, the New Deal could not really instigate the push to larger and fewer farms. Proponents of such a shift found help from an unusual source when the Dust Bowl initiated a dramatic demographic change. Between outmigration, foreclosure, and abandonment, the combination of depression and drought wrought havoc in both counties by shaking up the population and accomplishing what New Dealers could not – tens of thousands of marginal farmers moved away from the Great Plains. The depression and drought combined to compel this massive migration and it seemed to initiate a shift away from the 160-acre family farm – as much as retiring submarginal land or buying out small owners reflected an understanding that homesteading would

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<sup>291</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, “The National Grasslands: Origin and Development in the Dust Bowl” *Agricultural History*, 59, no. 2, The History of Soil and Water Conservation: A Symposium (Apr. 1985): 256.

not work in the region, only the confluence of the dual crises perpetrated the move away from an agrarian ideal of the family farm.

This is part of the Dust Bowl's mixed legacy on the Plains. Those who stayed generally adapted, made due with federal subsidies, and many of them started to conserve their resources. Those who could not withstand drought and depression left. In other words, the dual crises produced a decline in the number of farms in Colorado and across the Great Plains from 1930 to 1940, but the average size of those farms actually increased over the same period. The folks who stayed and survived the Dust Bowl had firmer footing on which to stand. Indeed, the farmers who withstood the worst years looked confidently to the future when rain levels started to normalize again in 1939. Moreover, they stood ready to benefit from increased precipitation rates and the influx of wartime demand that started that same year.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Claiming the Arkansas

The dual crises of Dust Bowl and Great Depression challenged Colorado farmers in various ways by exploiting weaknesses in their land use regimes. The dryland farmers in Baca realized how sustained, severe drought exposed the damage they had done in tearing up the topsoil and leaving it to blow away. To their credit, they slowly adopted resource conservation during the New Deal as the chief way to mitigate dust storms and soil erosion and, therefore, to protect their livelihoods. For all intents and purposes, this turn to conservation reflected a dramatic transition and showed their willingness to adapt in the face of such adversity. No such drastic adaptation or adoption of soil conservation occurred in Prowers County primarily because soil erosion did not reach crisis level like it did in Baca. Prowers did not have the same rate of soil erosion, never experienced the same kind of wheat boom as its neighbor, and never attained the kind of “Dust Bowl disaster” status that Baca attained by 1932. Most Prowers County farmers cared more about water than soil. Indeed, the first Anglo-American settlers who arrived in the late nineteenth century envisioned a population of prosperous farmers and a series of private and public corporations organized to take full advantage of the river’s bounty. By the turn of the century, Prowers farmers had established a system of canals and small dams to funnel river water to their fields, and, in effect, coordinated the development of an irrigation system meant to satisfy all those with legal rights to river water.

Unfortunately, the river never seemed to satiate its users, and appropriators constantly searched for ways to augment their access and stabilize their supply. Few

settlers ever enjoyed the kind of irrigated Eden that boosters promised when they advertized the “valley of content,” and current residents continue to long for such a place. Still, Prowers County residents have always drawn as much water from the river as possible to help them grow what they wanted; most of the time that meant market commodities like sugar beets, alfalfa, and melons. Prowers County residents maintained hope that the river could meet new challenges posed by depression and drought. They debated how to utilize the water better and how to provide more water to users. They searched for a way to ensure a steady and abundant water supply, one capable of providing enough water to stabilize and hopefully bolster their economic prospects. Locals agreed that a dam and reservoir system along the Arkansas River represented their best chance at maximizing their appropriation. As many local observers correctly concluded, the New Deal provided a window of opportunity, one left sufficiently ajar to allow southeastern Coloradans to capitalize on federal largesse to stabilize, and hopefully expand, their access to irrigation. They got a break; the 1930s represented the peak period for dam building in America, evidenced by the Tennessee Valley Authority, development along the Columbia River, and dam construction in California. Locals capitalized on this momentum and successfully lobbied the federal government to complete the John Martin Dam and accompanying John Martin Reservoir in 1948.

The fight to garner federal funding and manpower to construct the dam reveals two similarities between how Baca dryland farmers and Prowers irrigators conceived of land use during the 1930s. First, the Dust Bowl compelled both dryland and irrigated farmers to search for ways to mediate the effects caused by aridity. Dryland farmers



looked to soil conservation while irrigated farmers focused on expanding their access to river water. It is testament to the drought's severity that farmers practicing different agricultural techniques and growing quite different crops had to adapt. Both groups realized that something had to change if they wanted to continue farming in southeastern Colorado. Second, federal support and local impetus combined to change the landscape. In 1933, members of the Lamar Chamber of Commerce organized a committee to develop a plan to dam the river and construct a reservoir capable of holding river water until folks downriver needed it for irrigation. After five years and multiple attempts by local associations to persuade federal officials and local politicians to embrace their plan, the Army Corps of Engineers decided to fund the construction and provide the workers to build the dam. Indeed, as it had done so often during the heyday of the New Deal, the government footed the bill and therefore made dam construction, like soil conservation, possible in order to help farmers in depressed areas.

In spite of these similarities, however, the differences in economic stability and land use choices between dry and wet farmers illustrate that Prowers county farmers often faced fewer challenges than their southern neighbors. Irrigation meant that farmers could experiment with more diverse crops, could easily settle on prominent cash crops, and could more easily survive periods of drought than dryland farmers. In Prowers, this meant fewer "lows" and more "highs" than in Baca – even though the Dust Bowl and Great Depression affected farmers in both counties. Roughly 70% of Prowers farmers had irrigation by 1939 and therefore could often rely on at least some water for their crops. The comfort of knowing you had at least some hope for water and therefore a chance at producing crops, rather than the Baca homestead pattern of

plowing and then praying for rain, meant that irrigated farmers enjoyed a sort of safety net that dryland farmers lacked.

The history of irrigation in the Arkansas Valley and the Roosevelt administration's willingness to spend money allowed farmers to home in on stored water as their response to drought, thereby precluding the need to consider dramatically changing their land use routines. "Wet farmers" embraced water conservation and evidence suggests that they thought about the ways that irrigated water impacted soil health, but they lacked a sense of urgency about retiring land or diversification that Baca farmers exuded. In essence, advocates of expansive irrigation projects believed that as long as they as they had sufficient water, through additional access and more responsible use, then things would normalize and drought could be bested. There was no need for a dramatic reappraisal of land use practices because irrigation represented a viable and attainable solution to their problems. They still dealt with problems associated with aridity – during especially tough years even some of the small canals and tributaries dried up – and irrigation had its own adverse effects on soil fertility including salinity. Certainly, Prowers farmers faced lost income and land values during the depression and while the population decline paled in comparison to that of Baca, Prowers still lost 16% of its population from 1930 to 1940.<sup>292</sup> The Dust Bowl challenged everyone in the region, but Prowers irrigated farmers had an easier time than their neighbors because of their natural advantage in having access to water. Consequently, the call to reform land use never reached the same fevered pitch in Prowers as it had in Baca; water promoted and allowed for stability.

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<sup>292</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943)

This chapter traces the development of irrigation in the Arkansas Valley beginning with late-nineteenth century efforts to control the river and concluding with the Army Corps of Engineers completing the John Martin Dam in 1948. The Arkansas River never provided the kind of panacea for which farmers and boosters had prayed, but it gave them a cushion that dryland farmers never enjoyed. This became painfully obvious during the 1930s. As Baca farmers had in their fight against soil erosion, irrigated farmers effectively used local agency to capitalize on federal largesse, suggesting that southeastern Coloradans took advantage of the New Deal and utilized its programs to their benefit. They faced distinct problems including salinity and lack of crop diversity because they were so beholden to the river water. They also remained subject to regional precipitation rates: the Arkansas's flow relied on mountain snowmelt so precipitation still determined their fate. Yet, in spite of these issues and the fact that no agricultural endeavor proved infallible, Prowers residents' faith in the river's ability to provide never truly wavered and the 1930s and 1940s exposed how that conviction grew stronger during the Dust Bowl years. The dam represented their ability to utilize that faith to earn federal action.

#### •Early Irrigation•

Irrigation had been part of farming life along the Arkansas since humans first developed the ability to tap into flowing water for agriculture. Early settlement in the Arkansas River Valley started in Pueblo I period (A.D. 850-900) and focused most on areas where people could effectively divert mountain or river water to their fields. They used ditches and canals to funnel the water and also trapped water in small reservoirs as a way to save it until later diversion to their crops and villages. Spanish and Mexican

peoples utilized similar techniques to establish villages along the Arkansas River near present-day Pueblo. The Hispano ditches, called *acequias*, were community run irrigation systems designed to satisfy a larger and more sedentary population of people than earlier efforts. Anglo settlers like the Bent brothers (proprietors of Bent's Old Fort) similarly manipulated river water to irrigate cropland; the Bents used Arkansas River water to irrigate nearly forty acres of land during the early 1830s.<sup>293</sup> The size and scope of irrigation efforts increased dramatically by the end of the 1850s when Hispanics settled much of the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado and used the river to feed their cropland. The discovery of gold offered the real impetus for this expansion, as Hispanic settlers realized that selling their products to miners, local businesses, and other new arrivals could provide a significant boon to their finances. The chance for such profit proved enticing enough to compel the farmers to create a more sophisticated and extensive irrigation system so that they could expand their acreage. In effect, they believed that expanding their access would produce more wealth for their community; that theme emerged in later Anglo-American thinking about regional development as well.<sup>294</sup>

Although it occurred a few decades later, large scale Anglo-American migration to southeastern Colorado ushered in similar growth downriver and for similar economic reasons. In many ways, the American version of irrigation dwarfed Hispanic efforts even though each arose from the same desire to manage the river for human use.

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<sup>293</sup> A.W. McHendrie, "The Early History of Irrigation in Colorado, and the Doctrine of Appropriation" in *A Hundred Years of Irrigation in Colorado* (Denver, CO: The Colorado Water Conservation Board, 1952), 14-16. See also Michael Holleran, "Historic Context for Irrigation and Water Supply Ditches and Canals in Colorado" (Denver, CO: Colorado Center for Preservation Research, 2005), available online at <http://cospl.coalliance.org/fez/eserv/co:3740/ucdh612d632005internet.pdf>.

<sup>294</sup> Holleran, "Historic Context for Irrigation and Water Supply Ditches and Canals in Colorado," 10-11. Additionally, see Virginia Sanchez, *Forgotten Cuchareños of the Lower Valley* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010).

Technological and engineering advances, population pressures, market demands, and corporate structures made it possible for Coloradans to significantly ramp up their ability to tap Arkansas water for agriculture. Early community-based development efforts, including early mutual stockholding companies created just before 1900 and designed to spread risk among their shareholders by organizing capital, funded the drive to build canals and reservoirs. As James Sherow illustrates, these companies sprouted up throughout the valley once white settlers came to realize the obstacles to productive agriculture presented by a semi-arid environment. They also quickly realized that corporate-led development could do things that no individual or small group could accomplish; they turned to irrigation companies and relied on them to augment their access. The Amity Project and the Fort Lyon Ditch Company are two interesting examples of such conglomeration in Prowers County. The Project shows some of the problems associated with early irrigation efforts while the Fort Lyon situation demonstrates some early successes at capitalizing on the river's bounty.

The Amity Project, a colonization program started by the Salvation Army in Chicago, aimed to use irrigated farmland as an outlet for urbanites plagued by poverty and despair. With inducement from the Santa Fe Railroad Company, which tried to entice settlers to lands they had been granted by the federal government, a group of between thirty and thirty-five families started Fort Amity between Granada and Holly along the Arkansas River in 1898. The settlers arrived and the Salvation Army provided water shares from multiple companies to the settlers upon their arrival to increase their chances of sustaining the community in the arid environment. The farmers established a small town and found their numbers consistently growing with

additional migrants from Chicago until the colony's population peaked at 450 residents.<sup>295</sup>

Unfortunately, neither the farmers nor their supporters understood the myriad problems that could result from irrigating cropland along the Arkansas. Specifically, the Amity farmers faced the issue of salinity. The Arkansas River's natural level of salinity explains this rise to some extent, as the river is "one of the most saline rivers in the United States" and especially so as the river moves east toward the Kansas state line. Another explanation for the rise in salinity was the migrants' choice of land and the soil on that land.<sup>296</sup> The sandy soil on their farms did not allow for the sufficient permeation of the river water. In addition, the water table was so high that seepage proved almost impossible and water simply sat on the ground's surface. Even heavy rain meant puddles and the high water table meant very little run-off from either precipitation or irrigation, so standing water became commonplace. This became more pronounced as the migrants used river water to supplement natural sources because their crops literally sat in water. The lack of any viable run-off raised the water table when the excess water eventually leaked into the ground past the root zone and added to the groundwater. With no place to go, then, the water sat until evaporation removed it and the water effectively pulled salts out of the soil and brought them to the surface. The high-saline soil became waterlogged and cut off the crops' access to oxygen, resulting in heavy crop failures throughout the colony. Most plants could not survive the high salinity levels and those that did had become so shriveled and salted that the produce

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<sup>295</sup> Ava Betz, *Prowers County History* (Lamar, CO: The Prowers County Historical Society, 1986), 127-143; Carl Ubbeholde, Maxine Benson, and Duane A. Smith, *A Colorado History*, Ninth Edition. (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 2006), 227-228.

<sup>296</sup> Donald L. Miles, "Salinity in the Arkansas Valley of Colorado" (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado Extension Service, 1977), 3.

was inedible, so the colonists lacked anything for market and even struggled to feed themselves. While the farmers tried to drain the water to alleviate seepage, nothing seemed to offset the damage already done. Left with few options, then, the migrants effectively deserted the initial Fort Amity by 1910 when the Salvation Army left and sold the land to locals.<sup>297</sup> For Fort Amity residents expecting water rights to safeguard their livelihoods, these consequences certainly came by surprise and they abandoned the site less than fifteen years into the project. Put another way, irrigation did not promise prosperity for farmers in the Arkansas River Valley.

The Fort Lyon Canal Company represented a much more successful community effort to use river water to support agriculture. The company, started in 1887 when two smaller irrigation companies combined their holdings, came to control a considerable irrigation system by the 1930s.<sup>298</sup> Even though it started comparatively early, the Fort Lyon Company fought for its water against neighboring companies as well as inhabitants up river who had first access to the free-flowing resource. It also had to fend off companies that could easily amass capital by building ditches and then selling land abutting the ditch for profit. Yet, it successfully formed and established some of the most senior water rights in the region. Taking advantage of its senior rights, the Fort Lyon Company quickly established a solid hold over the river and distributed water to its stockholders. For example, the company used concrete to seal some of its ditches,

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<sup>297</sup> Betz, *Prowers County History*, 127-143; Frederic J. Athearn, "Land of Contrast: A History of Southeast Colorado" Cultural Resources Series Number 17 (Bureau of Land Management, 1985), chapter VIII (see [http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/blm/co/17/chap8.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/blm/co/17/chap8.htm)).

<sup>298</sup> Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado* (Chicago, IL: The Blakely Printing Company, 1895), 282.

bought two local reservoirs outright, constructed a concrete diversion dam, and built additional ditches to increase access for additional farmers.<sup>299</sup>



**Figure 16: Postcard celebrating the Fort Lyon Canal, circa 1910. Successful irrigation was something to celebrate and advertise. Courtesy monstermarketplace.com.**

The company's efforts seemed to have paid off when, just prior to America's entry into World War I, the company president claimed that the Fort Lyon Company could deliver on its promise of turning the arid region into the idyllic gardens that boosters had once predicted. This optimism for the company's delivery and for farmers' benefits continued until after the war when the agricultural economy bottomed out. Irrigation was not a cure-all; irrigators still faced the same kind of market fluctuations and tempestuous demand that other farmers faced. Moreover, irrigated farmers had no real control over the river's flow and therefore no say in how much water they could eventually access. Inconsistent precipitation still threatened to derail irrigators even if dryland farmers proved more susceptible to variations. Consider that most of the Arkansas River's water comes from mountain snowmelt that makes its way

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<sup>299</sup> James Earl Sherow, "Utopia, Reality, and Irrigation: The Plight of the Fort Lyon Canal Company in the Arkansas River Valley," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 no. 2 (May 1989), 174-175.



down to the lower valley over the course of the spring and early summer. Another portion comes from the river's numerous tributaries. The combination, however fruitful in good years, was not enough in down years or during drought. Furthermore, the doctrine of prior appropriation meant that those with the senior access rights felt more secure getting regular water but the junior irrigators who established their access after 1875 had to wait in line for water. For shareholders in the Fort Lyon Canal Company and other such enterprises with junior rights, only rarely did there seem to be enough water to go around.<sup>300</sup>

The company also faced the same problem that Amity farmers had wrestled with – the issue of salinity and its adverse affect on crop production. Since most of the Arkansas River water that farmers in Prowers County used was return flow, they were subjected to a higher level of salinity in their share of the water than users up river. The return flow, water that either moved under the surface through the soil or groundwater that moved downhill and reentered the river as runoff from cropland, generally pulled salt from the soil. The flow picked up natural salt from running over saline and sedimentary materials, and it gained salt from the erosion of saline-heavy soil into the water flow and from concentrated levels of salt left after evaporation and evapotranspiration. Since a significant percentage of river water had already been consumed by the time it reached Prowers fields, even those fortunate enough to have access to irrigation contended with the unforeseen consequences of having downstream access. Most of the complications resulted from improper irrigation methods, as farmers often used too much water or used water when it was necessary, all of which passed excessive water through the soil near the root zone and leached the salt from the

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<sup>300</sup> Donald L. Miles, "Salinity in the Arkansas Valley of Colorado," 6-7

soil.<sup>301</sup> As a result, the Fort Lyon farmers, with only junior water rights and therefore at the mercy of users ahead of them in priority, consistently battled salinity problems. Indeed, even the portion of river up from Prowers County, and therefore with less salt concentration, had such a heavy dose of minerals that the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway stopped using river water in their boilers by the turn of the twentieth century because heavy mineral deposits left by the water degraded the system.<sup>302</sup>

Fort Lyon farmers also struggled with increased sedimentation of the river bottom that often challenged diversion implements and muddied up the water. Sedimentation became a problem in part because irrigation effectively eroded farmlands. The river gradually eroded the banks as well, wearing away the dirt and depositing it on the bottom of the river while slowly leveling off the soil. Heavy sedimentation complicated irrigation by clogging up transference points, by leaving less available room in canals and ditches for running water, and by literally overgrowing dams. For example, a diversion dam that the Rocky Ford Canal Company built in 1923 was completely covered by silt and mud twenty years later. Measurements taken at the Fort Lyon headworks showed that the riverbed had climbed some seven feet between 1910 and 1944. As James Sherow points out, the companies had to constantly remove the sediment to unclog their waterworks; the process involved horse drawn scrapers and eventually tractors. Importantly, “continuously battling siltation drained stockholders’ purses and required constant vigilance on the part of the superintendents.” Again, just as the issue of salinity emerged early, complicated notions of taming the river, and

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 4-7.

<sup>302</sup> James Earl Sherow, *Watering the Valley: Development along the High Plains Arkansas River, 1870-1950* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 31.

worsened over time, the problem of sedimentation hampered irrigators associated with Fort Lyon as well as later users across the Arkansas Valley.<sup>303</sup>

These environmental problems did not stop the proliferation of similar companies across the region. The first canal, the Rocky Ford canal, gained support from local farmers who dug out the future conduit and extended it so that by 1890 the canal ran sixteen miles from the Arkansas south, providing coveted water to the company's shareholders. In Prowers County, the Amity canal and the Lamar canal both distributed water to farmers starting in the 1880s and received additional water rights by priority of appropriation decrees that gave them more senior rights. These irrigation systems combined to allow Prowers County farmers to irrigate nearly 2,000 acres by 1889. While Prowers had a relatively small number of canals in comparison with other counties in the Arkansas Valley, the fact that local farmers already relied on irrigation before the turn of the twentieth century shows the depth of their dependence on Arkansas waters.<sup>304</sup> As did the amount of water diverted from the river. By 1930, for instance, the Amity canal and Lamar canal combined to funnel enough water through Prowers to satisfy farmers on more than 93,000 acres.<sup>305</sup>

The proliferation of irrigation companies and canal construction around the turn of the century also allowed Prowers farmers to grow a wide variety of crops and to take advantage of market demand to a greater degree than Baca County farmers. Baca County farmers relied on broomcorn and wheat as cash crops, while Prowers residents grew wheat, corn, watermelon, cantaloupe, alfalfa, and sugar beets, with levels varying

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<sup>303</sup> Sherow, *Watering the Valley: Development along the High Plains Arkansas River, 1870-1950*, 30-32; Miles, 12.

<sup>304</sup> Joseph Orlando Van Hook, "Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900" (Ph. D. diss., University of Colorado, 1933), 285-304.

<sup>305</sup> Joseph Orlando Van Hook, "Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1840-1900," 304.

according to comparative prices. Importantly, irrigated farmers most often had some dryland farming acres on their land as well, giving them the best of both worlds if they chose to raise wheat on the dry and alfalfa on the wet, for example. Beets represented the key commodity, however, especially after they started to take off near the turn of the twentieth century. Prior to that, and always in contention with beets for primacy in Prowers County, alfalfa dominated the “irrigated belt.”<sup>306</sup> Alfalfa commanded a considerable market until at least the 1910s since so much of the transportation in the West was animal powered and alfalfa was the fuel. Moreover, since so many horses and cattle existed across the region, farmers had less trouble selling it locally and could therefore make more money than they could if they had to ship it to distant markets. It could also be used at home for personal cattle. It was versatile, easily grown on both heavy and light soils, and while it required irrigation it was neither water nor labor intensive.<sup>307</sup> Prowers, then, possessed an ideal mix of land and water to boost the alfalfa industry. Plus, Lamar resident Floyd Wilson pioneered the alfalfa milling industry and built the first mill in the Arkansas Valley in 1908, a development that earned him “a place in the economic history of Colorado and the West.”<sup>308</sup> The mill ground alfalfa into effectively bite-sized pellets that could be moved more quickly and cheaply to market than the actual alfalfa. After taking off before World War I, the industry continued to hum at a good pace through the 1930s. Indeed, nearly half of all

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<sup>306</sup> Joseph Orlando Van Hook, “Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900,” 306.

<sup>307</sup> Dan Putnam et al, “The Importance of Western Alfalfa Production,” (Las Vegas, NV: 29<sup>th</sup> National Alfalfa Symposium Proceedings, Alfalfa Council and UC Cooperative Extension) via <http://ag.arizona.edu/crop/counties/yuma/farmnotes/fn1101alfalprod.pdf>

<sup>308</sup> “Floyd M. Wilson and the Alfalfa Milling Industry,” *Colorado Magazine* 21, no. 2 (March 1944): 100.

farms in Prowers grew alfalfa in 1934 and 1939, evidence of its place in the crop hierarchy in the irrigated regions.<sup>309</sup>

Sugar beets became the more important crop for regional development near the turn of the century, as the emergence of various sugar beet companies offered a steady outlet for beet farmers' products. The beet industry did not pick up in the Arkansas Valley until the 1890s; in fact the Rocky Ford branch of the State Experiment Station began experimenting with beets to figure sugar content and growth patterns in 1889.<sup>310</sup> By then, of course, George Swink and others had been growing sugar beets and learning how to best ensure production on the fly. The combination of individual initiative and Extension science gave rise to the "sugar boom," which lasted from 1897 to 1907 and included the establishment of nearly 73 beet factories across the country. No state equaled Colorado in beet production and early factories in places throughout the Arkansas Valley like Rocky Ford and Sugar City pioneered the use of beets on irrigated cropland and opened the door for wet farmers across the Valley to grow beets. The companies developed a practice of contracting with local growers and making sure that they had enough contract farmers to satisfy their needs. The grower promised to plant certain acreage in beets and agreed to sell his beets directly to that company. The companies then refined the beets and sold the sugar, paying the grower the price that they had previously decided on. Holly and Lamar both housed factories by the early

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<sup>309</sup> U.S. Census Office, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 269.

<sup>310</sup> Van Hook, "Settlement and Economic Development of the Arkansas Valley from Pueblo to the Colorado-Kansas Line, 1860-1900," 314.

twentieth century and offered good prices to their growers, creating instant and steady demand (see Figure 18).<sup>311</sup>



**Figure 17: "Holly Sugar Factory."** Photo shows the six-story brick building in Holly, Prowers County, CO. Photo taken between 1900 and 1910. Courtesy Western History/Genealogy Dept., Denver Public Library

The sugar beet caught on in Colorado for a number of reasons, according to M. John Loeffler, who has studied beet cultivation on the Colorado Piedmont. First, the beet grows well in a remarkable variety of soils, offering farmers some flexibility in terms of planting. Second, the crop does as well in desert climates and elevation as it does in humid climates at sea level. Third, the plant fits a Colorado growing season even though farmers sometimes had to plant a second crop if the first went into the ground prior to the last spring freeze. Finally, beets do very well in saline soils, making

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<sup>311</sup> Dena Markoff, "The Sugar Beet Industry in Microcosm: The National Sugar Manufacturing Company, 1899 to 1967" (PhD Diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1980), 1-24.

it a “necessary crop in many irrigated areas of the western states.”<sup>312</sup> Loeffler misses a few key points, however. Most notably, the beets required a lot of water, a sizeable labor force, and the grower had to be in close proximity to the refinery. All of these components came together on the Colorado Plains, as beet production boomed in the southeastern and northeastern parts of the state.

Relatively few Prowers County farmers actually grew beets because cultivation required water and workers and individuals often faced problems in trying to attain them. Companies made growing beets an attractive, and lucrative, business decision, and they tried to sway more farmers to contract with them to produce beets. As with alfalfa, the proximity to consumers – in this case the refiners and factories in Lamar, Holly, and elsewhere – meant that farmers had the opportunity to bypass railroad fees to get their products to market. The government ensured competitive prices for factory sugar, as Congress passed a series of protective tariffs during the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century designed to protect the domestic market for American companies.<sup>313</sup> The industry experienced a post-World War I boom and bust cycle similar to what wheat growers lived through, as each cash crop faced gradual decline over the course of the 1920s until depression hit late in the decade. The tried-and-true method of raising tariffs to stabilize prices unfortunately did not work to recover the prices, but the industry started to rebound with federal assistance during the 1930s.<sup>314</sup> Thus, while not totally secure from market fluctuations and never fully protected from

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<sup>312</sup> M. John Loeffler, “Beet-Sugar Production on the Colorado Piedmont” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 53, no. 3 (Sept., 1963): 364-365.

<sup>313</sup> See Leonard J. Arrington, “Science, Government, and Enterprise in Economic Development: The Western Beet Sugar Industry,” *Agricultural History*, 41, no. 1 (Jan., 1967): 15-16; Markoff, “The Sugar Beet Industry in Microcosm,” 6-7, 261-262.

<sup>314</sup> Markoff, “The Sugar Beet Industry in Microcosm,” 224-298.

drought, the sugar beet industry represented another economic opportunity that irrigated farmers had but dryland farmers lacked.

Baca farmers seemed to understand how irrigation might help their chances at sustaining agriculture in the region, but early Baca efforts failed to pan out. As a result, very few Baca farmers had a reliable and consistent water source until farmers started to tap the Ogallala Aquifer in earnest after World War II. Prior to the aquifer, only a few lucky individuals had access to any water, primarily through deep wells that tapped an aquifer. For instance, J.A. Stinson of the Herring-Stinson Cattle and Sheep Company set up windmills to pump water from an artesian well that he located on his property. Stinson enjoyed the benefit of owning land on top of a subterranean water source and had the capital necessary to both drill for access and setup the conveyance to bring the water to the surface. In that way he garnered credit for helping establish the county after 1900 because he offered those without water enough from his well to satisfy some of their daily needs.<sup>315</sup>

The use of the underground repositories of water became more widespread when technological advancement made the process easier and more efficient. For example, pumps could be used to bring the water up and divert it for irrigation, making it fairly easy for any farmer to access the groundwater. Indeed, as well construction matured and pumping equipment became more efficient, groundwater exploitation exploded across the state and the region during the mid-1930s. Farmers and ranchers used at least 1100 pumping plants in the state by 1935—over a third of that number had been installed in 1934 as the increasingly frequent dust storms continued to take their toll on

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<sup>315</sup> Baca County Historical Society, *Baca County* (Lubbock, TX: Specialty Publishing Company, Inc., 1983), 14.



Colorado farmers (see Figure 18).<sup>316</sup> That dramatic rise in plants is another demonstration of how drought spurred farmers to think about improving access to water. Yet, the presence of groundwater near the surface, therefore at depths more easily mined by irrigators, was mostly determined by geography. The likely locations to find water-bearing gravels were around streams and canals that had sustained seepage losses, from percolation losses where irrigation water had already been applied, and in old channels that no longer held water. Even if one found oneself on top of such a deposit, however, it was generally not a long term, surefire solution to the problem of aridity. As Associate Irrigation Investigator W.E. Code noted in 1935, “the fallacy that ground water is inexhaustible is believed by many of the uninformed. The opposite, however, is too well proved by the alarming rate at which the water table has receded in a number of districts in the Southwest.”<sup>317</sup> Code’s assessment is telling in that not only did relatively few farmers have a chance to take advantage of ground water, even those who did would eventually need an alternative.

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<sup>316</sup> W.E. Code, “Construction of Irrigation Wells in Colorado,” (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado Experiment Station, 1935), 4.

<sup>317</sup> W.E. Code, “Construction of Irrigation Wells in Colorado,” 6.



Figure 18: "A little water for a thirsty land. Drought committee inspects artesian well irrigation project. Baca County, Colorado, July-August, 1936." Courtesy Library of Congress.

The most successful effort to access water in a dependable way for Baca farmers was to construct dams, something the Two Buttes Irrigation and Reservoir Company did along Two Buttes Creek in 1909.<sup>318</sup> The company had access to some 22,000 acres of land that had been set aside and maintained by the federal government under the guidelines established by the Carey Act of 1894, also known as the Desert Land Act. The Carey Act was an important template for the Newlands Act of 1902, which established the Bureau of Reclamation. The Carey Act allocated up to one million acres of arid federal land to any state willing to transform it into irrigated farmland. It

<sup>318</sup> Office of the State Engineer, *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Engineer to the Governor of Colorado for the Years 1909-10* (Denver, CO: The Smith-Brooks Printing Co., 1911), 125-126.

acknowledged that the Homestead Act from 1862 could not work in an arid environment because the lack of water negated the settlers' ability to produce. States that agreed to manage the irrigable lands could then seek out individuals or companies that could then develop that land for irrigation. It remained the state's responsibility to oversee these projects to guarantee that the developers eventually transferred the water rights to settlers. The settlers who bought or leased the land effectively paid back to the state to offset construction costs and provide a small profit. This arrangement could transfer responsibility for supporting settlers from the federal to the state governments and still ensure that the West became settled.<sup>319</sup>

The Two Buttes Reservoir held water that the dam diverted from Two Buttes Creek, a tributary of the Arkansas, and serviced shareholders in both Baca and Prowers. The construction crews finally completed the system in November 1910 at a cost of nearly \$700,000, despite engineers initially estimating that the cost would be half of that total. The dam, an earth-filled structure with a concrete core, fed into a canal system that ran for twenty three miles across both northern Baca and southern Prowers County. The source canal ran just over ten miles while there were about thirty-three miles of lateral canals to reach farmers. Unfortunately, the farmers who initially became involved paid \$35 an acre for land with water rights (shares in the company equated to an acre of irrigation) from the canal system never received as much benefit from having water access as they had hoped. The canal system did not reach as much acreage as the first board of directors had promised; it reached only 3,178 acres out of the proposed

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<sup>319</sup> On the Carey Act see for example Robert E Bonner, "Elwood Mead, Buffalo Bill Cody, & The Carey Act in Wyoming," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, April 1 (2005): 36-51; Deryl V. Gease, "William N. Byers and the Case for Federal Aid to Irrigation in the Arid West," *Colorado Magazine* 45, no. 4: 340-345.

22,000 by 1941. Nor did it have the capacity to fully avert drought. Eventually the company sold its rights to the Fish, Game, and Parks Service, leaving farmers reliant on deep irrigation wells.<sup>320</sup> In essence, then, most Baca farmers found themselves relegated to dryland farming and handcuffed in ways that Prowers farmers could not fully understand.

In effect, irrigated farmers had more stable prospects and a firmer economic base on which to stand, whereas dryland farmers had very little say over their production. Regardless of what they grew, farmers needed water to grow the two most important cash crops; they believed that they could weather the depression once they stabilized production. Reasons to be that confident existed, in part because the rough postwar period hit Baca harder than it affected Prowers. In fact, once private and public entities built canals, diverted water, and started using irrigation, the Prowers system of agriculture remained more stable than the Baca system.

The Agricultural Census paints a telling picture of these differences. Baca farming changed dramatically from 1910 to 1930 – the number of farms more than tripled and the acreage increased fivefold; the number of Prowers farms increased by about one third and the acreage doubled.<sup>321</sup> Consider the demographic shift. Baca population in 1910 sat at 2,516 but rose to 10,570 by 1930, a jump of nearly 260%; Prowers numbers in 1910 reached 9,520 and rose to 14,762 by 1930, an increase of roughly 50%. Migration to Prowers happened earlier and those who arrived between

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<sup>320</sup> James H. Hill, “A History of Baca County” (Master’s Thesis, Colorado State College of Education, 1941), 119-123; Baca County Historical Society, *Baca County*, 52-53. The Two Buttes Reservoir is currently a State Wildlife Area, home to fishing, hunting, camping, birding, and hiking.

<sup>321</sup> U.S. Census Office, *United States Census of Agriculture 1925* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928); U.S. Census Office, *United States Census of Agriculture 1935* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936).

the late 1880s and 1900 generally earned water rights and stayed in the area.<sup>322</sup> Indeed, water rights had become firmly entrenched by 1930, so there was less of an impulse for potential migrants to move into Prowers as compared to Baca. Furthermore, Baca's population changed frequently, primarily because of the weather. Good rain years spurred migration into the County whereas drought years compelled exodus. As a result, both the population and the agricultural system were more consistent in the irrigated areas of Prowers than in the dryland areas of Baca by 1930. On the eve of the New Deal, then, agriculture in Prowers County seemed stable and better able to withstand the ebbs and flows of market fluctuations. But farmers still looked for help from the federal government when they hit tough times. For irrigating farmers, such assistance usually came in the form of more water.

#### •The New Deal Transition•

While the collective and individual efforts represented by the Amity Colony and the Fort Lyon Company showed the potential benefits and pitfalls for irrigators, the New Deal represented a new chapter in the history of water use in the Arkansas Valley. The combination of engineering expertise and federal funding emerged under the Roosevelt administration and compelled Coloradans to contemplate how the government could help them deal with their environment. Many southeastern Coloradans understood that the government could do things on a scale and in areas that no individual or private firm could realistically accomplish. They increasingly looked to Washington to help them control water as a way to provide security, a goal that became more important after depression and drought hit.

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<sup>322</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931).

In some cases, this meant rather humble projects that the government funded and provided labor to finish. For example, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civil Works Administration (CWA) cooperated on a project along Horse Creek near the town of Holly in Prowers County. The agencies combined to build a small dam to control the flow of the creek and decrease the likelihood that the creek could overflow or flood by straightening the channel and damming the creek to slow the water. Construction started in 1933, and there had been some headway when a flood ripped through the town and washed out the site in 1935, causing some \$250,000 in damage to the city and decimating the dam. The county commissioner and U.S. Representative John Martin tried to get the federal government to repair the damage and rebuild the dam to protect against recurrence. The WPA agreed to finish the assignment once the Army Corps of Engineers signed off on its legitimacy and the WPA could locate local labor to do the construction. All told, the dam cost nearly \$104,000 and the federal government funded almost \$99,000 of that total, providing a dam, a straightened channel, two spillways, and, most importantly to residents of Holly, a safeguard against later floods. The Horse Creek example demonstrates the federal government's willingness to construct, and most importantly to finance, water-control projects in the West during the New Deal.<sup>323</sup>

Such modest attempts to control river flow, while important, never gained the level of attention that the Herculean endeavors to build massive concrete dams along

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<sup>323</sup> John Martin letter to Lt. Col. E. Reybold, November 25, 1936; Folder WPA-Arkansas River Prowers County, Colorado—Horse Creek Dam; Box 75 WPA Projects Arkansas River/Cucharas River/Huerfano River/Purgatoire River; Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers; Record Group 77; National Archives – Rocky Mountain Region, Denver, Colorado. See also “Works Progress Administration Project Proposal,”; Folder WPA-Arkansas River Prowers County, Colorado –Horse Creek Dam; Box 75 WPA Projects Arkansas River/Cucharas River/Huerfano River/Purgatoire River; Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers; Record Group 77; National Archives – Rocky Mountain Region, Denver, Colorado.

the nation's major rivers did during the 1930s or after. Calls for dams to control river water in favor of irrigators represented the most obvious and loudest request for federal reclamation projects in the West. Such calls came from southeastern Colorado by the early 1930s and, fortunately for those calling for access to additional water, the New Dealers were listening. It never seemed possible for appropriators to have enough water to feel stable, so they constantly looked for ways to strengthen their hold on the resource. One proposed solution, which came to dominate public debate during the New Deal, was a dam and reservoir system designed to maximize the amount of water supplied to area farms. The drive for a large dam was not exclusive to southeastern Colorado; the New Deal marked the most significant period of dam construction in American history. The rise of land use planning and the growing desire to consider regional planning as a way to improve the nation's economy meant that New Dealers thought about ways to transform entire sections of the country. This led to the push for multipurpose dams, dams that people designed and built to satisfy a number of apparent needs, including "erosion control, water supply for rural areas and urban centers, drainage, flood control, generation of electricity, irrigation, recreation, wildlife conservation, and forest development."<sup>324</sup>

Support for multipurpose development on a regional scale in an attempt to modernize whole sections of the country proved especially strong during the New Deal; the Tennessee Valley Authority and Columbia River development represented the culmination of that push. According to Sarah Philips, the TVA sought to reconcile the divide between urban and rural America by providing electricity and irrigation, and

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<sup>324</sup> Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West*, Paperback Edition. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 81.

ultimately allowing rural residents to share in the bounty of natural resources from which private companies had been benefitting. In essence, the TVA tried to rehabilitate rural America through federal intervention; it, in that sense, was very much like most of the New Deal agricultural policies designed to help stabilize the agricultural economy in the Plains and beyond. By controlling flooding, by providing cheap hydroelectricity, by improving navigation on rivers, and by offering irrigation, the New Deal tried to use river basin development as a panacea for many rural problems.<sup>325</sup> Locals, not federal experts, actually pushed for dam construction in the TVA case and others. No individual or small group could accomplish what the federal government could, so people looked to Washington to help them out. Fortunately for those pushing to build dams, local political pressure, a willing administration, a need to extend employment opportunities, and a reliance on regional planning all combined to make the New Deal period the time most associated with big dam development.

The Roosevelt administration enacted a number of water projects, and while the Hoover Dam and Bonneville Dam might be more massive and more impressive than the John Martin Dam, enthusiasm for reclamation and smaller projects designed to control water flow are important parts of the story of New Deal water use. Indeed, by focusing on the mega-projects historians have missed an important piece of the story of resource use during the New Deal and the ways that the New Deal approach differed from earlier efforts at controlling water. The editor of the *Lamar Daily News* seemed to encapsulate the zeitgeist of early New Deal excitement when in 1934 he advised readers about the potential benefit of using the federal government to help with irrigation. He noted the

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<sup>325</sup> Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 80–107.



fortunate coincidence that irrigators needed help precisely when the government seemed willing to offer it and he applauded the government for making natural resources more accessible to the common man. He contended that there could be a program like the TVA in Colorado, the Arkansas Valley Authority (AVA), which might similarly remake the region using the natural advantages of a nearby water source.<sup>326</sup> The TVA specifically stood out as “the glimpse of what it is possible to do in this great country of ours by the application of intelligence as against the old policy of grab, graft and greed.” The “proper control of natural resources, storage of water, planting of trees and intelligently planned crop program all may be used to convert our section from a haphazard farming district, dependent upon luck and the weather man.”<sup>327</sup>

Under FDR’s guidance the federal government proved a willing investor in infrastructure improvements, but local initiative proved necessary to get the ball rolling. Local newspaper editors built momentum for dam construction in the Arkansas Valley, but the Lamar Chamber of Commerce made the first concerted effort to get a conversation about a dam started during the summer of 1933. Always sensitive to business development and regional economic stability, the Chamber broached the idea of providing additional water to ailing farmers in the Arkansas Valley.<sup>328</sup> Chamber members started to mount support for dam construction by reaching out to local and state politicians in search of political support. Unfortunately for proponents of dam construction, Governor Edwin “Big Ed” Johnson felt that the initial push for expanding the river’s irrigation capacity did not appear a fool-proof plan to stabilize agriculture on the Colorado Plains. Johnson feared that increasing access to water would only give

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<sup>326</sup> “The Editor Speaking,” *Lamar Daily News*, January 8, 1934.

<sup>327</sup> “The Editor Speaking,” *Lamar Daily News*, June 25, 1934.

<sup>328</sup> “The Editor Speaking,” *Lamar Daily News*, July 01, 1933.

rise to additional farms and more intense production, two of the underlying causes of the agricultural depression and the Dust Bowl. Johnson seemed willing to listen to locals' and regional politicians' calls for developing the river (it was after all in his personal interest politically to not upset his constituents) but only if the construction was done carefully, within budget, and without expanding farmers' production to a dangerous degree.<sup>329</sup>

At its core, the debate about the viability and even necessity of constructing a dam and reservoir system came down to competing visions about how to rebuild the Plains' agricultural economy. On the one hand, people argued that New Deal policies should focus on production controls to limit surpluses and stabilize prices. On the other, dam supporters believed the dam promised enough water to ensure continued, sustained production in spite of drought or depression. In no uncertain terms, irrigation meant production: if irrigators produced more goods, then the demand dropped, prices fell, and the entire series of New Deal programs designed to reconcile supply and demand would be toothless. Conversely, the Dust Bowl ravaged High Plains agriculture and irrigators represented the only constituency capable of a quick economic recovery because all they seemed to need was water. Their resurgence could bolster the regional agricultural. Expanding irrigation meant keeping people on the land and helping them rebound from the Great Depression, one of the key New Deal goals in agricultural policy. Irrigating farmers and their supporters believed that there was no real need to reform irrigated farming and no urgency to do more than tweak appropriators' practices by promoting water and soil conservation.

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<sup>329</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, July 21, 1933.

Proponents of expanding irrigation found their spokesman in U.S. Representative John Martin while naysayers turned to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. Pueblo Democrat Martin served Colorado in the House from 1933 until his death in 1939, fought long and hard to provide irrigation for his constituents in southeastern and south-central Colorado. Commencing a “verbal battle” with Ickes, Martin chastised the federal government for not doing enough to help westerners.<sup>330</sup> Arguing not only for Colorado but also for an entire region suffering under drought, Martin claimed that “any policy of national recovery under the public works administration which denies or does not take into account the conservation and application of water is tantamount to a death sentence against development in the Rocky Mountain states.” He continued: “failure to develop western water resources will be a permanent and discriminatory injury to that region.” Martin wanted some respite and directly blamed Ickes for obstructing western politicians’ motions for reclamation.<sup>331</sup>

Ickes defended his reticence to fund additional dam construction by extolling the benefits that the federal government had already provided for thirsty westerners. He claimed that the government had already spent \$150 million for irrigation, power, and/or reclamation works in the region. Moreover, Ickes offered the common refrain that irrigation meant more production, a dangerous possibility at a time when markets remained unstable and consumers had little money to buy produce. In that sense, Ickes wanted agriculturalists to limit production, and he felt that new lands should be protected from cultivation. He also hoped that the federal programs designed to rehabilitate submarginal land or resettle struggling farmers would have the opportunity

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<sup>330</sup> “Ickes Irrigation Policy Flayed by Rep. Martin,” *Lamar Daily News*, October 31, 1933.

<sup>331</sup> John A. Martin, telegram to Harold Ickes as quoted in “Ickes Irrigation Policy Flayed by Rep. Martin,” *Lamar Daily News*, October 31, 1933.

to work towards stabilizing American agriculture. He effectively prioritized a federal response to the dryland farmers instead of addressing irrigators' needs, believing that the former was more urgent, and dealt with the crisis in rural America more directly.<sup>332</sup>

Even given these sentiments, however, Ickes did not disavow the prospect of opening up additional irrigation projects in the West. He noted that the federal government had an obligation to help westerners attain irrigation because "we (the federal government) induced people to move to these lands long ago with a promise of water." By that logic, federal aid acted as the carrot to entice settlers to move onto lands that lacked irrigation and therefore left homesteaders without much insurance against drought. Ickes recognized that the small tracts that the Homestead Act afforded rarely allowed the farmer to prosper in an arid environment. The only real solution was water but very few homesteaders ever had an opportunity to settle land with water rights. He felt that the government had some obligation to help those people sustain themselves because of their difficulties supporting themselves. At the same time, though, he worried about rugged individualists who would take advantage of federal largesse for personal, not social, gain. He thought federally funded irrigation might provoke a reversion to a more exploitive past, whereby Americans "would today continue, as in pioneer days, to lay bare our forests; to destroy the public range; to attempt to grow crops on land the stirring of which by the plow only serves to provide dust for eroding winds to carry away."<sup>333</sup> He hoped that New Deal intervention could break that cycle with more inspired planning and a more sustainable approach to natural resource use. Ickes believed that expert guidance could reform individuals prone to

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<sup>332</sup> "Ickes Irrigation Policy Flayed by Rep. Martin," *Lamar Daily News*, October 31, 1933.

<sup>333</sup> Harold Ickes, quoted in "Ickes Hails National Planning," *New York Times*, October 14, 1934.

improper land use and ensure that future generations had access to America's natural advantages. He feared that additional water development projects could further jeopardize that likelihood by prioritizing production instead of conservation.

The two sides in this debate exemplified the often-contentious relationship between western politicians and members of the federal bureaucracy. The debate also reminded westerners that Washington held the purse and had the final say on expansion. Ickes effectively pumped the brakes on dam construction, never coming close to denying the possibility that a dam could be built along the Arkansas but also not willing to offer his support. As a result, proponents of dam construction understood that they would need to address such concerns about overproduction if they hoped to successfully win government support for construction. Proponents set the tone for the discussion about construction by promising a measured approach to irrigation. Rather than arguing for a dramatic expansion of farming throughout the region, proponents argued that the dam would do more to stabilize the flow and, therefore, help farmers who already had water rights and had already become established in the area. The dam would not mean dramatic migration into the Arkansas Valley or significant expansion of the current agricultural systems in place along the river. As rhetoric, this line of thinking played well in the Valley, Denver, and Washington, D.C., but locals still needed to convince supporters in Congress that dam construction made sense in the region. That proved a difficult task.

What really moved the conversation, however, was the establishment of the Arkansas Basin Committee (ABC) in late 1933. The Committee started as the product of an informal conglomeration of local business leaders initially joined as the Caddoa

Reservoir Association, which formed to levy pressure on the Mississippi Valley Committee. The Mississippi Valley Committee coordinated projects for the Public Works Administration and therefore had tremendous clout in determining viable federal projects along the Mississippi and its tributaries. The Committee constituted the first organized push for dam construction along the Arkansas in southeast Colorado and formed as a political body devoted to securing federal support for the endeavor. ABC members argued for the dam as a way to make sure that producers could stabilize their enterprise; farmers used irrigation as a safety net and needed a consistent and abundant supply to keep them financially afloat. They refuted the notion that they would immediately expand their holdings or plant more ground given more water. Instead, the argument that water created stability became central to their successful campaign. They also presented a convincing argument that a dam along the Arkansas River represented the best way to help Valley residents recover from the depression and drought as well as the only way to ensure prosperity once the dual crises subsided.

The ABC faced the difficult task of convincing federal engineers and regional planners that their proposal merited consideration. N.R. Graham headed the ABC and relied on a board of directors consisting of prominent residents from towns throughout the valley to present the ABC's first formal proposal for construction in December 1933. The proposal explained the ABC's interpretation of every facet of the project, making sure to emphasize the areas they found most important: need, cost, and potential benefit for local residents. The introduction painted a rather bland picture of the project, describing "an earth dam, 14,000 ft. long and 120 feet high, with necessary

spillways and outlet gates...to form a reservoir of 680,000 acre-feet capacity.”<sup>334</sup> The completed project looks nothing like the modest image that they presented in the first report, but the fact that the ABC appeared to embrace an unassuming, low-cost vision may have been tactical in trying to persuade the Mississippi Valley Committee, and thus the administration, that the proposal made financial sense. It argued that the potential assistance that such water would offer to farmers and the ways that the dam and reservoir would protect against floods greatly outweighed the proposed federal expenditure. In this way, they argued that the dam represented a sound investment in the region’s stability and not an opportunity to further open up the region to selfish individualists or speculators.

The ABC’s attempt to downplay the likelihood that the dam would allow for expanding agriculture in the valley similarly showed their flexibility and represented their signal attempt to assuage doubters about their intentions. They assured the Mississippi Valley Committee that they wanted the dam for multiple uses, and that bringing in more farmers to utilize the river contradicted their vision of development. Their proposal listed the hierarchy of benefits produced by the project as first, unemployment relief for laborers working on construction, then “complete protection against all floods,” and finally “conserved water available for use by existing irrigation systems.” The phrase “existing irrigation systems” connoted no dramatic expansion; the ABC presented the dam as a stabilizing force for farmers who sought a little extra security during periods of limited flow rather than a gateway for more production and

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<sup>334</sup> Arkansas Basin Committee, “Request for Approval of the Caddoa Dam and Reservoir Project on the Arkansas River in Colorado,” 1, FD 800.12 JMD Request for Approval of the Caddoa Dam and Reservoir Project, 15; Box 4; Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers; Record Group 77; National Archives – Rocky Mountain Region, Denver, Colorado.

more farms.<sup>335</sup> In teasing out the details of flood control and broader efforts for river management, the submission celebrated the possibility to improve navigation along the lower Arkansas and the “conservation for uniformity of flow.” In other words, the project could lessen the amount of soil erosion occurring along the river’s banks by employing a means to regulate the river flow via the dam. It could also help conserve the peak flows for human use—by capturing the water that would otherwise pass through the valley (82% of the water moving into Kansas escaped capture) the dam and reservoir could tame the river while simultaneously providing more water to be used in the irrigation systems for agriculture. The big dam could pacify the river; it would reduce the likelihood of floods along the river and its tributaries and also maximize the river’s irrigation potential by corralling the heavy flow.<sup>336</sup>

The issue of creating a steady flow to prevent floods and keep more water in the state proved important enough to compel the Colorado Extension Service to research the river’s flow as it moved from Pueblo to the Kansas state line. The research and subsequent report suggested that farmers had a legitimate gripe about inconsistent flow and its adverse effect on local agriculture. Extension employees studied the river’s flow over a fifteen-year period, calculating acre-feet in the river as well as a number of the larger canals in the Arkansas Valley. Extension researchers found incredible yearly variation in acre-feet by the time the river hit Lamar. For example, 523,000 acre-feet flowed through the town in 1923, while only 24,000 acre-feet by the time the river passed through Lamar in 1931 (see Table 2). Such inconsistency and dramatic

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 8-10.



fluctuation left farmers with no way to plan on how much water they might have, an unknown that obviously affected their production.<sup>337</sup>

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Arkansas River Flow in Acre-Feet

Year	At Canon City	At Pueblo	At La Junta	At Lamar
1923	596,000	666,000	311,200	523,000
1924	656,000	658,000	256,000	408,000
1925	384,000	322,000	104,000	163,000
26	506,000	460,000	96,000	52,000
27	554,000	496,000	216,000	295,000
28	509,000	513,000	178,000	219,000
29	556,000	617,000	206,000	176,000
30	478,000	500,000	152,000	38,000
31	282,000	248,000	65,000	24,000
32	451,000	387,000	121,000	26,000
Ten yr. ave.	493,000	486,000	168,520	197,000
1933	389,000	346,000	179,000	162,000
1934	254,800	164,000	59,400	328,000
1935	444,750	386,000	188,000	146,200
36	582,000	523,000	266,000	527,500
37	409,400	382,000	154,000	66,000
38	504,860	456,000	159,900	82,500

19 Garden G. King Arroyo March 2, 1936 3.24 " "  
 20 Gailbrook Res. Arkansas May 6, 1936 (4067 ac-ft. 600,000  
 21 Pringle Res. Arkansas May 11, 1936 3.21 ac-ft.  
 22 W. J. Barker Arroyo May 13, 1936 15.00 " "  
 23 Martin King Arroyo June 1, 1936 9.76 " "  
 24 A. J. Anderson Crooked Arroyo Aug. 26, 1936 3.13 " "  
 25 Lake (Collegiate) Arkansas Aug. 30, 1936 446.00 " "  
 26 Fort Lyons Arkansas Aug. 30, 1936 171.60 " "  
 27 Great Plains Res. " Aug. 31, 1936 253.50 acre-feet  
 28 Kansas Klamath " Jan. 28, 1937 4.80 " "

Table 2: Extension Service calculations for the fifteen year period, 1924-1939. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.

Not surprisingly, the numbers for water flow through prominent canals across the Arkansas Valley demonstrate similar unpredictability over the same period. The Fort Lyon Canal peaked with 248,471 acre-feet diverted to fields in 1929 and bottomed

<sup>337</sup> Floyd E. Brown, "Annual Report of Floyd E. Brown, Extension Specialist in Irrigation Practice, December 1, 1938 to November 30, 1939," 90, Folder Irrigation Practice Specialist Reports 1939, Box 121, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

out at 100,675 acre-feet in 1934.<sup>338</sup> Similarly, the Amity Canal varied from a high point in 1924 at 131,040 acre-feet (or 3.85 per acre of irrigated cropland) and a nadir of 31,738 acre-feet (.84 per acre) in 1934. There does not seem to be a direct correlation between rain on the Colorado Plains and available acre-feet; 1937 was the driest year in Lamar during the fifteen year stretch but appropriators accessed 73,520 acre-feet, more than double the allotment from 1934.<sup>339</sup> Indeed, the following table regarding water flow in the Amity illustrates the inconsistent amounts, varying dates that water started and stopped flowing, and disparate number of days the water flowed. Irrigators faced something of a guessing game to figure out how much water they could anticipate,

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<sup>338</sup> Floyd E. Brown, "Annual Report of Floyd E. Brown, Extension Specialist in Irrigation Practice, December 1, 1938 to November 30, 1939," 93.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

leaving them in the lurch and waiting to see (see Table 3).<sup>340</sup>

County: Frowers  
 Agent: Jack H. French  
 Year: 1940

AMITY DITCH  
 10-Year Record of Irrigation  
 Frowers County

Year	First Date	Final Date	Number Days	Average	Acres	
	Water Flowed	Water Flowed	Water Flowed	Daily Flow	Acres Feet	were
	in Ditch	in Ditch	in Ditch	(Second Feet)	Water Used	Irrigated
1930	Mar. 18	Oct. 31	167	201	67,134	36,842
1931	Feb. 20	Sept. 3	106	196	41,136.46	36,663
1932	Jan. 2	Oct. 31	153	184.17	53,489	36,607
1933	Mar. 6	Oct. 31	145	256.1	73,555	37,514.4
1934	Jan. 1	Sept. 22	113	138.61	31,014.7	37,610.8
1935	Jan. 1	Oct. 31	166	232.4	76,388	37,611
1936	Nov. 1, 1935	Oct. 31	250	187	92,581	33,919
1937	Nov. 1, 1936	Oct. 22	221	213.5	73,521	34,822
1938	Nov. 20, 1937	Oct. 31	255	204	103,448	34,456
1939	Nov. 1, 1938	Aug. 8	231	166	73,278	34,402

Source: Water Commissioner's Field Records.

Table 3: Amity Canal tabulations for the 1930s. Courtesy of Colorado State University Archives.

Dam proponents contended that the reservoir could balance these numbers and give appropriators more control over the water flow. Farmers' inability to capture water and hold it to ensure consistent acre-feet, dates for water delivery, and the number of days they could expect, left them extremely frustrated and longing for stability. They were beholden to the river and wanted a better way to protect themselves during down years. Having water rights was no guarantee that water would always flow, as some of the smaller canals regularly dried up or canal owners would only release water a

<sup>340</sup> Floyd E. Brown, "Annual Report of Floyd E. Brown, Extension Specialist in Irrigation Practice, December 1, 1939 to November 30, 1940," 39, Folder Irrigation Practice Specialist Reports 1940, Box 121, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

specific number of times per season to ration their acre-feet. The reservoir offered a solution. It could hold the water until farmers needed it, the dam could release it into the river, and the canals could then redirect it to the fields. That way, Prowers farmers could maximize their access and plan their planting strategy appropriately – the ABC thus dismissed the possibility for expansion in their proposal and instead emphasized the need to stabilize rather than augment production by managing the river.

The group tried to break down the dam's potential economic impact on the region as another tactic to curry favor with federal reviewers. Fully understanding that federal largesse had its limits – even under the New Deal umbrella – the proposal set out the financial costs and benefits to demonstrate that the dam promised an opportunity for dramatic economic growth in the region. In addition to the numerous indirect benefits that dam construction could engender, like increased property values and “social development,” proponents identified a direct way that construction made financial sense. Proponents used estimates from the Army Corps of Engineers study on the impact of floods in the region to calculate the amount of money saved from preventing destructive floods at \$130,000 annually. The dam could prevent damage to urban and agricultural property, roads, railroads, bridges, and irrigation and diversion infrastructure. In other words, the dam's ability to regulate river flow had an immediate economic benefit for all valley residents beyond irrigation, though the dam also promised financial gain by conserving water and stabilizing irrigation systems. Again drawing from the Army Corps of Engineers numbers, the proposal outlined \$340,000

worth of water gained by conserving the river's flow. The Corps tabulated a savings of some 170,000 acre feet of water, at \$2/acre foot, to reach that total.<sup>341</sup>

Advocates also utilized Corps data to figure the construction cost and outline a program of work. The ABC found that it would cost just under \$8 million to construct the dam and fund maintenance and operation costs. The construction, at approximately \$6,744,700, represented the bulk of the costs while the group calculated rights of way costs, engineering, overhead, as well as interest charges and an annual finance cost, to run just over \$1 million. Recapitulating the cost versus the benefit, the Committee figured that the annual cost at \$340,258 and annual direct benefit ("Indirect benefits not included") at \$473,000 for the first twenty years until the dam was paid off; they hoped that the difference of nearly \$133,000 per year offered overwhelming evidence in support of construction.<sup>342</sup> The proposal also tried to downplay the cost by identifying the "acute economic conditions" in the region. The construction could provide "considerable employment in the area, and greatly reduce the need for non-productive relief expenditures." The ABC acknowledged that irrigation could also help, as area financial stress was "due largely to a complete failure of the crops resulting from an unusually sever [sic] drought." "By providing additional irrigation water with which the inhabitants may cope with such mouths [sic - months]," the dam and reservoir "will not only ameliorate the existing conditions of distress but will, also, to a considerable extent, guard against their recurrence." That, then, reflected their central argument. Certainly, they conceded, the dam would involve government investment. Such assistance would advance the local economy immediately. It also promised long-term

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 12-14.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 7, 14. Quote comes from pg. 14.

financial benefit by providing jobs and stabilizing local agriculture. The ABC presented a persuasive argument in emphasizing such benefits, especially given the economic circumstances in play during the mid 1930s.

The ABC also emphasized the dam's ability to reconcile differences between Colorado and Kansas over the issue of access to river water. The two states had been battling over water rights since the late nineteenth century and a case between them was pending in the U.S. Supreme Court to determine how to allocate Arkansas River water equitably when the ABC put its proposal together. After decades of fighting over access, the states had finally started to come to terms with how to best share the water, and the ABC believed that the dam represented "the machinery for carrying out the distribution of the waters, which has been agreed to by the two states."<sup>343</sup> While the proposal lacked specifics on what that allocation might mean in practice, the authors included a long list of people who endorsed the project, including Colorado's State Engineer, Kansas' Chief Engineer, the President of the Mississippi River Commission, Colorado's Governor Johnson (who warmed to the project as outlined by the Committee), and a number of Colorado and Kansas water user/ditch associations.<sup>344</sup> Members of both state houses and residents on both sides of the border further affirmed the dam's potential positive impact on state relations, and the group hoped that such potential harmony provided another reason for federal intervention.

Indeed, supporters contended that the dam would solve a number of grave issues for area residents, ranging from economic depression to devastation from drought to interstate politics. The proposal argued that the project "is feasible, sound from an

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 4.

engineering view-point and economically justified.” The authors continued: “It is imperatively necessary for flood control, relief of acute economic distress, agricultural, industrial and social development and stabilization. Its adoption as a 100 per cent federal project is fully warranted.”<sup>345</sup> The tone suggested little optimism for economic recovery without the dam – the area would simply decline over the near future if left without such federal assistance. It also clearly stated the Committee’s view that the federal government should shoulder the load, both financially and physically.

While the Mississippi Valley Committee received the proposal and embraced parts of the plan, that group had reservations about the federal government’s role in funding and building the proposed system. The arguments in favor of construction, especially the economic justification for flood control and the assurances that more irrigation did not mean more production, proved enticing. But a problem emerged over the ratio of federal to local funding for the project. Colorado and Kansas legislators, both state and federal representatives and senators as well as governors, pushed for federal adoption of the plan with near-complete funding. Mississippi Valley Committee members believed that the project was viable from both an engineering and economic standpoint but that the local people should bear the brunt of the costs. That resembled the closest approximation to shared risk and responsibility for the dam, since the federal government offered assistance with expertise, materials, and labor. By putting locals on the hook for some of the construction cost as well as the maintenance and operational costs, plus paying for rights-of-way and land to make room for the dam, the Mississippi Valley Committee suggested shared risk. Local organizers bristled at the prospect of having to fund the dam, and unity fractured over how to proceed, specifically in terms

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

of how to convince the federal government to acquiesce with additional money. Ickes sided with the Mississippi Valley Committee and refused to make the federal government the sole funding source for construction, so he removed the Bureau of Reclamation from the list of federal agencies that could build the dam.<sup>346</sup>

Just as it seemed hopeless for dam supporters, Congressman John Martin, one of the project's most strident advocates, received word from the Army Corps of Engineers that it might be willing to build the dam. The Corps offered one caveat: locals needed to manage the purchase of rights-of-way and make room for the dam and reservoir. Otherwise, Corps representatives assured Martin that they could pick up the project because the Bureau of Reclamation had passed on it. The Corps signed off on the project to the National Emergency Council who then approved the dam in the Emergency Relief Program for flood control. Martin then successfully secured a place for the dam in the Omnibus Flood Control Act of 1936. Such inclusion became crucial because it offered Congressional support for the Army Corps of Engineers to manage dam construction in any case that had viable flood control concerns. Indeed, the bill allowed Congress to extend full funding for such flood control projects, demonstrating legislators' conviction to control the financial and human costs wrought by floods. In spite of such funding, however, the Corps still wanted local financial assistance to deal with two important issues in addition to purchasing the rights of way for the project: first, appropriators, and especially ditch companies, needed to pay for moving several miles of Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad track out of the proposed dam

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<sup>346</sup> Sherow, "Discord in the 'Valley of Content': Strife over Natural Resources in a Changing Environment on the Arkansas River Valley of the High Plains," 326–329. Sherow goes into deep detail about conversations and communication about the dam between locals, politicians, and federal agency officials. This explanation is thus only a recapitulation of the important moments within the larger story.



construction area; second, supporters needed to build levees to protect the hospital at Fort Lyon. These requests, though inexpensive compared to what Ickes's had wanted, still threatened to upset the local economy. Prowers residents had been hit by the depression of course mattered in terms of raising money, and so did the fact that many irrigation companies in the area like the Rocky Ford Ditch Company worried that more access might compromise their senior water rights and therefore degrade the value of their water shares. The company had no desire to open competition for what had been valuable and restricted water rights. Consequently, while supporters found themselves closer than ever to seeing the dam become reality, a significant gap remained between their vision of federal help and what the government deemed its role in construction.<sup>347</sup>

That divide narrowed due to Representative Martin and Senator Alva B. Adams, who continuously pestered federal officials to increase the federal government's share of the funding. Their "active lobbying" led to House and Senate adoption of a report approving full federal financing for all flood control projects. That approval came in June 1938, five years after the Arkansas Basin Committee submitted its first proposal and two years after the dam gained coverage in the Omnibus Flood Control Act. The 1938 agreement ameliorated relations between Kansas and Colorado over allocation of Arkansas waters by ensuring increased access to irrigators on both sides of the border, thus assuaging hard feelings. Indeed, the dam represented a technological solution to the problem of divvying up river water to keep all parties contented; agreement to construct the dam came hand-in-hand with the federal demand for Colorado and Kansas

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<sup>347</sup> Sherow, "Discord in the 'Valley of Content': Strife over Natural Resources in a Changing Environment on the Arkansas River Valley of the High Plains," 329-331.

to forge a conclusive agreement about their shares.<sup>348</sup> When the Army Corps of Engineers gained an appropriation for construction in 1939, residents in towns throughout the Arkansas Valley celebrated the coming of federal construction. John Martin passed away before construction started in 1940, but what had once been Caddoa Dam and Reservoir became the John Martin Dam and Reservoir, renamed in his honor to reflect his efforts in securing the dam's construction.<sup>349</sup>

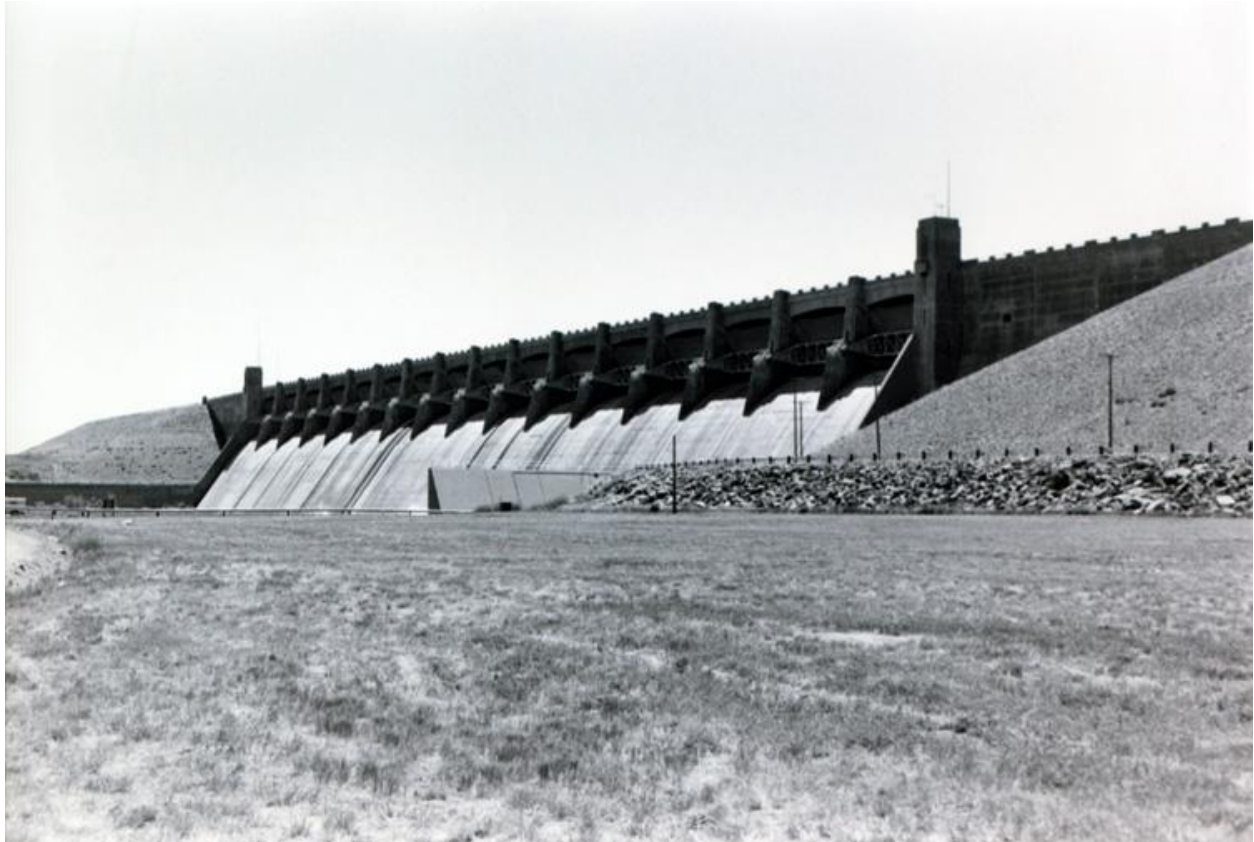


**Figure 19: John Martin Dam and Reservoir on the Arkansas River in Bent County, Colorado, USA. Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Digital Visual Library, accessed via Wikipedia Commons.**

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<sup>348</sup> See Lary M. Dilsaver and Craig E. Colten, eds., *The American Environment: Interpretations of Past Geographies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 177-120; James Sherow, *Watering the Valley*, 141-167.

<sup>349</sup> Sherow, "Discord in the 'Valley of Content,'" 332, 335-336.



**Figure 20: The completed John Martin Dam. Courtesy Colorado State University Archives.**

•AVA•

The path toward construction was rife with obstacles, however, and by the time that the Army Engineers finally completed the dam in 1948 advocates had faced a number of tense moments and had fought many battles over construction. One of the more revealing episodes dealt with the debate over establishing government control over regional water through the Arkansas Valley Authority (AVA). As the name implied, the AVA represented a similar form of regional development exhibited by the TVA. Clyde Ellis, U.S. Representative from Arkansas, presented the act to establish the AVA to Congress in 1941. Ellis ruffled western politicians' feathers by presenting the blueprint and explaining his rationale for creating the federally-managed body to

control regional water. Not surprisingly, westerners wanted to control the river and thought that the AVA represented a federal power grab, one destined to wrest water rights and the chance for prosperity away from water users downriver from the dam. Moreover, Ellis presented the AVA as one of a long list of potential federal projects to develop the nation's rivers. Somewhat predictably, lines were quickly drawn by promoters and by detractors over issues of federal intervention, partisan support for the New Deal, and, most significantly for Coloradans, irrigation rights.

The debates about the AVA reveal how Coloradans approached federal intervention once the worst of the Depression had passed and rain had returned to the Colorado Plains. For his part, Ellis hoped to utilize the TVA blueprint for nearly a dozen rivers across the nation. The AVA was set to replicate the TVA's basic functions: controlling flooding, providing electricity, making the river more navigable, and halting soil erosion. It also hoped to manage irrigation issues in the arid environment. According to Ellis, the TVA had proven so successful in transforming the region's economic prognosis that such federal regional planning promised similar results for other watersheds. He believed that every state deserved protection from drought and, more importantly, depression through federal intervention. A staunch Democrat, Ellis seemed to favor utilizing the New Deal's wide-ranging power to alleviate hardship. It also appeared that he had considerable faith in the expanding federal government to manage the project without compromising the citizens' best interests. In his view, only the federal government had the expertise and resources to

supervise regional development and the New Deal promised to make life easier for everyone in the Arkansas Valley.<sup>350</sup>

Ellis did not find many friends among Coloradans, though Edwin “Big Ed” Johnson was one of his most vocal supporters and a powerful ally in pushing for the AVA. Johnson served as both governor and senator over the course of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and while he ran as a Democrat he never completely toed the New Deal party line. He placed a premium on state-level reform rather than relying on the federal government to initiate and fund extensive programs. He reduced taxes, initiated a statewide highway construction program, tried to balance the budget, and worked for civil service reform. He felt torn between his party and his largely Republican constituency from the western slope, and his critics often accused him of vacillating over important issues.<sup>351</sup> As a result, he frequently demonstrated a willingness to act as a maverick, making his philosophy difficult to characterize. His efforts to garner support for the AVA represented one of the more notable examples of Johnson’s quixotic nature. Even as a staunch advocate for the state whenever it competed with the federal government, Johnson wanted Colorado to join the AVA and thus share responsibility for managing the river’s flow with a federally controlled body.

Yet, rather than accept Ellis’s plan as written, Johnson introduced a similar but slightly different bill to the U.S. Senate for its consideration. Johnson viewed the bill as inherently positive but needing some tweaks to make it palatable in Colorado.

Consequently, much of the bill that he sent to the Senate echoed the bill that Ellis sent

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<sup>350</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record, 77<sup>th</sup> Congress, Folder 15 Arkansas Valley Authority Act 1941 – HR. 18223 + S. 280 – Cong. Record Statements, Resolutions, etc.; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>351</sup> For a brief biography of Johnson see Richard D. Lamm and Duane A. Smith, *Pioneers and Politicians: Fourteen Colorado Governors in Profile* Second Edition (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008).

to the House. Each identified the supposed benefits of federal management, including the possibility for rural electrification, power, and erosion control, for example.

Johnson's resistance to allowing the federal government to dictate irrigation constituted the key difference. He contended that each state should have control over the water within its borders. Johnson believed that the Arkansas River west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian was not navigable, so the federal government had no legitimate reason to leverage control over the river's flow. As Johnson argued, his version of the AVA "shall have no right, authority, or power to make any demand or place any burden upon the Upper Arkansas River Basin, or any part thereof, for the delivery of water for the benefit of the Lower Arkansas River Basin or for any other purpose."<sup>352</sup>

In so articulating the need for Colorado to control its own water future, Johnson effectively tried to quiet the majority of criticism targeting the AVA. Southeast Coloradans had been willing to entertain federal intervention throughout the 1930s even though they often tried to adapt policy to best meet their needs. Most Arkansas Valley residents, however, dismissed the AVA out of hand. Unfortunately for Johnson, Ellis, and their supporters, however, Johnson was the only Colorado politician who favored the AVA and only Representative Laurence Lewis, a Democrat from Denver, was even lukewarm to the proposal.<sup>353</sup> Governor Ralph Carr became perhaps the most vehement critic of the AVA. Carr scheduled a trip to Washington, D.C., specifically to renounce the AVA and Ellis's intentions to take the state's water and he also targeted the AVA as the central part of his inaugural speech in early 1941. In both examples, Carr identified

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<sup>352</sup> Edwin Johnson, 6; Folder 15 Arkansas Valley Authority Act 1941 – HR. 18223 + S. 280 – Cong. Record Statements, Resolutions, etc.; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>353</sup> Mary Farley, "Colorado and the Arkansas Valley Authority," *Colorado Magazine* 48, no.3 (1971): 226

the importance of having state control over irrigation and protecting long-held water rights by Coloradans along the Arkansas. His rebuke to Ellis and Johnson relied on political and economic arguments about the Authority's infringement on states' rights. Proponents claimed that the AVA needed to manage flood control and supply hydroelectricity, but Carr reckoned that neither held any reasonable application to Colorado residents. Carr contended that there was no need for flood control along the Arkansas. He continued that the river did not offer viable hydroelectricity options from its headwaters in the Rockies well into Kansas.<sup>354</sup>

Carr thus flayed most of the reasons why the ABC pushed for a multipurpose dam and focused exclusively on the need for states' rights in controlling natural resources. Of course, he did not present his critique as one chastising the ABC or its intentions; rather, he argued the federal government's creation of a bureaucratic committee, appointed by the president and only truly beholden to him, left too much leeway for abusive power. Carr claimed that establishing the AVA was akin to opening Pandora's Box, giving momentum for an already-powerful state to grow even more authoritative, continuing down a dangerous path. He fashioned himself a watchdog for all Americans when he claimed that "if we are to control the lives, the property and the rights of American citizens by a new kind of government then the people should have some voice in determining whether that innovation is to be attempted." Carr considered the AVA a threat to democracy and to vested personal property rights. He intimated

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<sup>354</sup> Governor Ralph Carr speech, n/d, 6. FD 15 Arkansas Valley Authority Act 1941 – HR. 18223 + S. 280 – Cong. Record Statements, Resolutions, etc.; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

that its creation might provoke outright rebellion against an increasingly tyrannical central government.<sup>355</sup>

For Carr, and for nearly every Coloradan who questioned the logic behind imposing a federal agency to manage the river, the chief issue dealt with irrigation. Coloradans from seemingly every corner resisted the Authority, and while they may have cloaked their complaints in various forms, the right to use water sat at the heart of their concerns. Colorado water users had abided by the proposition “first in time, first in right” to deal with questions of water rights since the state constitution first used the adage to adjudicate conflicts over water. That maxim sat at the core of the doctrine of prior appropriation, also known as the Colorado doctrine, which bestowed legal right to the first water user against later users.<sup>356</sup> In adopting this legal definition, the state formally recognized seniority as its determinant in deciding access. Consequently, Carr spoke for Colorado users who believed that they had long-held and legally binding access; the prospect of handing over their rights to a government-appointed board left many uneasy and others angry. Moreover, the likelihood that the board would mandate that these users share their water with Kansans down river only added fuel to the fire.

Coloradans became extraordinarily protective of what they considered to be their water, and the years of drought and limited water flow only aggravated their anxiety and made them more suspicious of ceding control over the river to the federal government. Those who took exception to the proposed AVA over the issue of water rights hailed from throughout the valley and, indeed, across the state. Some, like Clifford H. Stone, director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, echoed Carr’s

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<sup>355</sup> Governor Ralph Carr speech, 8.

<sup>356</sup> Carl Ubbeholde, Maxine Benson, and Duane A. Smith, *A Colorado History*, 189-192; James Earl Sherow, “Discord in the ‘Valley of Content,’” 74-77.



concerns that the AVA executed too much power and specifically had too much carte blanche to deal the water issue. Stone contended that “no authority of this kind over a river basin where irrigation is practiced can ever be given congressional sanction and authorization without defeating effectually the rights, including the vested rights, of the state to control water for irrigation and other purposes.” He believed that there was in fact no constitutional basis for the AVA and worried that Coloradans supported the AVA then all other major river basins – and people residing in them – could be subject to the same treatment. He thought that the authority could jeopardize local water rights and effectively exclude local farmers from having an opportunity to influence irrigation development along the river.<sup>357</sup>

While Stone occupied one of the most powerful positions in the state as head of the Water Conservation Board, other Coloradans joined him in criticizing what they deemed a federal power grab. A number of these individuals and small companies sent Representative J. Edgar Chenoweth letters that dealt explicitly and almost exclusively with the water issue. Wilbur B. Foshay, Secretary of the Salida Chamber of Commerce, supported Chenoweth’s resistance to the bill. Foshay claimed that the Authority would hurt local business because the farmers were the most influential consumers in the Valley, and if they continued to suffer from the Depression or if another drought caused further damage then all business would be waylaid. Chenoweth assured Foshay that he was one of many who disagreed with the bill, writing “I have had nothing but protests against the Arkansas Valley Authority. It seems that all of the water users on the

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<sup>357</sup> Clifford H. Stone letter to J. Edgar Chenoweth, February 11, 1941; FD 14 Water - Arkansas Valley Authority Act H.R. 1823 1941-Correspondance/General; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

Arkansas are opposed to the bill.”<sup>358</sup> Foshay referenced the head of Denver’s Chamber of Commerce to say that if the AVA upset the southeastern Colorado economy then it would surely disrupt the state economy. But Foshay saved his most sensational indictment of Ellis for his role in extending federal power throughout the region. Foshay compared Ellis’s vision of the Authority to Nazi warmongering because each wanted to divide and conquer in order to subdue areas “one by one instead of attempting the subjugation of all at the same time.” In this case, Colorado represented a significant domino that had yet to fall. Ellis and authority supporters designed a “scheme...to attack the [various river] basins one at a time in the hope of preventing united resistance” that would ensue if he proposed the entire plan for the nation’s rivers. Because Ellis turned first to the Arkansas as a significant piece of the puzzle, such “subjugation” was an abuse of power and threatened Coloradans’ liberty and property rights.<sup>359</sup>

Floyd Wilson’s letter to Alva B. Adams offered one of the best expressions of the reticence to sacrifice autonomy or cede individual water rights to a federal body. Wilson, the successful Lamar businessman who developed alfalfa mills in the area as well as across the Great Plains, suggested that the federal government’s ignorance about the situation in southeastern Colorado represented the biggest problem with the AVA. Indeed, his letter included a litany of reasons to resist the AVA, including the possibility of federal power running amok as well as adversely affecting both the regional and local

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<sup>358</sup> J. Edgar Chenoweth to Wilbur B. Foshay, January 24, 1941; Folder 14 Water - Arkansas Valley Authority Act H.R. 1823 1941-Correspondance/General; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>359</sup> Wilbur B. Foshay to J. Edgar Chenoweth, February 13, 1941; Folder 14 Water - Arkansas Valley Authority Act H.R. 1823 1941-Correspondance/General; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

economies. Like others, Wilson believed that the AVA was going to “subordinate our ditch companies, water boards, and district engineers.” The root cause of that disruption was that AVA supporters had no appreciation for farm life in Colorado, especially the bureaucrats who could not grasp the importance of water rights to land values. Wilson argued that “the best men in Washington can’t savvy why the AVA does not fit into our irrigation picture” due to their thirst for federal control. Coloradans knew that “water is land, and land is not land without water,” and that to understand irrigation is to comprehend “its plan of operation and its definite relation to the price per acre of a farm.” Wilson argued that, unfortunately for Ellis and others, irrigation, and more specifically the precedence of water rights, was “something one has to live with to know.” The AVA threatened stable irrigation so it jeopardized land values, and its successful passage would cause the suspension of all farm trades in the valley. The Wilson letter exposed an underlying theme of state versus national agendas, where the federal government seemed disconnected from constituent needs. Like most interested observers, Wilson worried that the AVA would eventually take complete control of the river and could potentially sabotage long-held water rights. If the state had control of the water, however, farmers would augment their holdings and not sacrifice their long-held rights in the process. In essence, Wilson did not want to jeopardize users’ autonomy by allowing federal officials a chance to redirect river flow to people who had not earned their water rights.<sup>360</sup>

Wilson’s letter and Governor Carr’s speech in Washington, D.C. both addressed the issue of how jeopardizing water rights would adversely affect property rights. This

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<sup>360</sup> Floyd M. Wilson to Alva B. Adams, February 8, 1941, emphasis in original; Folder 14 Water - Arkansas Valley Authority Act H.R. 1823 1941-Correspondance/General; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado. Underlining in original.

possibility suggested catastrophe, especially considering the amount of mortgage debt most farmers faced and the likelihood that most of their money had been tied to their property. Carr contended that “Land without water is worth from ¢50 to \$2.50 an acre. Land with any reasonable irrigation right is valued at from \$25 to \$250 an acre. The water carries the value. The land is merely incidental.”<sup>361</sup> While perhaps guilty of hyperbole, Carr evidently believed the potential for interrupting water rights in the valley by inviting federal management would shake the economic foundation of the entire region and leave no farmer or business unaffected. As governor he could ill afford further deterioration of the agricultural economy when the horrors of the Depression were still very much fresh in his constituents’ minds. He had more clout than nearly anyone involved in the debate, and he used his political connections to leverage pressure on Congress to dismiss the AVA. For instance, Carr organized a conference of western governors to discuss the AVA and similar projects in the West. Carr chaired the meeting, and his influence is easily apparent in the set of resolutions adopted by the governors in attendance. It was in many ways a reiteration of what he had previously spoken about in both Washington, D.C., and Denver – the issue of federal power run amok, the lack of state control over its own resources, and of course the key point about irrigation. With Carr trumpeting resistance and successfully painting federal efforts in a negative light, the conference resoundingly condemned the

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<sup>361</sup> Governor Ralph Carr speech, Washington, D.C., April 1941; Folder 15 Arkansas Valley Authority Act 1941 – HR. 18223 + S. 280 – Cong. Record, Statements, Resolutions, etc.; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

AVA and similar federal maneuvers to replicate the TVA in other parts of the country.<sup>362</sup>

In the end, the combination of such political pressure and the widespread disdain for the AVA that various groups within the state demonstrated proved enough to kill the legislation in Congress. Arkansas Valley residents widely celebrated the victory, but the editor of the *Lamar Daily News* finally called attention to the elephant in the room. He noted the contradiction of wanting the federal government to become involved in some issues but not in others. He wondered why it was acceptable for the government to fund and build the dam but not to manage the newly available irrigation water once the dam retained it. He also pointed to the TVA as a success story that could boost the region's economy.<sup>363</sup> Historian Michael Welsh credits the bill's defeat to the presence of western individualism and anti-Washington behavior, citing detractors' ability to paint the AVA as "an eastern program to dominate the West."<sup>364</sup> Welsh's point is accurate in terms of the language Carr, Chenoweth, and others used to lobby against the AVA – they demonstrated their belief that the federal government was seeking to usurp state control of the river, handing Coloradans' water rights to folks in states downriver and sacrificing the tenuous economic recovery made by Colorado farmers. Even the Army Corps of Engineers weighed in, suggesting that the proposed AVA would

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<sup>362</sup> "Resolutions Adopted by Conference of Governors of Western States Respecting Proposed 'Arkansas Vally Authority Act of 1941,'" February 7, 1941; Folder 15 Arkansas Valley Authority Act 1941 – HR. 18223 + S. 280 – Cong. Record, Statements, Resolutions, etc.; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>363</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 13, 1941.

<sup>364</sup> Michael E. Welsh, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Albuquerque District, 1935-1985* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 69.

jeopardize progress being made between Kansas and Colorado to settle their ongoing legal dispute over allocating the Arkansas's water.<sup>365</sup>

The Corps's decision to argue against the AVA showed that it was more than happy to take responsibility for building the dam and effectively handing it over to local interests. Just after the Army Engineers got the green light to move forward with construction and AVA detractors won their battle in Congress, however, the United States entered the war and the federal government quickly dropped domestic water projects to the bottom of their list of priorities. The Department of Defense removed non-essential personnel from the site and then relocated them to the Army Engineers' regional headquarters in Albuquerque in early 1942. Word from Washington to shut down construction entirely came in March 1943; by that point 87% of the dam had been erected, leaving only gates and a bridge across the spillway for postwar construction. Yet the incomplete system still had storage for 165,000 acre-feet of water that farmers could (and did) use immediately.<sup>366</sup>

Farmers expressed some trepidation about the adjusted timetable, as the initial plans targeted a completion date in 1943 that was obviously no longer once the war started. Conflict over who should supervise and run the completed system, if and when it was finalized, came to the forefront during the hiatus. The key debate concerned whether the Army Engineers should maintain responsibility for the project or if the Bureau of Reclamation should take control. That possibility emerged when Congress considered its annual flood control authorization and contemplated giving authority to the Department of Interior. That transfer would mean a couple of changes, notably the

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<sup>365</sup> Welsh, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Albuquerque District, 1935-1985*, 60-61.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

transition from the Department of Defense to Interior (and thus putting it under Ickes who never truly warmed to the project). It would also entail a change for local irrigators, as the Bureau would manage and fund its management by charging them for using the water. The Army Engineers had not voiced that possibility in their time overseeing the venture. Consequently, local irrigators like Vera Pointer, Secretary of the Caddoa Dam Board, wrote to U.S. Representative Republican J. Edgar Chenoweth to encourage him to fight the transfer. The Army Engineers wanted to see the project through, so they joined Chenoweth in fighting against the transfer and in favor of leaving the dam entirely under the purview of the Corps. That support helped Chenoweth successfully argue to keep the dam a Corps project and ensured that irrigators could use the new resource at no additional cost. Farmers thus won the debate over initial expenditures and usage costs, showing their ability to maneuver within the New Deal state to take advantage of federal largesse.<sup>367</sup>

With the project still firmly in the Army Corps of Engineers' hands, then, construction continued after the war concluded. With demobilization efforts running full throttle after 1945, the federal government funneled men and material to the site and by late fall 1948 the reservoir had filled to its capacity of 275,000 acre-feet. The dedication ceremony occurred April 1, 1949; Chenoweth organized the festivities and John Martin's widow released the first batch of irrigation water just in time for spring planting. Later that year Colorado and Kansas finally came to terms on an Arkansas Compact to divvy up the waters, allocating 60% of stored water to Colorado users, with

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<sup>367</sup> J. Edgar Chenoweth to Vera Pointer, May 10, 1944; Box 73 Folder 23 Water – Caddoa Dam + John Martin Reservoir on Arkansas River 1941-1944; Box 73; J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection; University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

the other 40% to be released down the river to Kansans. After nearly fifty years of battling over the water, with litigation reaching the Supreme Court and tension constant in both state houses, the states decided to cede responsibility for managing the dam and reservoir to the Arkansas River Compact Administration. The Corps advised the Administration to limit new access and in that way keep the peace while providing water for those who already had established water rights. It was effectively local control that respected the Colorado doctrine of prior appropriation so it did little to upset Arkansas Valley residents.<sup>368</sup>

#### •The Value of Water•

For those fortunate enough to have had water rights prior to the dam's construction, the dam promised steadier and therefore more profitable access to the river water. What is interesting is that the Arkansas Valley residents who pushed for the dam had already enjoyed a level of stability unknown in Baca County. They simply believed that the dam could sustain that stability and further buttress their farms against drought. Consider that there was no dramatic upswing in the number of farms utilizing irrigation, just as the ABC had assured the Mississippi Valley Committee in order to get the project approved. The dam's ability to hold water did not lead to a significant influx of new users who sought to take advantage of the new dam. On the contrary, it seems that the same users simply took advantage of the new water source to expand their holdings. Indeed, changes in agricultural data for irrigated areas in Prowers from 1935-1945 reflect the more general trend in American agriculture toward fewer but larger farms. Individual farms became larger on average (from 385 acres to 814 acres), more of the county became classified as farmland (from 565,622 acres to 782,692 acres), and

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<sup>368</sup> See Welsh, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*, 70-71 and Sherow, *Watering the Valley*, 154-165.



the number of farms dropped (from 1472 to 962).<sup>369</sup> The amount of irrigated land fluctuated a bit over the same span, but nothing suggested that newcomers were taking advantage of new opportunities to extend irrigation to new acreage. The number of farms that had irrigation dropped over that period, but whereas the total number of farms declined from 1,469 in 1920 to 1,126 in 1950, the number of irrigated farms dropped from 660 to 647. The outmigration consisted primarily of dryland farmers, most of them presumably from southern Prowers County, an indication that the irrigated farmers had more reason to stay than leave during the Dirty Thirties.<sup>370</sup>

Census numbers also suggest that Prowers County farmers entered 1940 more economically stable than their Baca counterparts – coming out of depression in better shape just as they had entered the 1930s more able to survive the lean years. In that respect, we can see that the dam represented an opportunity for farmers to maintain stability rather than a silver bullet that promised prosperity to all. For example, census data for alfalfa and sugar beets demonstrate that by 1934 Prowers farmers had reached a point of stability that they maintained through the war and beyond, despite a drop from 1929 to 1934. For example, Prowers alfalfa production registered at 44,726 acres in 1929, 31,101 in 1934, 28,000 in 1939, and 30,658 in 1954. Sugar beet production illustrates a similar trend: farmers devoted 6,810 acres to beets in 1929, 3,552 in 1934, 3,142 in 1939, and 3,045 in 1954.<sup>371</sup> While these numbers demonstrate a drop in

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<sup>369</sup> Max Mills, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 1, 1944 to December 01, 1945,” 100; Folder 16; Box 67; Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. All future citations for Colorado Extension Service records include only author, title of annual report, folder, and box.

<sup>370</sup> Myron P. Gutman, Great Plains Population and Environment Data: On-Line Extraction System [Computer File], (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan [producers], 2005).

<sup>371</sup> These numbers come from calculations I made using census data from the 1930s and 1954 to check long-term trends. See U.S. Census Office, *United States Census of Agriculture 1935* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936); U.S. Census Office, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.:

production, the decline in wheat production in Baca over the 1930s (from roughly 88,000 acres in 1929 to nearly 24,000 in 1939) makes the slowed production in Prowers County look comparatively benign.<sup>372</sup>

Though not immune to the depression and similarly facing problems caused by drought, Prowers farmers maintained their acreages more consistently than their counterparts because they had a relatively stable water source. Consequently, it proved much harder for Prowers farmers to “bottom out” in the ways that their neighbors to the south had during the decade. Prowers County agent A.J. Hamman noted a difference as early as 1936. Hamman, who started his post in Prowers County in 1934 and understood the depths of the 1930s, found that “the general economic situation has become less acute, with better crops in the irrigated districts” while changes for dryland farmers have “probably been slightly for the worse, in that more farmers have had to have help during 1936 than did during 1935.”<sup>373</sup> In another telling example, farmers on irrigated lands in Prowers County “succeeded in producing [a] very good wheat crop” in 1937, the driest year for the county on record, while 80% of the dryland farm families in Prowers had left their land for neighboring cities or counties, leaving fourteen schools empty across the county.<sup>374</sup>

Demographic change is another indication of the comparative stability of Prowers irrigated farmers. The main Prowers County newspaper made no mention of Dust Bowl migrants, unlike the Baca County paper that routinely kept readers abreast of

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Government Printing Office, 1943); and Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Agriculture: 1954* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1956).

<sup>372</sup> U.S. Census Office, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943).

<sup>373</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 01, 1935 to October 31, 1936” 1; Folder 7; Box 67.

<sup>374</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 01, 1936 to November 30, 1937,” 1; Folder 8; Box 67

migrant communities full of former Baca residents living in places like Los Angeles. As Hamman suggested, dryland farmers became much more prone to absolving themselves of their predicament by picking up and leaving.<sup>375</sup> That helps explain the dramatic transition in Baca population from 1920 to 1940. By 1920 and the postwar wheat boom, Baca had 8,721 residents. That number increased to 10,570 in 1930 before dropping off to 6,207 by 1940 – a decline of 41.3% over the decade. Prowers, meanwhile, had a population of 13,845 in 1920, 14,762 in 1930, and 12,304 in 1940. By 1940, urban residents represented 36.1% of the county population, an indication of greater economic diversity, more immediate consumers for agricultural products, and a more stable economic base than that found in Baca County. Again, as with the numbers for agricultural production, population statistics suggest that Prowers had an economic and population decline after the start of the Great Depression but had more opportunity to stabilize by the mid 1930s.<sup>376</sup>

Former Extension agent Thomas J. Doherty noted a sort of psychological benefit, a kind of mental stability, which irrigators enjoyed and dryfarmers lacked. Doherty polled Baca County farmers about their transition from dryland to irrigated farming during the late 1950s and early 1960s. His assessment of how farmers thought about their prospects for success once they adopted irrigation is telling. In his analysis, 92% of the respondents, most of whom had access to deep well irrigation, felt either “pretty good or very good” about the change. They commonly noted more stable crop production and higher likelihood for income stability as the most important

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<sup>375</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 01, 1936 to November 30, 1937,” 1; Folder 8; Box 67.

<sup>376</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942).

consequences of their shift. The respondents felt more comfortable dealing with credit because they believed that irrigation gave them a better chance to pay off debts. As a result they were more likely to buy machinery or expand their holdings, speculating that irrigation offered some reassurance that they could remit payment. Doherty found that the biggest deterrent for potential irrigators was the initial investment. Once they made that plunge, however, irrigators generally felt more optimistic about their stability and the opportunity for prosperity, and the more successful irrigators proved more likely to adopt Extension recommendations about methods and techniques.<sup>377</sup> Doherty's findings suggest that irrigation provided a sense of security and protection from the harsh environment in addition to more tangible economic benefits. Prowers irrigators had enjoyed these benefits since they had started farming in the region – a certain buffer against the worst of the depression and drought.

At the same time, however, and as historians have consistently shown, having access does not preclude the need to conserve water or be conscious of its use. For all that irrigation provided, it was not a fail-safe. It was a technological option designed to mitigate the effects of drought, to provide more options for farmers to choose profitable crops, and, in the end, ameliorate an arid environment. A number of problems persisted, including salinity and sedimentation. But perhaps the most frustrating issue for appropriators remained the river's unpredictability, as no one could forecast snowmelt adequately to determine future river flow. A.J. Hamman, who served as Extension Irrigation Specialist after the war, reminded people that they should not "get

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<sup>377</sup> Thomas J. Doherty, "Effects on Farmers of Change from Dryland to Irrigation in Baca County" (Master's Thesis, Colorado State University, 1964), 49-56.

in the habit of taking the available water supply for granted.”<sup>378</sup> Indeed, even those with water rights found themselves at the mercy of precipitation levels, and the Prowers county agent noted a number of ditches that ran out of water during the 1930s drought years. The ditch companies that had seniority, and therefore preferred access to the river, provided for their constituents much better than those with junior rights. As a result, some ditches ran without water at the same time as others ran at full capacity. Some of the companies with junior rights built reservoirs to counter that fluctuation, but nothing offered as much security as senior rights.<sup>379</sup> By managing the flow more efficiently and by capturing the water before it could pass through the region into Kansas, the John Martin Dam and reservoir did a better job stabilizing water flow for all Colorado users. But even it did not solve all their problems.

There were also cases of user error, as irrigators often failed to do necessary upkeep on their canals and distribution systems to protect against water loss. Part of this fell on the farmers, many of whom did not know the best methods to divert and distribute the water. Some neglected to seal their ditches and canals to protect against leakage, either because they did not grasp the need or lacked the money for repairs or had no access to concrete or similar sturdy patch material to do an ample job. Some farmers also watered either too much, too often, or both, wasting part of their allotment and damaging their crops in the process. Many of these individuals lacked experience with irrigation so they found themselves not taking full advantage of their good fortune.

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<sup>378</sup> Ashley J. Hamman, *The Long Journey* (Marjorie J. Miller, 1989), 146.

<sup>379</sup> Jack French, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1939 to November 30, 1940,” 148; Folder 11; Box 67. Also see the Water Commissioner’s Field Records, reproduced in *Lamar Daily News*, June 22, 1940.



**Figure 121: "Showing wash off of good soil by faulty irrigation," May, 1940. The Extension Service reached out to farmers to promote water conservation by educating them on proper irrigation techniques. Courtesy Colorado State Archives.**

County agents held seminars and demonstrations to help, and announced such meetings in local newspapers to bolster attendance. In some cases people turned out to these showings, such as the irrigation seminar that Extension Service employee Floyd Brown taught in January, 1939 that some 200 Prowers County farmers attended.<sup>380</sup> While irrigation specialists, federal employees, and county agents usually offered instruction about the best techniques to conserve water, and federal workers from agencies like the CCC often provided labor to fix distribution systems, neither specialists nor workers were always available. For example, county agent Jack French noted that a group of farmers requested a demonstration on their ditch to figure out the best way to maximize their water right, but no one was available to help them by offering insight or labor.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 31, 1939 and February 08, 1940.

<sup>381</sup> Jack French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1940 to November 30, 1941,"; Folder 12; Box 8.

As county agents and federal employees came to discover, however, arousing enthusiasm for conservation often proved difficult regardless of experts' availability. For example, criticism of the AAA emerged in the late 1930s because the government only offered subsidies to farmers who practiced soil erosion plans and who worked dryland. The AAA also put a cap on the amount of land that participating farmers could account for, lessening the amount that the government should pay for halting production. That too invited condemnation.<sup>382</sup> County agent Jack French noted in 1940 that the Soil Conservation Service was starting to take hold in the county – five years after the agency's creation and three years after Baca County had established two soil conservation districts.<sup>383</sup> Farmers organized the Webb Soil Erosion District in 1943 but they disbanded in early 1944 when a sufficient number of farmers from within the district took the governing body to court over charges of faulty elections. The court ruled in favor of the farmers who claimed the elections were carried out without an adequate number of voters. They argued that 35% of the district farmers did not want to establish the board in the first place; the court agreed that the district rules had been violated and “dis-organized” the district.<sup>384</sup>

Many agriculturalists never pretended that controlling the river or its tributaries was a definite solution to the issue of drought or insurance for production, so they tried to augment their output by conserving soil and water. While the county agents in Prowers calculated a smaller number of farmers practicing conservation than the agents in Baca did, some Prowers irrigators nonetheless practiced crop rotation, planted cover

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<sup>382</sup> See for example *Lamar Daily News*, June 26, 1940 and March 03, 1941.

<sup>383</sup> Jack French, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1939 to November 30, 1940,” 19; Folder 11; Box 8.

<sup>384</sup> Max B. Mills, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, June 12, 1944 to December 1, 1944,” 24; Folder 15; Box 8.

crops, executed summer fallowing, planted shelterbelts, and contoured their fields.<sup>385</sup>

The SCS and county agents held regular demonstrations detailing conservation techniques, and it is evident that at least some area farmers found them applicable.

Indeed, the Arkansas Valley Soil Conservation District formed in December 1941 and became “the first demonstration of the use of soil and water conservation practices on a wide scale in a large irrigated area of the Southern Great Plains.” The *Lamar Daily News* celebrated its creation with a front-page story that the editors placed directly next to the announcement that the U.S. had formally declared war on Japan. The district formed just days before the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>386</sup>

#### •Conclusion•

Tapping the river had been a part of Arkansas Valley living for over a millennium, and as agriculturalists moved from subsistence to market production their demand for water increased. Generally speaking, they turned to technology to augment their access and stabilize their production. This applied as much to the first white settlers who utilized canals and reservoirs as it did to the members of the Arkansas Basin Committee who looked to the federal government to build a massive dam in the 1930s.

Historians like Donald Worster, James Sherow, and others have rued how the government helped irrigators build such dams and exercise this kind of domination of their environment. They have pointed to greed and selfishness, to the rise of large companies and corporations that have monopolized access to water, and to the influence these individuals had on state and federal authorities to bend to their demands. Yet, the

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<sup>385</sup> A comparison of the narrative and especially the statistical summaries from agents in the two counties expose the difference.

<sup>386</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, December 08, 1941.



story is more complex than these just-so narratives imply. Indeed, the dam represented a way that farmers changed their approach to resource use in response to depression and drought. Residents looked at the dam as another form of adaptation, one made available because of technological advances and federal financing. Irrigation may have allowed these farmers to become complacent about conservation or protecting their soil, but their calls for federal intervention evidence that they understood that the Dust Bowl and Great Depression threatened their livelihoods. Moreover, even though they knew that the government had heeded their calls for additional water, they started separate soil and water conservation districts, agents held seminars on how to conserve irrigation water, and federal and Extension records suggest that farmers became more intent to protect the resource.<sup>387</sup> In effect, farmers adapted to the extent that they took advantage of new opportunities to use the federal government to stabilize their agricultural system. According to the editor of the *Lamar Daily News*, the dam represented “Colorado’s greatest opportunity to share in the expenditure of the public works funds” of the New Deal, and residents took advantage of it – to their credit.<sup>388</sup> Certainly, farmers could have done more to conserve the valuable resource, as Extension workers and employees from various federal agencies pointed out, but they made strides in moving towards conservation by the end of the 1930s. Indeed, their efforts at trying to adopt water and soil conservation methods in spite of promised access to more water suggest that they understood what the water meant to their business.

Most importantly, the river allowed irrigators a chance to weather the bad years better than their dryland neighbors. The population and agricultural systems in Prowers

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<sup>387</sup> See for example Max B. Mills, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, June 12, 1944 to December 1, 1944,” 24; Folder 15; Box 8.

<sup>388</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, July 27, 1933.

had been more stable than those in Baca County since the turn of the century and remained so on the eve of the New Deal. Irrigated farmers were of course not immune to the trials and tribulations caused by drought and depression, but numbers suggest that they did quite well compared to their dryland counterparts. They maintained more consistent production levels and more farmers stayed on the land in spite of the dual crises. Unlike farmers in Baca County, Prowers County farmers looked at farming largely the same way in 1940 as they had in 1930 or even 1920 – access to water determined their production and once they settled on a crop then stability reigned. Irrigation had thus been *the* way of life for many Prowers farmers who enjoyed the all-important water rights that accompanied prior appropriation. The Dust Bowl and depression became bad enough to compel irrigators to think about their systems, to consider ways to improve their lot, and to organize and act collectively to realize their goals. They started to think more seriously about conservation techniques to maximize their irrigation efforts. In effect, they survived the 1930s by trying to get everything out of their water source and looked forward to a completed dam to augment their water allotments. By the onset of World War II, the drought had broken across the region and the river resumed normal levels, offering enough water to producers to make good on promises to supply the war effort.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### On the Move

Thousands of southeastern Colorado residents suffered greatly during the 1930s and simply tried to survive the hardest years that anyone could remember. Their prospects slowly seemed to change by the end of the decade. Indeed, those who eventually welcomed the 1940s lived in places that looked far different than they had when FDR entered office in 1933. The landscape had changed dramatically since Roosevelt's election. The Dust Bowl and Great Depression had taken a toll, of course, leaving houses abandoned, schools empty, and fields barren. Yet there were signs of a mended landscape as well. Various New Deal programs had generated the construction of school buildings, post offices, gymnasiums, bridges, and other infrastructure projects. The federal conservation program had purchased some land and rehabilitated other plots, while also allowing districts to set regulations for private owners, a move that subtly reconfigured the pattern of private ownership that had dominated the Plains since well before the Homestead Act of 1862.<sup>389</sup>

The social landscape also changed over the course of the 1930s. The ecological and economic crises initiated a number of demographic shifts that altered the regional population. The population in southeastern Colorado had been relatively steady from the onset of the 1910s to Roosevelt's election in 1932. During the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, however, the number of residents in both Baca and Prowers Counties declined as what had been a gradual trickle turned into a veritable flood by the end of

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<sup>389</sup> Neil Maher discusses the way that community formation failed to abide by the grid patterns the federal government employed when trying to organize the West. See Neil Maher, "'Crazy Quilt Farming on Round Land': The Great Depression, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Politics of Landscape Change on the Great Plains during the New Deal Era" *Western Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Autumn, 2000): 319- 339.

the 1930s. The late 1920s witnessed the highest population level in Baca County history and represented one of the high points for Prowers County as well. The census counted a total of 10,570 residents in Baca County in 1930 but 6,207 people resided there in 1940, a decline of over 40%. Prowers County experienced a less severe fluctuation, although it too saw a net drop of roughly 2,000 residents over that same period, from 14,762 to 12,304, a drop of 16%.<sup>390</sup>

That population decline and its consequences were part of a regional transformation engendered by the Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the New Deal. The migrants' stories have been told by many talented historians, and they have garnered considerable attention in literature, film, and photography.<sup>391</sup> Unfortunately, this attention misses two important points. First, it is inaccurate to consider this migration as the only demographic change that affected the Great Plains or to assume that every individual or family who moved from the Plains during the 1930s and 1940s ended up in California. A few historians, including Pamela Riney-Kehrberg and Peter Fearon, have rightly noted that Dust Bowl-induced migration *within* the area represented an important piece of a larger population decline in the region.<sup>392</sup> Even by the onset of war in Europe in 1939, people had started to leave the countryside for the city, many of them to work in growing industrial centers like Denver or to take advantage of urban relief efforts to alleviate poverty and unemployment. In addition, farmers – including many tenants or part owners – simply moved around the countryside in search of better

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<sup>390</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942).

<sup>391</sup> The best example is James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>392</sup> Various works on the Dust Bowl deal with the issue of migration but th, including Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

prospects. Members of the landless population could pick up and move without much fear of retribution for breaking contracts. Tenants frequently left one farm for another in a neighboring county or a few counties over in hopes of more opportunity or better land. These factors combined to leave much of the rural population in flux during the 1930s.

This chapter focuses more extensively on the second important point historians have neglected, namely the impact that the population decline had on agriculture, and specifically the adverse effect it had on the agricultural labor pool. The movement of workers, tenants, and owners influenced land use regimes by challenging New Deal conservation measures and by forcing farmers to find alternate labor sources when World War II started in 1941. The agricultural labor system that had matured by the 1930s in Baca and Prowers Counties, and that relied on the combination of local laborers, tenants, and migrant or immigrant labor, started to dissolve by 1935. Farmers were left scrambling for a viable workforce by the start of the war when the federal government interceded and provided workers. In a way, the labor disruption offers another perspective of the changes wrought by drought and devastation, a disturbance akin to the challenges posed by dwindling water availability and soil erosion. Each element required farmers' adaptation to new circumstances. In other words, contrary to the idea of stability that Geoff Cunfer saw in Plains agriculture after 1920, the population fluctuation during the decade suggests a major transition.<sup>393</sup> The lull in demand engendered by drought and depression – the combination led to a dramatic decline in production and therefore less need for workers – ended in 1938 and 1939, and

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<sup>393</sup> Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2005), 5-6, 19-35.

then demand for farm labor ramped up again with American entry into the war. The population drain left farmers more prone to look to labor outside their families and even their communities and more willing to employ wage labor with the start of the war. This transition is a vitally important part of how the Dust Bowl and Great Depression changed land use practices in southeastern Colorado over the course of the 1930s and 1940s. By focusing on labor as one element of this change we can better understand the social impact that drought and depression had on area residents as well as the ways that federal involvement in labor recruitment during the war answered farmers' pleas.

#### •Tenants•

The tenant system represented an important thread in the regional labor system, particularly after World War I and the wheat boom invited extensive land purchases by outside owners. These owners often hired tenants to work on and manage their holdings while they lived in other towns, often in neighboring states or as far away as New York.<sup>394</sup> This system seemed to work adequately during prosperous, or at least productive, years, but the Dust Bowl and depression upset the tenant system and exposed some of the structural issues that plagued tenancy in both the South and the West. Most historians of the Dust Bowl have done little to recognize the plight of tenants. Indeed, tenancy has long been associated with the South, not the West, and generally relegated to being just part of the perennial cycle of debt that plagued poor whites and blacks since the end of the Civil War. Tenancy, although developing later in

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<sup>394</sup> For example, Lauriston Walsh lived in New York and hired labor to tend their land in Baca. See the series of letters between Walsh and Jas. O. Dougan; Folder Baca County Soil Conservation District; Box 16 Western Baca Co. Dist. Rep—Water Facilities, Colo.; SP 18 Records of the Coordinator, 1936-1942; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

the West than in the South, became an important piece of agricultural production on the Colorado Plains as part of the pre-New Deal labor system.<sup>395</sup>

Tenancy became popular in the early 1920s and peaked in 1935 in both Baca and Prowers Counties. The two locales reinforced a trend occurring across the state, as the number of farmers who were tenants actually increased during the 1920s and again from 1930 to 1935 before a steep decline from 1935 to 1940. Consider the numbers. In Baca County, for example, the number of tenants was 621 in 1930, rose to 794 in 1935, and then fell to 398 in 1940. These tenants farmed more than 415,000 acres in 1935 but fewer than 365,000 acres in 1940, suggesting that the tenants who remained in Baca (or who moved in after 1935) found themselves responsible for plots that were larger on average. Prowers County numbers showed the same trend, although to a less dramatic extent, moving from 625 tenants in 1930 to 755 in 1935 and finally 561 in 1940. These farmers tended more than 231,000 acres in 1935 but just under 200,000 in 1940 – again 1940 witnessed a decreased number of tenants, but those engaged in tenancy managed more acreage per person.<sup>396</sup>

A number of explanations account for the rise and then sudden decline in tenancy in the two counties. First, by the mid 1930s most everyone had been adversely affected by the drought and depression; a number of rough years in a row could convince even the hardest and most resolute residents to pick up and leave. For better or worse, tenants had more opportunity to depart since they had no mortgages, no financial obligations for land, and very little in terms of significant expenditures for

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<sup>395</sup> Leon E. Truesdell explained some of the reasons for this shift to the West in Leon E. Truedell, “Farm Tenancy Moves West,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 8, no. 4 (Oct., 1926): 443-450.

<sup>396</sup> U.S. Census Office, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943).

machinery – three major capital drains for landowners. Second, early New Deal agricultural programs tried to cut production to stabilize prices. Such programs, including the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), paid owners to limit their production of major commodities like hogs, wheat, cotton, and even sugar beets. If owners took the subsidies and cut production then there was less need for a tenant to work on land that had been retired. Consequently, owners cut tenants and/or agricultural labor to reduce labor costs. In addition, many owners refused to share their AAA checks with tenants and instead kept the money for themselves, paid down debt, or reinvested in machinery like tractors. Tenants, therefore, had no access to federal assistance, had no guarantee of working a harvest, and had very little leverage vis-à-vis their employer. The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 attempted to reconcile some of these issues and make federal help more available to tenants, but by that point many tenants in southeastern Colorado had already moved on to other opportunities.<sup>397</sup>

The national conversation about tenancy illustrated how New Dealers effectively considered several aspects of Plains farming in hopes of finding solutions to the many problems. Furthermore, tenancy seemed to illustrate some of the issues that seemed to warrant immediate attention, including land degradation, poverty, and instability. That New Dealers considered such problems as part and parcel of the explanation for the Dust Bowl and the decades-long agricultural depression is noteworthy. In addition, the county agents played an important role in how the New

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<sup>397</sup> A number of historians and New Deal contemporaries indicted the tenant system for neglecting to help tenants during the 1930s. See Keith J. Volanto, "Leaving the Land: Tenant and Sharecropper Displacement in Texas during the New Deal" *Social Science History* 20, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 533-551; Albert H. Cotton, "Regulations of Farm Landlord-Tenant Relationships" *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4, no. 4, Farm Tenancy (Oct., 1937): 508-538; James G. Maddox, "The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act" *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4, no. 4, Farm Tenancy (Oct., 1937): 434-455.



Deal approached the issue. Eventual legislation utilized the agents' position in rural communities and had agents reach out to tenants, explain the programs, and curry tenants' favor for federal intervention. This kind of communication between agent and tenant resembled the relationship that agents had built with area farmers and further illustrated their ability to serve as interlocutor between the federal and local levels. Finally, the tenant situation impacted the pool of available labor in the two counties. While farmers had slowly started to rely on tenants to satisfy their labor needs, the tenants' widespread departure from the region complicated the farm labor system and compelled farmers to look beyond tenants to find farm labor.

Many critics argued that one of the central problems with the tenant system was that it rarely led to ownership, in spite of the myth of the agricultural ladder. Proponents of the agricultural ladder argued that tenancy represented one rung on the path to ownership, such that young people who started as tenants could eventually move their way toward ownership through diligence and perseverance. Proponents of the idea supposed that many owners initially started as unpaid laborers on their family farm, gaining skill and experience that allowed them to move up to the next rung, working as hired labor at home or in the community. Such labor allowed the workers to amass some capital and work towards tenancy, the third rung on the ladder that allowed the farmer to make enough money to eventually purchase the land or another plot in the area. The fourth rung, encumbered ownership, allowed the farmer to buy land, farm it, and make a good living, until the final step allowed for the farmers' retirement and position as landlord.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Shu-Ching Lee, "The Theory of the Agricultural Ladder" *Agricultural History* 21, no. 1 (Jan., 1947): 53; Marshall Harris, "A New Agricultural Ladder" *Land Economics* 26, no. 3 (Aug., 1950): 258-259.

Critics began indicting the ladder idea during the 1930s when it became evident that tenants had a difficult time ascending the ladder, especially because of the post-World War I depression in agriculture. In some cases, of course, the ladder functioned as its proponents had hoped, and laborers eventually made their way to ownership. During the 1930s, however, observers criticized the tenant system by arguing that more people actually descended than ascended the ladder, meaning that owners more often lost their holdings and ended up working for someone else rather than tenants becoming owners. As Chris Rasmussen notes, “the existence of a large number of struggling tenant farmers called into question the cherished American belief that agriculture was the province of contented, independent farm owners and a repository of the nation’s civic virtue.”<sup>399</sup> FDR appointed a special committee to determine the causes and consequences of farm tenancy; their findings suggest a number of important problems with the system that the depression aggravated. The committee found that the Great Depression shook the tenant system and thus threatened all of American agriculture because tenants had such a firm place in the farm economy. FDR claimed that “the American dream of the family-size farm, owned by the family which operates it, has become more and more remote. The agricultural ladder, on which an energetic man might ascend from hired man to tenant to independent owner, is no longer serving its purpose.” He continued: “While aggravated by the depression, the tenancy problem is

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<sup>399</sup> Chris Rasmussen, “‘Never a Landlord for the Good of the Land’: Farm Tenancy, Soil Conservation, and the New Deal in Iowa” *Agricultural History* 73:1 (Winter, 1999), 71. See also Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 22-46.

the accumulated result of generations of unthinking exploitation of our agricultural resources, both land and people.”<sup>400</sup>

Roosevelt’s conclusions reflected the findings offered by the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, a group the president appointed in 1937 to diagnose the situation and offer solutions to systemic issues. The report typified the New Deal’s response to agricultural problems. The Committee identified a number of problems, notably defective land use, inadequate credit available for tenants, the high rate of debt throughout rural America, and families trying to farm submarginal land or on holdings of inadequate size. In essence, farmers on any rung of the ladder had no guarantee that they could ascent to ownership. The Committee found that descent occurred more often and cited “an increasing tendency for the rungs of the ladder to become bars—forcing imprisonment in a fixed social status from which it is increasingly difficult to escape.”<sup>401</sup> The Committee blamed the tenant system and “sickly rural institutions” that “beget dependency and incapacity to bear the responsibilities of citizenship.”<sup>402</sup> It advertized ways to combat the downward spiral and therefore stabilize the ladder. It promoted soil rehabilitation, it pushed for the federal government to make more land available to potential owners, it stressed the need to extend federal benefits to farm laborers, it discouraged land speculation and absentee ownership, it emphasized the need to improve contracts between landlords and tenants to better protect the tenants, and supported worker and tenant organizations to defend civil liberties.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Lewis C. Gray et al, “Farm Tenancy: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), iii.

<sup>401</sup> Lewis C. Gray et al., “Farm Tenancy: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy,” 5.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 10-23.

Evidence of this sort of thinking emerged in an assessment of tenancy in Baca County in 1937, when economist Robert T. McMillan visited the area for the Resettlement Administration. McMillan argued that deficiencies in the tenant system helped explain the county's ecological and economic degradation since the onset of the Depression. McMillan noted that "nearly two-thirds of all tenants moved to the county after 1926" because they wanted to take advantage of jobs tied to wheat production and simultaneously move away from more impoverished areas. This dramatic influx complicated matters because tenant "stability increased with duration of residence in the region" and instability in tenancy affected the agricultural economy writ large.<sup>404</sup> He found that tenancy was a necessary and important part of the agricultural economy, and that "there is no reason why tenancy should not continue to fulfill its functions in the county agriculture." In other words, tenants still had a place working on owners' land, bringing in crops, and working their way up the ladder. Yet, pragmatically, he concluded that "a large majority of tenant operators probably are incapable of ownership" and any government program to compel tenants toward ownership should not dismantle the system.<sup>405</sup> McMillan argued that tenants could achieve a level of economic and social security comparable to owners but without the large-scale indebtedness or risk that owners faced. In his opinion, it made no sense to extend ownership to tenants when many owners in the county failed to survive. The local agricultural economy had been so devastated that even owners who enjoyed

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<sup>404</sup> Robert T. McMillan, "Social Problems of Farm Families in Baca County, Colorado," Report I of Sociology Section, Land Use Planning Division, Resettlement Administration, Region XII (Amarillo, TX: 1937), 43-44; Folder Baca County Sociological Study; Box 2 General; SP 10 Records Relating to Land Utilization 1936-1939; Record of the Soil Conservation Service, Record Group 114; National Archives – Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>405</sup> Robert T. McMillan, "Social Problems of Farm Families in Baca County, Colorado," 52.

considerable government assistance could not meet their financial obligations.<sup>406</sup>

Consequently, pushing tenants to ownership did not reflect sound policy to stabilize the rural economy, but the system of tenancy warranted federal attention nonetheless.

The land itself often became a casualty of a faulty tenant system. Some critics of the much-maligned system accused tenants of causing much of the problem with soil erosion across the South and West; they remained skeptical of any reforms, whether pushing ownership by extending credit or offering financial subsidies, unless the government also addressed land use. The adage of “poor land, poor people” thus played out in terms of tenancy and soil conservation, whereby the tenant system left tenants in perpetual debt and therefore more likely to misuse the soil. These issues were interconnected and each needed attention, according to Farm Security Administration (FSA) spokesman Flip F. Higbee, who noted that “the problems of impoverished lands and poor people...are closely allied with the short tenure system in American agriculture.” Higbee continued that the only realistic way to address soil conservation was to invest in improving the plight of tenants and to ensure that they were willing to execute federal programs to protect soil and wind erosion. For Higbee, this meant strengthening the agricultural ladder and continuing to focus on moving the tenant toward ownership but simultaneously emphasizing the important role that tenants had in conserving water and soil even while they were in another’s employ.<sup>407</sup>

Higbee and others contended that farmers who had a financial stake in the land’s health proved more conscious of conserving resources. That thinking suggested that tenants or laborers who had no hope of owning land had no incentive to protect it.

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>407</sup> Flip F. Higbee, *Springfield Democrat Herald* December 29, 1938.

Tenancy promoted maximum production in spite of the resource; soil exhaustion often resulted from such negligence. Moreover, critics also indicted landlords for emphasizing production at any cost. Resident farmers had often blamed absentee owners for encouraging such activity, especially because they found the “suitcase farmer” guilty of not knowing or caring about their land, the neighbor, or the community. In many ways, however, setting the absentee owner up as a scapegoat missed the point. As McMillan found throughout Baca County, the *combination* of tenancy and absentee ownership often resulted in the biggest impact on the environment. He contended that “one-crop farming is the attendant evil of tenancy and small farms. Farmers on small farms are compelled through necessity to raise crops which will produce the largest returns per acre. Also the landlord is too often interested in collecting the greatest cash return from the land regardless of soil losses.”<sup>408</sup> The Committee also indicted tenancy for this problem, finding that “the tenant whose occupancy is uncertain at best, and ordinarily does not average more than 2 years, can ill afford to plant the farm to any but cash crops.” Furthermore, “the tenant who expects to remain but a short time on a farm has little incentive to conserve and improve the soil; he has equally little incentive to maintain and improve the woodlot, the house, barn, shed, or other structures on the farm.” Put succinctly: “Erosion of our soil has its counterpart in erosion of our society.” The tenant system, McMillan thought, led to the waste of natural and human resources.<sup>409</sup>

Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace argued in 1935 that federal reforms could help the situation. He believed that longer leases would provide tenants with a

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<sup>408</sup> McMillan, 45.

<sup>409</sup> Lewis C. Gray et al., “Farm Tenancy: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy,” 7.

stronger sense of responsibility for the land's health. Wallace figured that extending the leases would provide more security to the relationship between owner and tenant and could keep tenants happy, promote soil conservation among non-owners, and protect owners from broken contracts. He echoed the concern that the *system* promoted land abuse, and contended that tenants deserved little blame for soil exhaustion.<sup>410</sup>

According to Wallace, Higbee, and others, tenants could easily become responsible stewards if given the opportunity and a stake in the land's long-term productivity.

Indeed, Baca County extension agent Claude Gausman noted in 1940 that Farm Security Administration clients, former tenants who took advantage of tenant purchase programs to buy land that the federal government made available, took remarkably good care of their land. Such new owners proved more conscious of conservation and more willing to protect their land "than the unattached operation," suggesting that ascending the ladder compelled the farmer to be more diligent in conserving resources.<sup>411</sup>

FDR's Special Committee also found that the tenant system's short leases facilitated heavy migration. Committee members argued that such a dramatic shift in population that "not only wears down the fiber of the families themselves; it saps the resources of the entire social order."<sup>412</sup> The report stated that tenancy led to short stays on land and high rates of mobility from farm to farm, county to county, and sometimes state to state. The migration left tenants with no job security and disrupted the family as

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<sup>410</sup> William H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions" *Agricultural History* 66:2 (Spring, 1992), 107; McMillan, 52.

<sup>411</sup> Claude E. Gausman, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, November 1940 to November 1941" 27-32, Folder 52, Box 8, in Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. All future citations for Colorado Extension Service records include only author, title of annual report, folder number, and box number.

<sup>412</sup> Lewis C. Gray et al., "Farm Tenancy: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy," 7.

well as the community. Ralph Swink, Prowers County supervisor of the FSA, estimated that 225 farm tenants in Prowers moved annually, costing each family \$57 a year (a total of \$12,825 in lost wealth among tenants). These moves, which usually happened after harvest season during the winter, uprooted the family, pulled children from school, and made the entire family feel discouraged and disinterested, frustrated with their plight. This shift also left the landlord in the lurch. Landlords were often unaware of the tenant's plan and ended up flailing through the winter looking for new employees. Invariably, the landlord found the first available tenant, unconcerned with helping the tenant adjust or weeding through unstable tenants to find the best employee. In essence, Swink argued, landlords promoted "getting the most out of this year's crop, letting the future take care of itself," and they treated the tenants in the same way.<sup>413</sup>

Beyond criticizing the system for not leading tenants to ownership, some observers argued that the tenants deserved some blame for their plight. For example, Lewis C. Gray, who Donald Worster credits with launching New Deal agricultural conservation, as well as economists and social scientists within and outside of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, suspected that many tenants had character flaws. Gray and others argued that a portion of tenants were thriftless, even shiftless, and unstable. They acted like soil-miners, tied to neither the land nor the community, and were more than willing to break a contract if to do so was in their best interest. Castigators also claimed that the most egregious tenants were dishonest, negligent, and prone to abandon the farm when the crop did not meet expectations, which usually meant that they could not fulfill their financial responsibilities to the owners. The owners then faced multiple

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<sup>413</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 18, 1939



challenges to get their enterprise back up and running, a process that cost time and money.<sup>414</sup>

These indictments showed that observers had concerns about the system, the landlords, and the tenants, indicating that only dramatic reforms might stabilize tenancy. As it stood, tenancy offered security to no one and left the land especially susceptible to abuse – both potential ramifications countered the basic New Deal agricultural policy. Consequently, FDR’s Committee constituted one element of a larger conversation about the role of tenancy in American agriculture, the state’s responsibility in promoting ownership for tenants, and how to improve the system. To that end, then, New Deal policy sought to protect tenants by the mid-1930s. If ownership was indeed a goal for most tenants then the federal government would help them reach it; if that was impossible then the government could help the tenant leave the countryside. Unfortunately, one problem that plagued the early New Deal effort to right the agricultural economy was the consistent blind eye that it turned to the issue of tenancy. In spite of Wallace’s apparent concern for the situation, the first incarnation of the AAA only subsidized the owner or landlord and offered nothing directly to the tenant. It also paid owners to retire land, which often negated the need for either tenants or labor, and thus many owners jettisoned those individuals. The subsidy system that proved so vital

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<sup>414</sup> Harbaugh, “Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions,” *Agricultural History* 66: 2 (Spring 1992): 97-101; Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), 189. Harbaugh suggests that such reputations were often unwarranted and unearned, given to tenants because they often challenged the idyllic notion that agriculture was the safest path to competency. He argues that the evidence collected during the 1910s and 1920s promoted as proof that tenants disparaged owners’ did not take an adequate survey of the country, nor did it reflect variables that could adversely impact the soil such as wind, climate, or crop choices.

to helping farmers survive terrible economic years thus did almost nothing to assist tenants.<sup>415</sup>

The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 constituted the first Congressional legislation designed specifically to help tenants by including them under the umbrella of federal assistance offered by the New Deal. It effectively enacted the recommendations that FDR's Special Committee on Farm Tenancy suggested in terms of trying to stabilize the agricultural ladder. Congress had briefly considered the tenancy issue a few times between 1933 and 1937 – mostly because of John Bankhead and other southern congressmen. The law passed because of the sudden convergence of executive and congressional attention, and it looked to do three things: “to promote farm home ownership through a system of long-term farm mortgage loans; to rehabilitate distressed farm families (who cannot be aided in purchasing a farm) through short-term loans for livestock, equipment and supplies; and to provide for the development of a land conservation and utilization program, through the purchase of land submarginal for agriculture, and the development of such land into uses for which it is best suited.”<sup>416</sup>

It thus expanded the New Deal's efforts to identify and purchase submarginal land and rehabilitate the farm economy through conservation while simultaneously giving the tenant a boost up the agricultural ladder. The Act apportioned \$10 million the first year and it allocated \$50 million annually by the third year to be managed by

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<sup>415</sup> Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 94-95 and 157-161. Other policies like the second AAA and the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act tried to protect tenants more than the original by mandating that owners pay tenants for their part in conservation or land retirement, but there was no serious mechanism to force owners to share their subsidies.

<sup>416</sup> James G. Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4, no. 4 (Oct. 1937), 446.

the FSA, the successor to the Resettlement Administration and the agency most aligned with tenant concerns. The county agent spearheaded the program in southeastern Colorado by reaching out to and answering inquiries from interested tenants, drumming up support for the program.<sup>417</sup> Tenants contacted the county agent when they wanted to apply for loans to buy property, and a review of the tenants led to the FSA determination of who proved most qualified for low interest loans. The program allowed four tenants to buy farms in 1938 in Prowers County and four more in 1939— a small number relative to the tenant population of roughly 775 people but an indication that the program worked for at least some farmers.<sup>418</sup> Additionally, the FSA offered low-interest loans to tenants to defray costs accrued in maintaining the land, including equipment, seed, and other necessities. The FSA in Baca County used federal money as well, in addition to the low-interest loans for supplies or property, the Baca County office extended direct financial assistance to tenants who wanted to improve their surroundings. For example, the FSA used federal dollars to build or repair more than 200 buildings in Baca in 1939, spending nearly \$20,000 and therefore doing the work at no cost to the requesting parties.<sup>419</sup>

According to J.E. Morrison, Colorado Cooperative Extension Director from 1952-1958, several parts of the FSA-led Bankhead-Jones Tenant Act proved successful across the state. The push for rehabilitating the rural economy through loans and grant-in-aid programs designed to secure livestock, machinery, family necessities, and other

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 447-448.

<sup>418</sup> Jack N. French, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1939 to November 30, 1940,” Folder 10, Box 67; Jack N. French, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County,” Folder 11, Box 67; *Lamar Daily News*, January 18, 1939.

<sup>419</sup> Claude E. Gausman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, November 30, 1940 to November 30, 1941” 38; Folder 52, Box 8.

goods, proved largely successful. The FSA also worked with Extension to promote farm and home economics, as well as quality of life issues like improving nutrition, attaining a proper shelter, and keeping the family clothed. The tenant purchase program was a boon as well, “probably the most successful part of the Farm Security set up.”<sup>420</sup> Even though the program only helped a relatively small proportion of needy farmers – Morrison noted that only a “small percentage of tenants” met the necessary qualifications to become involved in the program – the new owners paid back their loans quickly.<sup>421</sup> Despite these successes, however, Morrison understood that the program existed at a high cost in administration, supervision, and land purchase. He claimed that the resettlement program had “for the most part failed” because the new owners resettled on poor sites or on such small units that they could not sustain themselves.<sup>422</sup> He also questioned the logic of adding more landowners when “if all farmers farmed just ½ as well as the best farmers, agriculture would very soon be swamped in its over-production.”<sup>423</sup> His statement effectively identified the crux of the problem with much New Deal agricultural policy: emphasizing the need to keep farmers farming proved counterproductive if the real goal was to balance supply and demand. Morrison thus celebrated the federal effort to stabilize the tenant system but challenged the desire to increase ownership across the state.

Regardless of its sometimes convoluted logic, the New Deal approach to tenancy reflected a concerted effort to address problems with the agricultural ladder.

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<sup>420</sup> J.E. Morrison, “An Evaluation of the Farmers Home Administration (Formerly the Farm Security Administration),” n/d, 2; Folder Reports 1935-1950 (1), Box 155, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>421</sup> J.E. Morrison, “An Evaluation of the Farmers Home Administration (Formerly the Farm Security Administration), 3.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 3.

The FSA and the Bankhead-Jones Act constituted federal attempts to improve tenants' plight, and each had some success in Colorado. But the convergent forces of drought and depression meant a considerable migration among tenants. Indeed, the numbers suggest that more tenants simply migrated during the 1930s than those who became owners. Even while the government tried to restore the agricultural ladder, the trend in southeastern Colorado was away from small farm ownership as big farms had a better chance at surviving the lean years than their smaller neighbors. The declining numbers of tenants, as well as part-owners and managers, left landlords with fewer options to help run their enterprises. The tenants had been an important piece of how especially large owners produced, and their absence disrupted a system that was only starting to mature in southeastern Colorado by the early 1930s. Their departure left a significant dent in the available labor supply for farmers who needed such assistance.

#### •Paid Labor•

The widespread departure of tenants marked one problem for owners looking for workers. A similar slowing of migration into the state during the middle and late 1930s represented another element of this growing problem and made matters worse for Colorado farmers who needed labor. The same factors that allowed for the growth of tenants during the 1920s – expanded production and more focus on cash crops like wheat and sugar beets – led to an increase in farmers using paid labor. Hispanic workers made up much of this labor, some of the workers hailing from nearby states as well as Colorado, and other workers came from Mexico, especially after World War I. The push to employ paid workers started just before the turn of the twentieth century, as the budding sugar beet industry increasingly relied primarily on paid labor during the

planting, thinning, and harvesting stages. Corporations like the American Sugar Company and the Holly Sugar Company recruited and contracted with workers, then made them available to growers who had signed a separate contract with the company to sell their sugar beets to the same refiner. The companies proved remarkably adept at establishing this labor pool, as they had more resources – they often had a paid labor agent and a budget to publicize the company’s needs to potential employees – to direct at labor and a vested interest in making sure that their growers had all that they needed to produce.<sup>424</sup> These alternative sources became necessary once it was clear that family and local labor could not satisfy the industry’s needs. Consequently, the refiners looked outside the Arkansas Valley and developed two distinct labor streams to abet growers. This pattern of attaining workers functioned fairly well until the mid-1930s, but complications from the depression and drought effectively stalled the migration of seasonal workers into the state.

Sugar companies spearheaded the turn to outside migrant labor because the various stages of production were each labor-intensive. The first phase involved blocking and thinning the small beet plants once they sprouted from the ground. Immediately upon completing the thinning process, the worker focused on hoeing or weeding to protect the plants from insidious weeds. After a short break lasting a couple of weeks while they waited for the plants to ripen, the workers started harvesting the beets for shipment and processing. Employers often had difficulty finding laborers because the work itself proved so strenuous: “Thinning and harvesting were considered two of the most arduous types of agricultural labor. The tasks required workers to

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<sup>424</sup> Dena Markoff, “The Sugar Beet Industry in Microcosm: The National Sugar Manufacturing Company, 1899 to 1967” (PhD Diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1980), 70-73.

constantly stoop over the rows of plants. In addition, growers exerted constant pressure for speed in both processes, and thinning was done under the hot summer sun, while harvesting took place during the disagreeable weather of late fall.”<sup>425</sup> In total, the labor demands meant that most workers spent between 80 and 90 days on sugar beets and the beet calendar meant that most laborers started and concluded their years in beet fields.<sup>426</sup>

Before the turn of the century and the beet industry’s explosion, however, family labor filled most needs in southeastern Colorado. Like most nineteenth-century agriculturalists, Colorado farmers often utilized family members and neighbors to fill out their labor needs, only turning to “a few itinerant workers to meet peak season labor demands” (See Figure 22).<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Kent Hendrickson, “The Sugar-Beet Laborer and the Federal Government: An Episode in the History of the Great Plains in the 1930’s,” *Great Plains Journal* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 45-46.

<sup>426</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943” (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State College of A. & M.A. and United States Department of Agriculture in Cooperation with Office of Labor, War Food Administration, 1944), 4.

<sup>427</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943,” 1.



**Figure 22: Three adults and six children from seven years to twelve years hard at work on a sugar beet farm near Greeley Colorado. The children work all summer and go to school in the winter. Courtesy Library of Congress.**

Demand increased dramatically at the turn of the century with the beet boom, and local workers proved insufficient to meet production goals. Consequently, southeastern Colorado beet farmers looked for alternative labor sources. They initially turned to members of various Asian groups, especially immigrants from Japan, and companies recruited the workers to travel from Denver or settle in the area to labor in the fields. Farmers found that these individuals largely “did not prove satisfactory” because they often ended up starting their own farms once they built up enough capital. Their success at moving up the agricultural ladder complicated employers’ demands and, in this case, made them competition for farmers who initially hired them. This proved a



powerful deterrent to the use of Asian labor and growers and companies looked elsewhere as a result.<sup>428</sup>

Colorado sugar companies found a solution when they turned to largely Hispanic migrant labor that traveled between Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and even Oklahoma, to find seasonal employment. In addition, Mexican laborers became an increasingly important part of these labor streams by the mid 1910s, adding to the number of Spanish-speaking workers available to Colorado farmers. The Mexican Revolution started in 1910 and “as civil war raged through Mexico year after year, increasing numbers of Mexicans—a few political refugees, others with a heritage of seasonal migration, and many others mobilized by Carranza’s decree in January 1915 liberating them from peonage—fled the war’s chaos and its destruction of life and land.”<sup>429</sup> Employers throughout the Southwest tended to embrace these workers with open arms, especially since the First World War engendered a decline in immigration from Europe and left employers scrambling for workers. Immigration continued after the war, in spite of immigration restrictions, because sugar beet companies worked with cotton growers in Arizona, California, and Texas to earn exemptions for agricultural workers. Sarah Deutsch claims that the Mexican-born population in Colorado increased nearly fivefold between 1917 and 1920, to a total of 11,037, evidence of increased demand among mine owners and sugar beet growers. Deutsch contends that “the demand for imported labor increased faster than the acreage planted, which implies that it was Mexican labor, indeed, that provided the margin that made sugar-beet and other

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 1. Hamman is the epitome of increased state involvement after 1933, having served as County Extension Agent in Prowers County then as head of the Irrigation Division in southeast Colorado before taking over management of the agricultural labor division of wartime employment.

<sup>429</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 108.

agricultural expansion possible.”<sup>430</sup> Importantly, the dramatic expansion of irrigation operations in the region also made this possible, implying that the combination of water and workers made irrigated farming a financial success for Prowers farmers.

Even though the postwar period witnessed anti-Mexican sentiment in Colorado and New Mexico, the number of immigrants increased through the 1920s in both Prowers and Baca Counties. In Baca County, for example, the 1920 census showed zero Mexicans while the 1930 census counted a peak of 48 before it fell again to only eight in 1940. Prowers County numbers are a better indication of both the rise and fall as well as the proclivity for sugar beet companies in that county to bring in Mexican workers. The 1910 census tabulated 281 Mexicans and the 1920 census tallied 951, whereas the 1930 count calculated 1,436 before that number declined to only 918 in 1940.<sup>431</sup> The 1920s thus represented the peak decade for enticing Mexican workers into the two counties.

Farmers thus had two viable labor streams to meet production needs. The Hispanic workers largely did the agricultural labor, and generally stayed in sugar beets, meaning that they did not represent any competition for tenants on the agricultural ladder. Some competition and animosity existed during the lean years of the 1930s, but by then the practice of using Mexican and Hispanic labor had become commonplace across southern Colorado. Prowers County agent A.J. Hamman contended that

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<sup>430</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940*, 120.

<sup>431</sup> See the corresponding census data: Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913); Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922); Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932); Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942).

Spanish-speakers were “essentially an agricultural people.”<sup>432</sup> Furthermore, Hamman suggested that farmers were very comfortable with using Hispanic labor. He also claimed that they constituted the “most dependable and generally accepted group of seasonal workers because of their availability and adaptability to a wide variety of hand work.”<sup>433</sup> This assessment, while evidencing Hamman’s racialization of the migrant labor force – a view seemingly common to many farmers, sugar beet companies, and county agents – explained why migrants became the standard for paid labor and filled farmers’ needs through the first decades of the twentieth century.

This system took some time to mature, and interactions between Anglo-Americans and Hispanics often became complicated as each side looked out for its best interest. For example, the ways that companies changed their tactics suggests the ways that recruitment changed as companies prioritized a more stable and reliable workforce. Initially, according to Dennis Nodín Valdés, companies employed a “sojourner” strategy, meaning that they did not want any permanent worker settlements and simply wanted migrant workers to remain for the season and leave once the work had been done. That shifted after World War I when companies intensified recruitment and tried to entice workers to settle in the region so that they could attain reliable workers at less expense. The companies started to offer opportunities for settlement, providing workers with incentives to bring their families to Colorado and stay during the entire year – giving the companies a reliable work force that they could count on for the following

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<sup>432</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943,” 2.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

spring.<sup>434</sup> The companies often funded the construction of schools and housing to make the area more appealing to migrant families, facilitating what they hoped would effectively work as chain migration to maintain a steady flow of workers. This then afforded them broader appeal when the companies sent recruiters to find and then ship migrant and immigrant laborers. The employers generally identified and recruited workers and finally paid their transportation costs to get them to the fields.<sup>435</sup>

Those methods contributed to increasing the numbers of workers who stayed in the area beyond the season. Indeed, newspaper coverage in southeastern Colorado supports census data identifying the increasing presence of Hispanic residents in the sugar regions of Prowers County. The U.S. Census from 1930 tallied only 48 “Mexicans” in Baca County but 1,436 for Prowers County –local newspaper coverage evidenced this discrepancy and showed the relevance of Hispanic communities in Prowers County.<sup>436</sup> The *Lamar Daily News* consistently published articles describing activity in what they deemed the Hispanic part of Lamar. For instance, the paper informed readers of the Mexican Independence Day celebration held at the Mexican Lodge in “Colonia Juarez.”<sup>437</sup> The paper later noted a Cinco de Mayo party at the “Mexican colony” and explained that after some considerable debate, the celebrants decided to fly both American and Mexican flags at the function.<sup>438</sup>

These newspaper pronouncements suggested that Spanish speakers had started to carve out a place for themselves in local life by the early 1930s. None of the notices

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<sup>434</sup> Dennis Nodín Valdés, “Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940” *Great Plains Quarterly* (1990): 113.

<sup>435</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943,” 2.

<sup>436</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931).

<sup>437</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, September 09, 1933.

<sup>438</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, May 06, 1938.

regarding Hispanic news implied any animosity or racism against the minority, and other than a few articles describing crimes perpetrated by Hispanic men, the majority of coverage seemed to consider them a productive and important part of the community. For instance, as Hamman noted, many sugar beet companies enticed these workers by offering housing and schools, and the Lamar newspaper announced school construction in Lamar as well as Wiley.<sup>439</sup> The paper's notification about a community meeting organized to consider the resident Hispanic community in light of New Deal funding represented another example. The county-wide gathering met to discuss employment problems and relief issues Hispanic citizens faced in garnering federal financial assistance.<sup>440</sup> Such attention to the community illustrated its increasing size, scope, and influence in Prowers County before 1935.

Historians have looked at sugar beet companies' attempts to establish colonies like "Colonia Juarez" outside of Lamar, in two distinct ways. On the one hand, some have argued that such colonies indicate ethnic solidarity and migrants' concerted efforts to maintain cultural independence while also taking advantage of economic opportunities.<sup>441</sup> Conversely other scholars have perceived such colonization as an indication of racism and discrimination, and that the companies hoped to segregate the workers from the white community. For example, Ruben Donato contends that companies effectively "colonized" workers and neither the recruiters who shuttled them to the area nor the white residents living near them believed that they could – or should – amount to more than simple manual laborers. Moreover, Donato postulates that the

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<sup>439</sup> On the Wiley notice, see *Lamar Daily News*, November 13, 1933; for Lamar information, see A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 01, 1935 to October 31, 1936," Folder 6, Box 67.

<sup>440</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 12, 1934.

<sup>441</sup> The best example is Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge*, 3-9, 152-163.

migrant workers-turned-residents were exploited; they were underemployed, lived in relative squalor, and worked in deplorable conditions.<sup>442</sup>

Donato's interpretation identifies some of the more nefarious consequences for those the company successfully recruited to work. As Kent Hendrickson argues, companies employed multiple underhanded methods to force workers' compliance and keep them near their employers by circumventing their mobility. They could stall payments and not remit for two to three years after the work had been completed, thereby forcing the worker to stay in the area to eventually recoup his wages. Refiners also offered free rent and/or credit at the local grocery store during winter months to entice workers to stay. The company also knew that the worker who stayed would have a hard time skipping out on his grocery bill in the spring if he ever wanted to work for that company again. Finally, the company encouraged workers to build homes on company land. Unfortunately for the settlers, companies often funneled the workers to poor land and withheld the deed until the worker paid the whole mortgage. This started a cycle of indebtedness that held the worker on site until he could pay off the loan – something that often did not happen.<sup>443</sup>

Recruitment methods, nefarious or otherwise, proved so successful in building a deep labor pool that workers eventually started to think about organizing themselves. In effect, the burgeoning community of workers and their families started to think in terms

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<sup>442</sup> An example is Rubén Donato, "Sugar Beets, Segregation, and Schools: Mexican Americans in a Northern Colorado Community, 1920-1960" *Journal of Latinos and Education* 2, no. 2: 69-88. For further support of Donato's claims that the labor system was especially exploitive in northern Colorado fields, see *Denver Catholic Register*, May 23, 1929; Thos F. Mahoney, Chairman of Longmont Council of Mexican Welfare Committee, Knights of Columbus, to John E. Gross, Secretary-Treasurer Colorado State Federation of Labor, January 25, 1930, Folder Beet Field Workers' Conference-Greeley March 22, 1936 – Correspondence with Locals August 1, 1936, Box 46, Colorado State Federation of Labor, University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>443</sup> Kent Hendrickson, "The Sugar-Beet Laborer and the Federal Government: An Episode in the History of the Great Plains in the 1930's," 49.

of mutual needs and their rights, and they formed the Federated Beet Workers of Colorado under the American Federation of Labor umbrella in 1935.<sup>444</sup> Their preamble identified their desire to collectively bargain with the sugar beet companies in hopes of better treatment. They sought to unite the native and foreign-born workers in common struggle. The preamble noted the need for unemployment insurance, and it demanded an end to child labor, an improvement in conditions, and an expansion of education opportunities for workers and their children.<sup>445</sup>

The rise of industrial labor unions and the New Deal's apparent sensitivity to worker organization represented one catalyst for such unionization in Colorado fields. The drought and depression combined to act as another because the dual crises caused economic fallout among growers and refiners. The drought meant that even irrigated farmers needed to monitor production, and the depression adversely influenced sales. Consequently, neither grower nor refiner had much money. As employers are wont to do, the growers and refiners looked first at ways to cut their expenses by reducing labor costs. They used child labor when possible, they dropped wages, and they failed to do any upkeep on their facilities or employee housing. In effect, worker organization that culminated in unionization in 1935 represented the most obvious response to this

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<sup>444</sup> It does seem that the AFL had some trepidation about the potential for extremism among agricultural workers. A letter from the AFL president William Green to Secretary-Treasurer of the Colorado State Federation of Labor John E. Gross suggests that there could be some concern for incoming labor leader Paul Arias, who took over as President of Colorado State Federation Agricultural Workers Unions. William Green to John E. Gross, n/d, Colorado State Federation of Labor, Folder Beet Field Workers' Conference-Greeley March 22, 1936 – Correspondence with Locals August 1, 1936, Box 46, Colorado State Federation of Labor, University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>445</sup> No author, "Constitution and By-Laws of the Federated Beet Workers of Colorado," October 1935, Folder Beet Field Workers' Conference-Greeley March 22, 1936 – Correspondence with Locals August 1, 1936, Box 46, Colorado State Federation of Labor, University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

mistreatment and indicated the growing proletarianization of agricultural labor in the West that emerged during the New Deal.<sup>446</sup>

Refiners' mistreatment of migrant workers not only led to Colorado beet workers' unionization, but it also compelled the federal government to intervene in the industry during the New Deal. The Jones-Costigan Sugar Act, penned by longtime Colorado Representative Edward Costigan and Representative Marvin Jones from Texas, addressed both the industry's economic stability and its labor issues. Importantly, the Act included sugar cane and sugar beets as basic agricultural commodities and therefore eligible for inclusion under the management of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. In addition to offering direct subsidies for production reduction, the federal government tried to regulate and stabilize foreign and domestic prices for sugar – an important boost to the beet industry when it faced hard times with the drought and depression. In terms of labor, the Act stipulated that the Secretary of Agriculture could intervene to adjudicate labor disputes and create a minimum wage for laborers. Furthermore, the Act identified child labor as a significant problem in the sugar beet industry and gave the federal government the power to prohibit child labor from any child under the age of fourteen.<sup>447</sup>

The Act represented the New Deal's answer to stabilize the beet industry and to protect exploited workers, but it could not preclude the Great Depression's impact on the patterns of migration that fueled the industry. Certainly, most observers sensitive to the workers' plight supported the Jones-Costigan Act and federal intervention more

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<sup>446</sup> Kent Hendrickson, "The Sugar-Beet Laborer and the Federal Government: An Episode in the History of the Great Plains in the 1930's," 50-51.

<sup>447</sup> William T. Ham, "Sugar Beet Field Labor under the AAA" *Journal of Farm Economics* 19, no. 2 (May, 1937): 643-644.



broadly for cleaning up the industry and distributing the profits more equitably.<sup>448</sup> It was in line with the New Deal effort to bring labor to the table and provide workers with a chance to collectively bargain with employers. In essence, labor and capital came to more equitable terms during the New Deal by virtue of federal intervention. Many historians have attended to the plight of urban, industrial labor during this period, agricultural workers organized in response to similar grievances about wages, conditions, and hours.<sup>449</sup> The Hispanic effort in that regard was an important demonstration of both their increased political activity as well as their comfort working within the system to demand change. Their unity pushed Costigan to consider legislation, and, consequently, we can consider the sugar beet workers' unionization an important catalyst to gaining Washington's attention for agricultural laborers.

Such unionization illustrated unity among the beet workers but they still faced a number of challenges during the late 1930s. For example, dissonance existed between the laborers and members of the surrounding communities. Quite obviously, much of the tension grew between workers and the white population that dominated the economic and political aspects of life in the Arkansas Valley. Some animosity grew during the Great Depression because the economic crisis left many white Americans worried about their jobs or bitter about being unemployed. Consequently, beginning with the onset of the Great Depression, debates about the value of employing migrants, whether from neighboring states or from Mexico, became more frequent, as concerns

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<sup>448</sup> Blanche Hyde and J.H. McClelland, "History of the Extension Service of Colorado State College, 1912 to 1941" (Ft. Collins, CO: Extension Service, Colorado State College of Agricultural and Mechanic Arts, 1941), 106; see also *Lamar Daily News*, January 24, 1934, and May 11, 1934.

<sup>449</sup> Two of the better examples are Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, N.Y.: Verso, 1997).

over Americans' ability to survive the economic catastrophe gave rise to the argument of hiring only white Americans to do any type of labor. White Americans also grew restless because they believed that Mexican immigrants to the United States and Mexican Nationals received too much federal welfare and took up space on relief rolls, thereby taking potential relief money away from white Americans. Many growers and refiners supported the anti-migrant push and chose to use white labor when possible. Furthermore, the number of farmers able to produce enough to mandate outside employment diminished during the Dust Bowl, so agricultural jobs for anyone slowly started to disappear. The federal government also played a role in cutting off labor streams into the Arkansas Valley by enhancing penalties for illegal immigration and looking at a series of immigration quota bills designed to limit legal immigration to the U.S. from Mexico. This anti-Mexican hysteria contributed heavily to the fervor behind the repatriation movement that peaked during the 1930s. Mexican workers' departure challenged the migration patterns and employment opportunities that had satisfied beet growers; even though production demands had declined over the 1930s, the repatriation saga threatened to cut the Hispanic labor streams off entirely.

Much of the historiography detailing repatriation deals extensively, almost exclusively, with California, but Colorado was also home to repatriation pressures.<sup>450</sup> Speaking of communities in southern rather than southeastern Colorado, Sarah Deutsch notes, whether the majority left voluntarily or because of coercion, "whole communities

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<sup>450</sup> Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, Fourth Printing (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 2-4, 75-76. Additional coverage of the repatriation saga can be found in Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1976); Peter N. Kirstein, *Anglo Over Bracero: A History of the Mexican Worker in the United States from Roosevelt to Nixon* (R and E Research Associates, 1977).

disappeared from Colorado.”<sup>451</sup> No such dramatic cases seem to have occurred in Prowers. Regardless, the population fluctuated and the relationship between workers and employers changed. Certainly, some repatriates left by choice. The opportunity to own land in Mexico proved quite a draw when the Mexican government passed an equivalent to the Homestead Act as a way to get more Mexicans to settle in rural areas. It also helped that the Mexican government offered free rail transport to returnees. In addition, most workers faced cuts in their employment because their employers faced the same difficult economic times and cut labor costs. Workers’ hours and pay were often the first cuts and the most common tactic that employers used to save money. In some cases, employers lost their holdings and migrated from the region, obviously diminishing the number of potential employment opportunities for migrants. Instead of waiting around with little hope of surviving the down years, many Spanish-speaking migrants with the means to leave did so and never returned.<sup>452</sup>

More commonly, though, American citizens and the federal government pushed for and orchestrated the repatriation of Hispanic peoples from the U.S. to Mexico. Many repatriates found themselves at odds with important constituencies within the U.S. and faced significant pressure to leave the country. For example, Deutsch and Tanya Kulkosky identify a rift between the sugar companies who had once recruited the workers and wanted to keep them as cheap labor and the proponents of “nativistic, anti-immigrant fervor” in southeast Colorado.<sup>453</sup> Kulkosky claims that a number of different

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<sup>451</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge*, 163-167.

<sup>452</sup> See Robert Oppenheimer’s work on Kansas as one example. Robert Oppenheimer, “Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II” *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (Oct., 1985): 429-448.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-167 and Tanya W. Kulkosky, “Mexican Migrant Workers in Depression-era Colorado,” in *La Gente: Hispano History and Life in Colorado*, Vincent C. De Baca, ed., (Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1998), 128.

groups sided with repatriation advocates, including members from “all poorer classes regardless of ethnicity” who used an economic argument to justify their demands. Many agricultural and industrial workers argued that immigrants took their jobs by doing work for less money and therefore making themselves more appealing for employers. Kulkosky also cites tenants and agricultural laborers who had previously worked in the sugar beet industry but who lost their jobs with the downturn in production.<sup>454</sup> In effect, it became easy for whites who struggled to make ends meet during the depression to scapegoat immigrant workers for contributing to their problems. Other repatriation advocates also presented an ideological argument by contending that immigrants lacked the means or desire to assimilate to the “American way of life,” arguing that since they lived outside of white communities in segregated barrios or *colonias*, attended different schools, and refused to naturalize even when they had been in the country long enough to gain citizenship. In effect, such repatriation proponents argued that Mexicans had no desire to assimilate.<sup>455</sup>

While less politically influential than their white neighbors, many Hispanics also questioned Mexican Nationals’ place in the U.S. and argued in favor of their repatriation. One important reason for this animosity was that the backlash against aliens often left Hispanic residents dealing with collateral damage and therefore nervous about their own standing. Both Colorado residents and migrants to Colorado felt discriminated against because white Coloradans lumped them in with immigrants as

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<sup>454</sup> Tanya W. Kulkosky, “Mexican Migrant Workers in Depression-era Colorado,” 125. Eric Meeks exposes similar arguments made in favor of repatriation in Arizona. See Eric V. Meeks, “Protecting the ‘White Citizen Worker’: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in South-Central Arizona, 1929-1945” *Journal of the Southwest* 48, no. 1 (Spring, 2006): 91-113.

<sup>455</sup> Tanya W. Kulkosky, “Mexican Migrant Workers in Depression-era Colorado,” 127. Oppenheimer rightly points out that many of the reasons for this reluctance spread from white attempts to segregate and discriminate against the immigrants. See Robert Oppenheimer, “Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II.”

outsiders and undesirables.<sup>456</sup> Self-preservation also influenced the arguments to send immigrants home. Members of Hispanic groups like the American Citizens of Spanish Descent voiced their concerns that immigrants often took jobs and enjoyed federal relief when many members of the organization had been rebuffed in both regards. Indeed, some of the more vocal critics of immigrant aid tried to dissuade relief agencies, and especially the Works Progress Administration, from offering either employment or welfare to anyone unable to prove their citizenship.<sup>457</sup>

These amplified voices calling for repatriation or an alternative to limit the number of immigrants largely succeeded. Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez estimate that between 1930 and 1935 nearly 20,000 Mexicans and many of their American-born children either left Colorado voluntarily or became part of the approximately 400,000 total expelled from the U.S. during the first years of the Great Depression.<sup>458</sup> Colorado proponents of repatriation pressured Governor Edwin Johnson to ramp up state-led repatriation, and he responded by proposing to round up all aliens in the state and deport them unless federal officials quickened their pace and expanded their scope to expedite repatriation. In May 1935, his patience exhausted, Johnson ordered county sheriffs in southern Colorado counties to round up suspected aliens – especially beetworkers – to expedite the repatriation process.<sup>459</sup> This action led to the

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<sup>456</sup> Deutsch, 16.

<sup>457</sup> Kulkosky, 129-130. Conversely, John Gross complained to AFL president William Green and Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA, that the agency had done too little to help sugar beet workers and had “immediately and arbitrarily” taken workers off the WPA relief rolls. See John E. Gross to William Green, March 23, 1936, Folder Beet Field Workers’ Conference-Greeley March 22, 1936 – Correspondence with Locals August 1, 1936, Box 46, Colorado State Federation of Labor, University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado. See also *Pueblo Star Journal*, April 24, 1936.

<sup>458</sup> Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez suggest that a more accurate assessment, based on Mexican documents, is closer to 1 million people sent home over the 1920s and 1930s. See Balderrama and Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, 122.

<sup>459</sup> Deutsch, 165-166.

deportation of twenty seven Mexicans out of Prowers County in early May and seemed to aggravate the situation for both Mexicans left in the state and for Hispanics as well.<sup>460</sup>

Johnson was not yet done, however, and less than a year later he upped the ante when he decided to close the state's southern border. On the morning of April 20, 1936, Johnson sent members of the state's National Guard to the southern border from Utah to Kansas to block migration into Colorado. He ordered the troops to keep an especially well-trained eye on the southern border with New Mexico as well as the southeastern border with Texas and Oklahoma. Johnson gave the Guardsmen explicit instructions on who they should let in based on the requisites of money and financial responsibility: "If they do not have money for means of support, do not let them pass...Colorado cannot care for indigent from other states and these people become charges of the state after the brief spring labor season ends." Johnson ordered the blockade on April 18 as part of his declaration of martial law along the entire 360 miles of the southern border that included troops patrolling each entry point into the state.<sup>461</sup> This meant state officials stopped and searched every train, bus, truck, or automobile, and each passenger forced to prove citizenship and means to survive in the state. For example, troops stopped 194 cars at the summit of Raton Pass outside of Trinidad in south-central Colorado and sent four back to New Mexico.<sup>462</sup> Similarly, Guardsmen out of Lamar patrolled the borders in Baca County and stopped several vehicles, eventually

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<sup>460</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, May 07, 1935.

<sup>461</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, April 20, 1936; *Springfield Democrat Herald*, April 23, 1936.

<sup>462</sup> *Denver Post*, "Alien Labor Found With Rail Passes," April 22, 1936.

seizing two carloads of workers who had wintered in Texas and were en route to Fort Morgan for the spring planting season.<sup>463</sup>

Proponents of such a stiff response to migration certainly applauded Johnson's decision as a step toward regulating the influx of cheap labor into the state. Yet because of heavy criticism he lifted the blockade after less than two weeks. Critics of Johnson's border closure responded quickly, charging the governor for his "law-violating and publicity-seeking" move designed to win votes by hurting the needy.<sup>464</sup> Paul D.

Shriver, head of the Colorado Works Progress Administration, argued that Johnson had no power to refuse relief to aliens and migrants and reminded the governor that "aliens get hungry too."<sup>465</sup> One problem for Johnson was that neither he nor the Guardsmen made any distinction between citizens and Mexican Nationals, so that they often prohibited American citizens from crossing the state line. This mistreatment inspired vocal indictments from various Hispanic groups who, while they may have wanted to protect their jobs from Mexican immigrants, resented the state's willingness to lump all dark-skinned people together.<sup>466</sup> Johnson also seemed to understand that the blockade disrupted agricultural production because it cut off the flow of workers into the state just before planting season started. The consequent labor shortage stirred heavy resistance to the blockade among farmers desiring to use the migrant labor, and their voices combined with other criticism and convinced Johnson to call off the blockade on April 29.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, April 21, 1936.

<sup>464</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, April 21, 1936.

<sup>465</sup> *Lamar Daily News* April 20, 1936

<sup>466</sup> Deutsch, 166.

<sup>467</sup> *Lamar Daily News* April 30, 1936.

Johnson's blockade further exacerbated an already tight labor market, especially in the beet fields of southeastern and north-central Colorado and inadvertently offered a window into the future. The *Lamar Daily News* noted the need for farm labor in Prowers County for use on beet fields in the irrigated district less than a month after the blockade ended. The newspaper cited a number of local farmers who had been unable to satisfy their labor demand and wanted the city, county, and state to stop providing relief to "employable people" or to families who have "employable members."<sup>468</sup> Certainly, climate and crop projections directly influenced the need for such labor, but even as the weather remained dismal during 1936, 1937, and 1938, farmers wanted more access to migrant workers. Most of this demand originated from sugar beet farmers in Prowers County, but even broomcorn farmers in Baca County pushed for increased access to workers.<sup>469</sup> The old adage of "hope springs eternal" certainly applied for farmers who requested labor and who seemed to approach each planting season with the thought that this harvest would be better, that the weather would finally turn, and that production could rebound. They stubbornly maintained this outlook in spite of the continued depression and dust storms; that they did may have actually better prepared them for the end of drought in 1939 and the start of the Second World War.

#### •Conclusion•

The Dust Bowl and Great Depression combined to erode what had become a viable labor system for farmers who contracted with workers to meet production goals. The lean years of the 1930s had in fact been so lean that hundreds of tenants left

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<sup>468</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, May 26, 1936. Prowers County Agent A.J. Hamman noted widespread resistance to the Works Progress Administration for the same reason, see A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 1, 1935 to October 31, 1936," Folder 6, Box 67.

<sup>469</sup> See for example *Springfield Democrat Herald*, July 01, 1937; *Springfield Democrat Herald*, August 25, 1938; *Lamar Daily News*, August 17, 1940.



Prowers and Baca counties by the end of the decade. The slow drain of migrant and immigrant workers exposed a growing problem, further diminishing an already-shrinking labor pool. The lack of demand and uncooperative weather meant limited production throughout the 1930s; consequently there had been little need for tenants or hired hands, leaving former employees scrambling to find work for themselves regardless of where that job might present itself. The dual crises thus interrupted the labor regime that had become standard by the end of the 1920s, and growers who started to think about rehiring employees by the late 1930s had few options about how to reestablish the regime or develop a new one. By that point, concerns about having access to a viable labor pool became more pronounced, turning into outright crisis by 1939.

The number of tenants never fully recovered to pre-1935 levels. The move away from tenancy in the West became more pronounced after the war, but the writing seemed to be on the wall for tenants and small operators who struggled during the 1930s. The arid environment and high price for water rights meant that few small operators could survive on a small plot and without available capital to start and maintain their operations. In spite of federal assistance, then, tenancy in southeastern Colorado looked very different after the war than it had a decade earlier. As Robert McMillan noted, most of the tenants in Baca County by the time of his study had arrived in or after 1926, but within ten years most seem to have left or at least had thought about the possibility. Federal programs appeared to seek solutions to the most pressing problems, including the issue of restoring the agricultural ladder and making sure that tenants acted as good stewards of the land. Yet programs like the Bankhead-

Jones Tenant Act did little for tenants in either Baca or Prowers. As a result, they moved on in hopes of better opportunities elsewhere.

The same can be said for the presence of migrant laborers. The racism and xenophobia that compounded economic concerns and helped facilitate the repatriation movement eventually subsided, and not coincidentally it lessened as soon as farmers again needed inexpensive labor. The circumstances changed to some extent, though, as pressures to curtail immigration during the 1930s led to more federal oversight. Additionally, the seasonal migrant community that moved from village to field slowly became more sedentary. In sum, then, the stream of migrant workers that had been so fluid and abundant coming into the region from both neighboring states and Mexico temporarily dried up after 1935. Farmers again tapped these resources during the war, but the responsibility for contracting with the workers moved from sugar beet companies to the federal government, a move that changed the dynamics of employer-employee relations.

Neither Baca nor Prowers residents had a clear picture of how they could deal with the labor shortage. But once the weather turned, there was no ambivalence about the need for a healthy and competent labor pool. Unfortunately, the war aggravated the problem by instigating a slow trickle of able-bodied workers from the area to wartime industries that sprouted up across the Front Range. Local workers as well as migrants started to flood into defense industries once the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the U.S. formally entered the war. Colorado, like many western states, enjoyed a dramatic increase in federal largesse as a result of the attack and subsequent declaration of war. A sizeable number of men and women either enlisted or

were drafted to serve in the armed forces, and nearly 140,000 Coloradans served in one form or another. Additionally, wartime industries in Denver, such as the Denver Arms Plant, the Remington Company, and the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, enjoyed a dramatic increase in federal contracts that accompanied American involvement. Similar examples occurred in other parts of the state, like the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company in Pueblo, which took advantage of its opportunity to create large artillery shells and raked in federal dollars. Additionally, military posts shot up across the state as well, in places like Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Denver. These operations also required workers, ranging from flight instructors to clerical workers to janitorial staff. The military even bought swaths of open land to practice aviation and artillery, acquiring 800 square miles of mostly open land in Las Animas County, and 500,000 acres near La Junta for a practice range. Ranchers were allowed “to use the land for grazing purposes at their own risk.”<sup>470</sup>

The war of course amplified that need and led farmers to become more vocal about what they required to produce at the level the federal government requested and the war effort demanded. As they had before, the federal government helped farmers in ways that few observers could have imagined. The complexion of southeast Colorado society changed as the influx of government-provided contract labor replaced the number of former residents who had chosen to move on.

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<sup>470</sup> Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson, and Duane A. Smith, *A Colorado History*, Ninth Edition (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 2006), 321-325; Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, Fourth Edition (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 297-307. Quote reprinted from Abbott, et. al., pg. 306.

## CHAPTER SIX

### “Food for Victory”

After nearly a decade of poor weather, rain returned to the Great Plains in 1938. Precipitation levels returned to pre-Dust Bowl levels for the first time in 1940 before a deluge in 1941 brought more rain to the region than it had enjoyed in decades. A survey of some precipitation totals in the two counties suggests the reprieve from drought. Baca County farmers started the decade with 16.8 inches of precipitation in 1930, before the numbers bottomed out in 1934 at 8.5 inches, and finally recovered at 14.4 inches – about average for Baca – in 1940. Just in time for war, precipitation maxed out at 29.8 inches in 1941, a level that allowed farmers to produce in remarkable quantities for the war. Prowers County farmers endured similar fluctuations, as precipitation levels moved from 16.6 inches in 1930 to a mere 7.8 inches in 1934 and then rebounded to 14.1 inches in 1940. Like it had in Baca County, 1941 marked a banner year with 26.1 inches of precipitation as farmers prepared to feed the Allied war effort.<sup>471</sup>

Local newspapers celebrated each rain shower or snowstorm with excitement as searing temperatures cooled and rains picked up. For example, the *Lamar Daily News* announced: “Over an inch of rain in one January downpour! Not in years has such a thing occurred. There can no longer be any doubt about it, 1939 is the year!”<sup>472</sup> Prowers residents greeted one and a half feet of snow that hit in February 1939 with enthusiasm – it was the heaviest snow in twenty years – and the local newspaper gave it

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<sup>471</sup> Myron P. Gutmann, Great Plains Population and Environment Data : On-Line Extraction System [Computer file] (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan [producers], 2005).

<sup>472</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 9, 1939.

front page coverage. There was nothing new in celebrating precipitation like this.<sup>473</sup> But, adjacent to the story about the snowfall there appeared a story about the best ways farmers could conserve the moisture from the snow so as to maximize its benefits. The *Springfield Democrat Herald* demonstrated a similar appreciation for life after the Dust Bowl when it reprinted an article explaining the need for farmers to remember the horrors of the 1930s and to continue abiding by federal procedures to stabilize the land and the farm economy. The author reminded readers that even with the return of precipitation, those who lived through the decade should know well enough to not take it for granted or try to institute get-rich-quick schemes to capitalize on improved weather.<sup>474</sup> This conservation consciousness was new and demonstrated how farmers had embraced the New Deal conservation state and stood ready to protect their resources.

Agricultural conservation proponents faced a significant challenge with the onset of war in Europe and Asia because the war seemed to demand all-out production. The war compelled prognosticators to think about the brewing conflict's impacts on the American economy and specifically its potential benefit for the agricultural segment. Within weeks of Germany's advance into Poland in September 1939, southeastern Colorado newspapers published several disparate interpretations of the conflict's potential influence on America. One article suggested that the war could benefit farmers, as grain futures promised good prices and farmers could maximize production to capitalize on the high prices and heavy demand. The author believed that this promised profit for the resident farmer and not the speculator. Furthermore, farmers

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<sup>473</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, February 26, 1939.

<sup>474</sup> *Springfield Democrat Herald*, April 20, 1939.

could make money from the market while still receiving federal assistance for participating in New Deal programs – it was the best of both worlds.<sup>475</sup> A more measured, if borderline morbid, response from the U.S. War Department assured locals that “Colorado farmers won’t get rich this year on profits from the war in Europe, but they stand a good chance to reap a harvest of extra dollars if the conflict lasts another 12 months or longer.”<sup>476</sup>

Part of the reason for optimism was the Allies’ dire need for supplies, particularly after the Germans overran France and left Britain fighting alone. This heightened demand came while the New Deal was still offering subsidies to farmers for participating in various programs. That local farmers continued to abide by and partake in federal programs is testament to both the New Deal’s appeal in the region and to the extent of federal spending that provided such staying power. Indeed, 87% of residents polled in Baca County voted in favor of keeping the reformatted AAA in 1941, knowing full well that they could continue to make money by conserving their resources and staying actively involved in government programs.<sup>477</sup> Similarly, federal agencies like the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Soil Conservation Service, the Farm Security Administration, and the National Youth Administration maintained a presence in southeastern Colorado. Indeed, a quick perusal of Extension Service records indicates that the federal programs spearheaded by the county agent’s office continued almost without interruption during 1939 and into the 1940s.

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<sup>475</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, September 11, 1939.

<sup>476</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, October 10, 1939.

<sup>477</sup> *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, January 30, 1941.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor changed things. No one could have accurately predicted what the country would need to fight a two-front, global conflict, but it would certainly require more agricultural production than during the years when America served as the “arsenal of democracy.” In that sense, of course, shifting circumstances demanded adaptation by farmers, federal employees, and the federal government. For example, the federal government developed a series of morale-boosting programs, advertisements, and slogans designed to unify the citizenry behind the war effort after the U.S. declared war on Japan. The key theme underlying these programs in rural America – Food for Victory – recognized the important job that food producers had in supplying the military. The federal government organized a system that helped farmers prioritize what materials were most needed, how much acreage was necessary to meet production targets, and why they had to abide by acreage restrictions so as to not over-saturate the market and still reap financial benefits. Certainly, the Pearl Harbor attack sounded the horn for unity, sacrifice, and common purpose, and it offered a chance for farmers to free themselves of the Great Depression.

Many farmers had difficulty fueling the war effort, and therefore capitalizing on wartime demand, because they were unable to harvest their crops. Farmers had yet to reestablish any consistent labor system since the dissolution of tenant and paid labor that had served farmers so well until the mid-1930s. The slow drain of the labor pool that accelerated in 1939 became a veritable flood of workers leaving the countryside for either military service or work in wartime industries by early 1942. That individual farmers lacked the means to entice workers to stay in the fields during the war years when attractive employment alternatives grabbed their attention compounded the

problem. The federal government interceded in hopes that it could find some way to offset such labor losses and replenish the labor pool that had been dwindling over the previous ten years. The federal government acted in ways and on a scale that no individual farmer, corporation, town, county, or even state could match, and federal intervention proved definitive in providing necessary agricultural labor. By bringing in Mexican Nationals, Jamaicans, American Indians, German prisoners of war, and Japanese American prisoners from Camp Amache to supplement available migrant labor, the federal government used unprecedented measures to address the labor problem.

This chapter examines the wartime effort to corral labor, to create new streams of labor for southeastern Colorado farmers, and how the workers enabled farmers to produce for war. More specifically, it addresses the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service's role in that process by looking at how Extension ran the Emergency Farm Labor Program from 1943 to 1947. The Extension Service effectively took control of providing labor to needy farmers in mid 1943 and managed the importation, placement, and administration of workers until 1947. The Service's role in helping farmers meet production demands illustrates yet another way that Extension served its constituents. As they had during the 1930s, agents played a distinct and important role in the countryside, and during the 1940s that meant figuring out how to solve the labor problem. Agents distinguished where the labor was most needed, how to get it there, and in what capacity the workers could best meet local demand. The agents also remained the biggest organizer of and cheerleader for soil and water conservation, often reminding farmers that wartime demand did not negate the necessity of protecting



natural resources. They understood, and took pains emphasizing throughout the war, that the need for production could not be met if farmers disavowed the conservation measures that they had been utilizing for the past decade.

In this way, the agents, and the Extension Service more broadly, maintained a presence in the countryside during the war and continued to work as intermediaries between farmers and the federal government. They relied on the relationships they had forged with farmers during the 1930s and the faith that farmers put in them paid off when farmers turned to Extension agents to fulfill their labor needs. In that respect, the war initiated another phase in the relationship between farmers and Extension and showed another way that Extension employees worked with farmers in response to crisis. It is evident that the New Deal largely set the stage for the country's successful production during World War II. Continued government involvement and Washington's willingness to fund important programs in rural America continued during the war, as did residents' readiness to take advantage of such federal endeavors. Both examples evidenced consistency between the New Deal and World War II. The Extension Service marked another point of consistency, as the Extension Service sat at the middle of it all and played a chief role in keeping the homefront humming during and immediately after the war.

The workers themselves are of course an important part of the story of wartime labor in the region. For the most part, though, this chapter explores the relationships that agents had with farmers and only delves superficially into how agents related to workers or how workers experienced the war years. The agents' review of workers emerges in heavily racialized language and is thus probably indicative of how many

rural white Americans viewed those they considered “outsiders” during the 1930s and 1940s. This was very much a racialized landscape, as Extension workers worked to separate different worker groups from others and often policed relations between farmers and their employees. It seems that employers had a level of comfort with people from groups that they had some previous exposure to – including Germans and Mexican Nationals – but they seemed perhaps most critical of and least likely to use Jamaican labor and only lukewarm to Japanese American workers. The sugar beet farmers also appeared to be more willing than their Baca neighbors to utilize labor of any distinction, presumably because of their longer history utilizing paid migrant labor. Even then, however, race dictated how the workers experienced the war years. The workers toiled in different farms, lived in different camps, and were undoubtedly working in the region for various, divergent reasons. Many faced discrimination and some complained to federal or state authorities, but few enjoyed much recourse after airing their grievances. In the end, the workers had little leverage against their employers and effectively became another cog in the machinery that produced for war.

#### •Preparing for War•

The attack on Pearl Harbor induced a national sense of emergency, but it took some time for the U.S. to transition from Arsenal of Democracy to belligerent. Agricultural production represented a core aspect of mobilization; obviously a military cannot function without provisions, so the federal government looked to America’s farmers immediately after Congress declared war. Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard inspired farmers with the slogan “Food for Victory” and promised farmers that “food will win the war and write the peace.” The slogan represented a concerted effort

to remind farmers of the depression that followed World War I and convince them that the same set of circumstance – and economic fallout – could recur unless they took responsibility for managing production and abiding by government directives. Wickard emphasized the importance of focusing on the most needed commodities and explained how blind production, without an understanding of what the military and its Allies needed, would simply disrupt the war effort. In effect, an implicit danger existed because farmers might be tempted to maximize their output, out of both a patriotic and market-driven desire, and if they did then they could easily upset demand, drive down prices, and saturate the market. Wickard hoped that federal directives regarding production goals would negate that possibility and stabilize the relationship between supply and demand to safeguard both production and commodity prices.<sup>478</sup>

Federal observers like H. H. Finnell worried that farmers might forget the aftermath of World War I and its negative effect on land prices, personal debt, and soil conservation. Finnell, Regional Director of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), reminded farmers that high prices and high demand both evaporated once the war ended. Unfortunately, the temporary wartime boon had proved enough to entice farmers to expand and mechanize, forcing many into extensive debt. Speculators participated in the mad dash for land only to see their investments dry up with the drop in prices and eventually with the drought during the 1930s. Finnell hoped that farmers remembered the bleak period – and its cause – and that they would approach the

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<sup>478</sup> See “Again, Food Will Win the War and Write the Peace, Adds Secretary Wickard,” *Life*, August 11, 1941; “Food: The Farmers Come Through,” *Time*, August 06, 1942.

postwar period with a better appreciation for sustained prosperity rather than a get-rich-quick mentality.<sup>479</sup>

Finnell and others hoped that farmers would act differently in another way as well: by thinking more intently about conserving their natural resources. The push to produce during and after World War I led to the great plow up and the decimation of Plains topsoil, something that conservationists urged farmers to remember. Finnell assured Colorado farmers that conserving soil was necessary “to meet national defense demands” by safeguarding and eventually improving the land’s productivity in the time of crisis.<sup>480</sup> Mismanagement of resources or excessive production threatened the soil and therefore jeopardized the war effort. According to southeastern Colorado district conservationist R.A. Harris, “War time farming means conservation farming.” Harris implored farmers to appreciate that since “total war requires total production” they must “build up soil fertility” and “make the best use of every drop of water.” Harris echoed Finnell’s argument by contending that farmers could ensure their long-term productivity by working with the SCS and other agencies devoted to land management. They both put forward the conviction that postwar prosperity started with conscientious stewardship during the war.<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, December 10, 1942.

<sup>480</sup> H.H. Finnell, quoted in *Lamar Daily News*, July 14, 1941.

<sup>481</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, December 31, 1942.



Figure 23: "Get your Farm in the Fight"  
[http://library.marshallfoundation.org/posters/library/posters/poster\\_full.php?poster=498](http://library.marshallfoundation.org/posters/library/posters/poster_full.php?poster=498).

Fortunately, New Deal conservation policies helped prepare farmers to conserve resources prior to the war by educating farmers, subsidizing their efforts, and supporting

their establishment of county-level soil conservation districts to police local practices. By the start of war, then, farmers in both Prowers and Baca had been active conservationists. Soil conservation districts contained most of Baca County by late 1941 and in an indication of how important conservation seemed to have become by that point, the *Lamar Daily News* announced the attack on Pearl Harbor beside an article announcing the establishment of a soil conservation district in Prowers County.<sup>482</sup> Such districts supplemented local efforts at conservation by offering classes, meetings, and demonstrations on proper conservation methods. The districts also lent equipment to protect fields or repair dams and other irrigation equipment and provided labor to do the work.<sup>483</sup> This Prowers County district joined three others in Baca County, meaning that districts controlled the majority of acreage in the two counties by the onset of war – an important indication that farmers embraced conservation beyond the end of the Dust Bowl era.

Belonging to a soil conservation district showed a proclivity for conservation but it did not guarantee that members always practiced restraint. For some farmers, government production limits made no sense. The government identified what it wanted and assessed how much it wanted, but by turning away other products or farmers' surpluses the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) effectively hurt the farmers. The war promised an opportunity to make up for lost time, to earn money after so many years of small harvests, and to finally dig out from under heavy debt. The thought that the government could or would impede their financial success left many with a bad taste in their mouths about government intervention – to some extent this

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<sup>482</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 08, 1941.

<sup>483</sup> *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, September 14, 1944; *Lamar Daily News*, March 05, 1942.

constituted a return to traditional anti-government sentiment that had temporarily lapsed during the New Deal. For example, a Baca County farmer approached the county agent with the argument that “Providence” had finally provided rain but the federal government restricted wheat production and decided the sale price, circumventing farmers’ chance for profit in two ways.<sup>484</sup> Similarly, local Farm Bureau leaders complained about federal stipulations on both production and prices, noting that 1943 prices for goods were often actually lower than they had been in 1918. Bureau representatives blamed the government for going overboard on such regulations and price controls, which they used to manage the economy to the farmers’ detriment.<sup>485</sup>

While the government maintained its influence on pricing and production guidelines, the federal government’s overall presence in the countryside diminished over the course of the war. Priorities changed once the war started. For instance, the SCS actually dissolved its Southern Great Plains branch in 1942 because federal officials believed that the time of crisis in the Dust Bowl region had passed. They argued that improved weather negated the need for a branch principally devoted to the Dust Bowl region, as “favorable seasons” combined with “widespread acceptance of conservation farming methods” to imbue conservationists with confidence that farmers had sufficiently turned a corner.<sup>486</sup> Implicit in this justification and explicit in other cases, however, was the fact that Washington turned most of its attention to the war and focused on international rather than domestic issues. The federal government often

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<sup>484</sup> Claude E. Gausman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, November 01, 1941 to December 01, 1942,” 15, in Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Baca County Annual Reports, 1931-1932, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. All future citations for Colorado Extension Service records include only author, title of annual report, folder, and box number. *Lamar Daily News* covered the debate for much of spring 1942; see for example *Lamar Daily News*, May 6, 1942.

<sup>485</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, February 16, 1944.

<sup>486</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, June 02, 1942.

funneled financial and human supplies from agencies not involved in the war effort to agencies tied to it. As a result, many agencies became so taxed and short on resources that mundane tasks easily accomplished before Pearl Harbor became more difficult after America entered the conflict. Even when farmers wanted assistance on how to best conserve water, for example, the local experts from the SCS had no time to help. In one case, locals requested a demonstration from the local SCS on how to best maximize water from their irrigation ditch but no one answered their call. The temporary cessation of construction on John Martin Dam during the war marked an obvious example, and the break meant that locals only enjoyed its benefits after 1948 when workers finally completed the dam, some five years after the projected conclusion.<sup>487</sup>

While many New Deal agencies like the SCS became less involved in rural America because of the war, the Extension Service and the county agents maintained a constant presence throughout the period. The agents continued to act as intermediaries between the federal government and local farmers during the war by executing production regulations, instituting acreage limits to manage how much land farmers devoted to specific crops, and promoting soil and water conservation. In that sense, agents, and the Extension Service more broadly, represent a point of consistency connecting the New Deal and the war. With the agents' help, the government had identified the most essential materials for war by early 1942 – and fortunately for Colorado farmers the list included many of their principal crops. Wheat, sugar beets, and broomcorn topped the list, and when coupled with vegetables, potatoes, and meat from hogs, cattle, and sheep, southeastern Colorado farmers had the opportunity to cash

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<sup>487</sup> Jack N. French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 30, 1940 to November 30, 1941," Folder 11, Box 67.



in on government purchasing. The wheat and sugar beet allotments were arguably the most important. Wheat, of course, became a central part of the soldiers' diet, and sugar beets rose in prominence because, as historian Louis Fiset notes, the "continued loss of sugar supplies from the Philippine Islands and Java...and [the] conversion of vast quantities of disaccharide to industrial alcohol for the manufacture of synthetic rubber" meant an increased demand for the war effort.<sup>488</sup> Agents and Extension employees also spearheaded the federal effort to plan and prepare "for the greatest farm production effort of all time." This meant helping farmers to repair their machinery, ensuring that they had access to seed, clearing up scrap metal for conversion into military items like tanks and planes, and clarifying a system of financing so that farmers could abide by federal demands. The Extension Service also provided experts in plant disease, irrigation, and home gardening to answer questions and lead county-wide demonstration meetings once a month in early 1942. Such cooperation between the various levels of employees and farmers proved vital to jump-starting the war effort.<sup>489</sup>

The Extension Service also helped the federal government by managing its attempt to provide agricultural labor for American farmers. The dearth of serviceable agricultural labor caused by outmigration and a decline in seasonal labor posed a significant challenge to wartime production. As Colorado Cooperative Extension Service Director F. A. Anderson explained, the labor issue became dire by the summer of 1942 as the already-dwindling numbers of available workers was further decimated by large-scale enlistment and continued migration to urban areas for industrial work.

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<sup>488</sup> Louis Fiset, "Thinning, Topping, and Loading: Japanese Americans and Beet Sugar in World War II," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 90 (Summer 1999): 126. See also stories in *Lamar Daily News*, February 05, 1942 and *Lamar Daily News*, February 19, 1942.

<sup>489</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, March 04, 1942.

The War Food Administration's demand for increased acreage and food production in crops critical to the war effort brought crisis to Colorado farms. The Department of Agriculture took responsibility for supplementing labor, but it took some time to win Congressional authorization and funds for action. The key moment came when the USDA appointed the Extension Service to address the labor problem and Extension took over on May 1, 1943. Unfortunately, by that point the spring planting season was already underway and the Extension Service scrambled to meet demands. Once the Service got its feet on the ground, however, it responded to the labor problem in novel and remarkable ways by reaching out to workers first made available, or only made available, during the war.<sup>490</sup>

#### •Extension as Labor Broker•

A.J. Hamman, one time Prowers County Extension agent as well as district soil conservationist during the New Deal years, ended up directing the Colorado Emergency Farm Labor Program from 1943 to 1946. As he remembered it, Extension Director F. A. Anderson called him and recruited him for the position. Hamman had experience in the sugar beet industry and had recruited labor for a private company called Broadacre. Moreover, his time as a county agent gave him the perspective on how to deal with farmers as well as Extension employees. Hamman reluctantly agreed to take the position, in part because he realized that the job would be complicated since Colorado “had a much greater and more constant demand for out-of-state-workers than any of the surrounding states.” Hamman immediately tried to get “competent people” for his staff and looked to “ex-sugar agriculturalists and persons with that type of experience.” He

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<sup>490</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” (Fort Collins, CO: Extension Service, Colorado A & M College, 1947), 2-3.

convinced a trio of men to work as his inner circle, men he had previously worked with in the Arkansas Valley and who had maintained ties to various sugar companies in the region. Hamman's decision to use sugar men illustrated the place that sugar beets held in the state's crop hierarchy, especially during the war, and also showed his appreciation for its status as the Colorado crop possessing the highest labor requirements. He hoped that their previous experience working with contract farmers and contract labor could prepare them to work with the Extension Service.<sup>491</sup>

Under Hamman's direction, the Service turned first to a tried and true labor source, local residents and their children, who were well suited – and available – to help on area farms. Starting in 1943, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction allowed for school aged children to serve as a supply of seasonal workers on neighboring farms as needed. Local leaders, ranging from teachers to representatives of church officials to scout leaders, recruited the students and prepared them for work, then made arrangements with local farmers who needed workers.<sup>492</sup> For its part, the Extension Service tried to build support for the program by distributing pamphlets and holding informational meetings as well as empowering community leaders who organized recruitment. A pamphlet from the Service noted that “our farmers’ sons and hired men have been called to fight” and so “every available person...every able-bodied boy and girl in every city, town, and village” needed to answer the call for production. Without such help, “our fighting men don’t get their food and they can’t protect themselves

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<sup>491</sup> A.J. Hamman, *The Long Journey* (Marjorie J. Miller, 1989), 136.

<sup>492</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 13.

against the enemy and fewer of them will come home when the fighting stops.”<sup>493</sup>

Obviously relying on the sense of common sacrifice and compassion, such calls for action helped bring teenagers into the fields. For example, forty-two young men worked Prowers County fields in 1943 in response to labor demands.<sup>494</sup>

This kind of volunteer effort constituted an important tool for farmers and represented one piece of the domestic labor used to meet labor needs. Additional options became available as well, and sometimes from surprising sources. The USDA helped establish an umbrella organization for all farm workers called the United States Crop Corps, a “national decentralized farm labor program” under USDA and Extension Service jurisdiction that the USDA created in 1943.<sup>495</sup> The Crop Corps included a number of groups, including the Victory Farm Volunteers, comprised primarily of high school students who worked the fields during peak times, and the Women’s Land Army, part of the nearly 3.5 million people who labored in American fields during the war.<sup>496</sup> While no significant effort to organize women to volunteer for the Women’s Land Army emerged in 1943, the number of women from the Land Army working in the region increased in 1944 and again in 1945. Additionally, Colorado officials opened the State Penitentiary to allow farmers to access convict labor. If a farmer agreed to cover travel expenses then the Penitentiary supplied guards to supervise the

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<sup>493</sup> A.J. Hamman, “How to Fight on the Farm Front” (Fort Collins, CO: Extension Service, Colorado State College, 1943), Folder Annual Report – Emergency Farm Labor 1943, Box 137, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>494</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943” (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State College of A. & M.A., 1944), 49, Folder Annual Report – Emergency Farm Labor 1943, Box 137, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>495</sup> Stephanie Ann Carpenter, “‘Regular Farm Girl’: The Women’s Land Army in World War II” *Agricultural History* 71, no. 2 (Spring, 1997): 163.

<sup>496</sup> Stephanie Ann Carpenter, “‘Regular Farm Girl’: The Women’s Land Army in World War II,” 164; “U.S. to Mobilize Land Army of Over 3 millions,” *Denver Post*, January 25, 1943.

work; roughly 350 convicts worked in Colorado fields under this arrangement, a demonstration of the lengths to which farmers went to satisfy labor needs. The Extension Service also organized an effort to place conscientious objectors on farms. The state constructed two camps for objectors, and, once they had been cleared for work, the Extension Service transported them to area farms and placed them under the county agent's supervision. Conscientious objector labor, like that of the convicts, did not greatly impact southeast Colorado war production. Yet everything helped given farmers' dire need and the Extension Service's lack of alternatives.<sup>497</sup>

Yet Extension employees and federal officials quickly realized that agriculturalists still lacked a labor pool that allowed them to keep up with demand. Local and state options proved inadequate. Consequently, farmers as well as state and federal employees started to mull over their options. They left no stone unturned, and their efforts resulted in a surprising influx of workers. The federal government provided access to an unprecedentedly diverse array of workers, by negotiating with other countries to institute guestworker programs and by providing German and Japanese American prisoners of war to needy farmers. Consider the sequence of events that produced enough workers for Colorado farmers. The decision to incarcerate Japanese Americans, moving them from the West Coast inland to protect sensitive and vulnerable war industries, forced the exclusion of roughly 120,000 people to incarceration camps across the Mountain West. American advancement across Africa and eventually Europe meant a constantly increasing pool of Axis prisoners of war that the federal government shipped across the Atlantic to work in the U.S. for the Allied

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<sup>497</sup> A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943," 24-25, 61-62.

war effort. Additionally, the federal government hammered out deals with Mexico and Jamaica to initiate the recruitment, importation, placement, and payment of eligible workers. Finally, the state pushed for increased domestic migration into areas hard-pressed for laborers.<sup>498</sup>

Coloradans pushed particularly hard for government action to bring in workers and the government responded. The situation proved incredibly complex. In each case, for each group that ended up in Colorado, a combination of local and federal forces made it possible to bring workers into the state. Indeed, even though the federal government initiated the guestworker programs and decided to send prisoners of war into Colorado, each situation required some level of local/county and state cooperation in finding adequate accommodations for these groups – to say nothing of pacifying residents, many of whom feared the influx of these outsiders who were ostensibly enemies of the state. Certainly, the Jamaican and Mexican labor also required housing and payment in addition to the first step of making contact and then transporting them to their stations. In other words, the dramatic and expansive incorporation of these outside workers caused problems and led to some trepidation among Prowers and Baca County residents. Regardless of any such hesitancy or doubt, however, the federal government's effort and the Service's Emergency Farm Labor Program proved remarkably effective and absolutely crucial for farmers to produce enough for the war effort.

The government's importation of Jamaican labor has been largely forgotten in the annals of World War II, and the little work that has considered their efforts in the

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<sup>498</sup> A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943," 24-40.

U.S. has glossed over the workers in the Great Plains.<sup>499</sup> Like most of the groups that eventually toiled in Colorado fields, the Jamaican laborers found themselves in unfamiliar surroundings and forced to deal with American farmers and bureaucrats. Moreover, little consistency existed in terms of the number of imported workers – crews changed from season to season and the number of Jamaicans in the U.S. varied per year by up to 1,500. This variance reflected a tendency among farmers to opt in favor of using other groups, primarily because they had previously gained some exposure to the other groups. In addition, Jamaicans quickly earned a bad reputation in the state. Many farmers, and even some county agents, believed that Jamaican workers were inadequate, that they lacked the effort and expertise that Mexicans demonstrated. For example, Prowers County agent Max Mills claimed that Jamaicans, or “Jakes” as they were called at the time, became the worst of the new workers because they were “not as careful in their work” and “there were many social problems” among the workers, which exacerbated the tenuous relationship between worker and farmer.<sup>500</sup>

The Extension Service reiterated these concerns and noted that the unimpressive reputation meant that relatively few Jamaicans found their way into Colorado. Indeed, only four communities used Jamaican labor in 1943 and 1944. According to A.J. Hamman, farmers “only requested and accepted [Jamaican workers] as a last resort”

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<sup>499</sup> Three examples from Cindy Hahamovitch cover the importation of Jamaican workers but focus more closely on the eastern United States. See Cindy Hahamovitch, “‘In America Life is Given Away’: Jamaican Farmworkers and the Making of Agricultural Immigration Policy” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001): 134-160; Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man’s Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>500</sup> Max Mills, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1944 to December 01, 1945,” 28, Folder 16, Box 67; Hamman noted that “we” called Jamaicans “Jakes” See A.J. Hamman, *The Long Journey*, 142.

and “with considerable misgivings.”<sup>501</sup> As director of the program, Hamman did relatively little to secure Jamaican workers and had very little patience for them once they arrived in the state. He recalled an instance when nearly an entire trainload of workers arrived and promptly refused to do any farm work. Hamman had them placed back on the train and returned to Jamaica for not fulfilling their contracts.<sup>502</sup> Some arrived “dissatisfied,” which Hamman and others took as a sign that the crew did not want to be in Colorado and that they should be sent home. Hamman believed that such apparent apathy indicated the entire group’s predisposition against hard work and cold weather, but he felt that the workers could be best utilized during the warm months in lower altitudes, especially when the farmers warmed them up with “friendliness, flattery, small favors, and fair treatment.” Even when this approach proved successful, however, Hamman warned farmers to not rely solely on Jamaicans for their county labor supply. Hamman’s reaction to the “outsiders” and his unfamiliarity with Jamaicans most certainly influenced his racialized perspective. But his reluctance to contract Jamaicans suggests that many Coloradans felt similarly and his post as program supervisor gave him the power to determine who made it to the fields. In essence, as State Supervisor of the Emergency Labor Program he was able to influence how many Jamaicans worked in Colorado so his impressions of their work ethic and skill level indicate a general reticence to use Jamaican labor.<sup>503</sup> In spite of his misgivings, however, Colorado farmers eventually employed more than 2,000 Jamaicans during

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<sup>501</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program” (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State College of A. & M.A., 1944), 33, Folder Annual Report Emergency Farm Labor 1944, Box 137, Records of the Colorado Cooperative Extension, Colorado Agricultural Archive, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

<sup>502</sup> A.J. Hamman, *The Long Journey*, 142.

<sup>503</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program” (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State College of A. & M.A., 1944), 33.



1945. Though not a significant number considering the total of nearly 45,000 contract workers used during that year, Jamaican guestworkers became an important part of the labor used during the war.<sup>504</sup>

Because Colorado farmers proved more willing to use bracero labor instead of Jamaican workers, a considerable number of Mexican Nationals found work in the state during the war. Acknowledging their presence in the Colorado fields adds to the existing historiography on the guestworkers, since the vast majority of the literature deals with California or the Southwest.<sup>505</sup> Certainly, many braceros found jobs in California because of labor-intensive agricultural production in that state, but R. Douglas Hurt's recent synthesis of how World War II impacted the Plains is an important addition to the historiography. Hurt shows that braceros played a part in agricultural production in a number of Plains states, including Wyoming, Nebraska, and, of course, Colorado. In addition, many of the first braceros to arrive in Colorado worked manual labor jobs on railroads or in mines or in factories like the Colorado Fuel and Iron plant in Pueblo.<sup>506</sup> In both industrial and agricultural labor, then, the braceros helped Coloradans and Colorado companies produce for war

The first Mexican Nationals arrived in the United States in spring of 1943 after Congress passed Public Law 45 to provide federal funding for a guestworker program. Public Law 45 and its successors arranged for Mexican workers to fill labor shortages

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<sup>504</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, May 22, 1945.

<sup>505</sup> See for example, Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story; An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California, 1942-1960* (San Jose, CA: McNally & Loftin, 1964); Peter N. Kirstein, *Anglo over Bracero: A History of the Mexican Worker in the United States from Roosevelt to Nixon* (San Francisco, CA: R and E Research Associates, 1977); Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-era California* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

<sup>506</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 217-224. Hurt's work is important because of its attention to the region and because of its sweeping synthetic analysis, but its extensive scope precludes in depth local studies, something that this dissertation hopes to provide.

across the country. The legislation exempted recruits from military service, and the government covered their transportation and living expenses en route to the fields. Upon their arrival, the workers stayed at housing provided by private agricultural groups who received some assistance from the federal government to defray their costs. The two nations agreed that wages should equal the prevailing wage scale and these workers should be free from discrimination by their employers. In effect, then, the worker and employer signed a contract to acknowledge that both sides understood the wage and housing requirements; the worker started once both had signed the contract.<sup>507</sup> Negotiations over acquiring Jamaican workers emphasized similar stipulations, as each of the guestworker programs meant to entice workers, but the U.S. had to ensure that the workers benefitted from their time in the States.

In some respects, the government-run guestworker program looked very much like the importation of labor by private companies and local organizations. For example, both the East and West Prowers County Farm Labor Associations established contact with Mexican Nationals and successfully filed contracts to bring them to work in the beet fields. Large corporations like the Holly Sugar Corporation and the Great Western Sugar Corporation often opened their warehouses or constructed camps for workers they contracted and provided to their growers and processors. For example, Prowers County had two such camps that the Holly Sugar Corporation and American Crystal Sugar Corporation built to house workers during their off time. Once settled, Mexican Nationals filtered out to farms that had established agreements with the

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<sup>507</sup> A solid description of the early efforts at starting the program and its goals can be found in Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Santa Barbara, CA: McNally & Loftin, 1964), 45-48. On Colorado, see the brief account in A.J. Hamman, , “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943,” 28-29.

corporations. This practice became somewhat common during World War I and the 1920s before becoming less frequent during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression.<sup>508</sup>

The Extension Service effectively took the responsibility of managing labor from these private and public enterprises in order to centralize labor recruitment. An example of this kind of arrangement was the Baca County Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp that had been abandoned once that program concluded in the county. With the CCC boys gone, the empty camp offered a perfect place to house Mexican Nationals and other outside workers. The government paid for upkeep, repairs, and necessary improvements at such camps to ensure that the workers lived in adequate conditions. Extension also offered equipment for a nominal fee, meaning that farmers had a veritable one-stop shop for all things related to labor, particularly for those not aligned with some of the major sugar companies but who wanted access to a reliable labor force. Area farmers could thus stop by these sites, recruit the workers, access farm machinery, and even rent cots, tents, and other necessities they required to house the workers on their own property during times of intense work – thereby saving them additional transportation costs and lost time in the field.<sup>509</sup>

State Supervisor Hamman believed that Colorado farmers felt more comfortable hiring Mexican Nationals than any other available group. In part, he explained, this was because farmers had become accustomed to using Spanish-speaking immigrant and migrant labor before the war started. Hamman noted that many farmers believed that braceros were superior workers, more diligent and knowledgeable than the Jamaicans.

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<sup>508</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 24-26.

<sup>509</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 24-26.

Consequently, farmers searched for alternatives to using Jamaicans, and, in many cases, the alternative was bracero labor. By the numbers, the peak for Mexican Nationals in the state stood at 10,000 in 1944 compared to the nearly 2,000 Jamaicans brought in during the period of highest demand in 1945.<sup>510</sup> The predilection for Mexican labor proved especially true in the sugar beet industry, which pressured Congress to pass the legislation and used more seasonal contract labor than any other constituency in Colorado.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, March 24, 1944; *Lamar Daily News*, May 22, 1945.

<sup>511</sup> A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943," 28-29.



**Figure 24: "APR 1 1945 Migrant Labor - Colo. A scene inside one of the cars of the special train. The workers are shown making "Victory Signs" with upraised fingers. They feel their farm work is a blow at Hitler." Courtesy Viva Colorado.**

Relations between farmers and guestworkers were never solely about the work in the field. Hamman noted that while farmers regularly told him that the Mexican Nationals were "very satisfactory workers," farmers had problems communicating with

the workers, and, at least early in the program, getting in tune with federal officials to secure the right number of workers for their needs. Perhaps most importantly, farmers had trouble completing the stipulations put forward by the legislation that created the guestworker program; this applied to their dealings with both Mexicans and Jamaicans. Farmers had a terrible time finding extra work for the Nationals beyond what they offered in their own fields; this proved problematic because farmers agreed to keep guestworkers employed for 75% of the season. For example, beet growers had to coordinate with other farmers who needed workers for wheat or alfalfa or broomcorn in order to satisfy the work requirement set forth in the worker-employer contract.<sup>512</sup> Conditions in the camps or other temporary settlements to house workers also complicated relations. Braceros usually wanted “able cooks who were Mexicans or who had had experience in Mexican cooking” but this “was a problem that was never completely solved.”<sup>513</sup> Jamaicans similarly lamented that camps lacked a Jamaican cook and they routinely suffered through dismal food.<sup>514</sup> Guestworkers complained about the pay scale and delinquent payments, both of which became significant problems in sugar beets because workers were paid “on a piecework basis” and farmers often had trouble calculating the workers’ wage.<sup>515</sup>

Finally, racism sometimes flared up, though Jamaicans seem to have had a more difficult time dealing with racism in the South than anywhere else.<sup>516</sup> Hamman noted that while the contractual agreement promised no social or class barriers, the reality on

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<sup>512</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943,” 29.

<sup>513</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-1947*, Agricultural Monograph No. 13 (Washington, D.C.:USDA Bureau of Economics, 1951), 229.

<sup>514</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-1947*, 264.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-260; Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man’s Land*, especially 67-85.

the ground reflected a continuation of such discrimination. He argued that the contract should be changed to reflect that such obstacles existed, in addition to other “barriers in both the United States and Mexico in which neither race nor color is involved.” He concluded that “racial discrimination cannot be overcome by international agreements.”<sup>517</sup> Hamman and the Extension Service attempted to preclude such conflict by keeping groups of workers separate and by trying to maintain enough of a presence in the farmer-worker relationship that ensured that the guestworker contracts would be satisfied. Of course conflict still erupted from time to time, and workers continued to criticize the Service and the U. S. government for not doing a better job protecting their rights, but, on the whole, clash between worker and employer were few.

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<sup>517</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1944,” 20-22.



Figure 25: "Mexican workers recruited and brought to the Arkansas valley, Colorado, Nebraska and Minnesota by the FSA." Courtesy Library of Congress.

The problem was not exclusive to white and Mexican relations, however, as Hamman mentioned significant conflict between “resident Spanish-American and alien Mexicans.” Such issues resembled the kind of animosity that the two sides lived through during the 1920s and early 1930s when they competed for many of the same jobs. Hamman noted that the crux “Spanish-American” problems with guestworkers during the war concerned the benefits that Mexican Nationals accrued by signing their contracts, benefits unavailable to many locals and nearly all migrant laborers who had been in the area for much longer. The Nationals’ relatively high wages, adequate housing, and access to medical care gave them opportunities that most resident workers lacked – residents quickly understood the disparity and complained that they never



enjoyed the same benefits as guestworkers. Additionally, friction developed in social settings, often because Hispanics resented the Mexican Nationals' "crashing Spanish-American social gatherings." Some resident and migrant workers even discouraged local farmers from hiring Nationals, presumably to open up better opportunities for themselves while diminishing the likelihood of seasonal conflict. In these cases, as in the examples of white and Mexican National conflict, the Extension Service tried to step in as quickly as possible to defuse any crises.<sup>518</sup> They seemed largely successful in containing any conflict, as local newspapers rarely mentioned violent outbreaks or vocal criticism of the program from the Hispanic community.

Guestworkers often had little recourse when facing racism, discrimination, or broken contracts. This proved especially true for Jamaicans who had little chance to return home if something went awry. For braceros, however, a trip home was highly possible if the worker so chose. In many cases, workers left farms because of problems with the surrounding community, whether that meant white or otherwise. They sometimes worked for another farmer in the area, although that meant a breach of contract. Other workers moved from the fields to the nearest urban area to search out the Mexican consul and request a trip home. Of course, workers did such things for reasons beyond discrimination or working conditions. Some simply became homesick or received word of some kind of family problem at home. Employers could also have workers sent home for various infractions, meaning that while the contract supposedly made both sides responsible for executing the program, it had little leverage to keep employer and employee on the same page.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

<sup>519</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-1947*, 219-225.

As much as guestworkers offered to Colorado farmers, however, Extension quickly opened up additional labor streams to meet demand and supplement imported workers. Migrant workers became especially important, and their return to Colorado fields during the war suggested a renewal of earlier patterns. Many migrants came of their own accord while others only arrived in Colorado after heavy government or industry recruitment. For example, Colorado officials recruited groups of Navajo Indians from both New Mexico and Arizona to work sugar fields during 1942 and 1943.<sup>520</sup> As Chapter Five showed, while enticed by the government, this movement from village to field represented a return to the migratory patterns that the depression and drought of the 1930s interrupted. Not surprisingly, the economic and social pressures unleashed during the depression to keep such workers out of the state abated once farmers needed workers to meet production levels. Consequently, migrant workers from throughout the Southwest proved especially important during the early war years. Many of them performed stoop labor, demanding physical work in the beet fields, as had other invited labor. Others also found themselves on potato, onion, and vegetable farms as well as included on wheat and broomcorn harvests. The workers also had opportunities at non-agricultural labor on occasion; in fact, migrant workers were principally responsible for building most of the Amache incarceration camp.<sup>521</sup>

Migrant workers from neighboring states had government support for their endeavors just as did the guestworkers. For example, the state government paid to repair and maintain various migrant worker reception centers, where the workers could

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<sup>520</sup> J. Hamman, "Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, February 15, 1943 to December 31, 1943," 40.

<sup>521</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 32-34.

gather after arriving in the area and wait for work. One such center in Lamar needed considerable attention, and the Extension Service provided almost half of the cost to complete the repairs. Similar migrant centers popped up in small agricultural towns along a line from south Texas to Montana, and Extension agents quite literally shuffled the workers to the fields as soon as they arrived. That, too, is an instance of federal intervention, as the Service maintained responsibility for setting up contracts with local farmers and ensuring that the workers made it to the sites on time and ready to work. County agents distributed recruiting pamphlets and bulletins to agents in other states so that interested workers could have some information about the situation in Colorado. For example, the Service printed a pamphlet entitled “Information for Agricultural Workers Coming Into Colorado” in Spanish and had agents distribute it in the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas. It explained the crops, type of work, and working conditions, and it included a detailed map of Colorado that showed the most direct roads leading to places of high employment. This effort to reach out to the worker proved typical for Extension Service recruitment practices.<sup>522</sup>

At their core, the guestworker and migrant labor developments resembled familiar patterns that the war effectively helped reestablish. But the government’s willingness to help coordinate recruitment and fund the enterprise marked an important difference from earlier examples. Certainly, the all-hands-on-deck approach that included volunteers such as school aged children and available women further helped farmers during the peak planting/thinning and harvesting seasons. Obviously, American involvement in the war demanded dramatic measures. It also opened the possibility to supplement the war effort in unusual ways with the incorporation of

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid., 30-34.

German Prisoners of War (POWs) as well as prisoners of Japanese descent from incarceration camps.

The two groups of prisoners shared some similarities with the others in the newly amassed patchwork labor force, namely the presence of a static pay scale, assumed contracts between employers and employees, working away from their temporary residences, and the need to somehow make peace with other workers and surrounding residents. Several differences existed between the two categories of workers, though none was more important than the fact that both the Germans and prisoners were largely viewed by local, state, and federal officials as enemies of the state. Members of both groups were prisoners of war, subjected to life surrounded by armed guards and living under constant surveillance in a camp enveloped by barbed wire. These groups, made available only because of wartime circumstances that compelled the federal government to place them in Colorado, represented an important part of wartime labor and were unlike the other laborers in that no one had much idea of how to work with them once they arrived in Colorado.

The federal government shipped Germans to Colorado once the state and federal government agreed on plans to build three main camps in the state, one each in Trinidad, Greeley, and Colorado Springs. The German POWs' impact on wartime production remains an underappreciated aspect of the homefront during World War II. The few works that deal with Germans in America do not deal extensively with Colorado, while the few articles on the situation in Colorado tend to focus on prisoners

out of Camp Carson rather than those in southern Colorado.<sup>523</sup> Consequently, little has been written about the camp in Trinidad or its residents.

The best resource is Kurt Landsberger 's autobiography that details his time at Camp Trinidad. Landsberger came to the U.S. before the war, a Jewish refugee who signed up with the military once the war against Hitler started and who earned an assignment to work as an interpreter at the camp. Landsberger remembered that most of the residents in and around Trinidad gave Colorado Congressman J. Edgar Chenoweth most of the credit for the camp. Chenoweth worked very hard to convince the federal government of the need to open a camp in southern Colorado, and he eventually earned approval in September 1942. Construction started immediately and took about a year to complete; the doors opened to German POWs in 1943. Chenoweth hoped that the camp could act as a financial windfall for his constituents in and around Trinidad; in fact, he promised them that construction could bolster the economy and offer a multitude of jobs to needy Coloradans. While he certainly understood that such a boon would probably earn him reelection, and thus perhaps politically motivated, he was also accurate about the Camp's economic impact on the area. The federal government allotted roughly \$2 million for camp construction, much of that money filtered to contractors and laborers who then spent money around town while they stayed for the work. Additionally, 30-40 people also worked inside the camp once workers completed the building, and both military personnel and prisoners spent money

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<sup>523</sup> On German POWs broadly, see Glenn Thompson, *Prisoners on the Plains: German POWs in America* (Holdrege, NE: Phelps County Historical Society, 1993); Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2010). On German POWs in Colorado, see Allen W. Paschal, "The Enemy in Colorado: German Prisoners of War, 1943-1946," *Colorado Magazine* 56 (Summer/Fall 1979): 119-142; Daniel A. Jepson, "Camp Carson, Colorado: European Prisoners of War in the American West during World War II," *Midwest Review* 13 (1991): 32-53.

in local shops and restaurants while stationed at the camp. Federal financing for camp construction helped the southern Colorado economy recover from the depths of the depression.<sup>524</sup>

The U.S. military started shipping prisoners to the camp in June 1943. Most of the POWs had been fighting in North Africa and surrendered to the Allied forces once they made their move across that continent. The new arrivals settled into their surroundings almost immediately and often took advantage of lax security and an unusually trusting guard. Indeed, Camp Trinidad quickly gained a rather notorious reputation for an extraordinary number of escapees and corruptible camp officials.<sup>525</sup>

The workers seemed to work well once they arrived in the fields, but that may have been a product of the fact that the Extension Service went to great lengths to ensure that no real fraternization existed between the prisoners and the farmers. It distributed information and instructions to farmers describing the healthy respect – and borderline fear – that citizens should have of their employees. The Service reminded farmers that prisoners were in fact enemies of the state and that they remained tremendously dangerous: “What might appear to be innocent conversation and small favors may in reality prove to be acts of treason” as they would manipulate their handlers to escape at any opening. It further reminded readers to remember that the prisoner did not really like them, that he did not like to work for them, and that the farmers should never engage him unless it related to work. Other stipulations included: no women would be allowed to work in the same fields; the enemy should never see or attain a copy of any

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<sup>524</sup> Kurt Landsberger, *Prisoners of War at Camp Trinidad, Colorado, 1943-1946: Internment, Intimidation, Incompetence, and Country Club Living* (New York, NY: Arbor Books, 2007), 7-12. Landsberger worked as a translator at the camp. His recollection of the early days, combined with his research in local newspapers, grounds this description. His work is one of the only examples to deal extensively with the situation at Camp Trinidad.

<sup>525</sup> Kurt Landsberger, *Prisoners of War at Camp Trinidad, Colorado, 1943-1946*, 45-60.

official directives or memoranda; and any question about the worker or his work should be funneled to his supervisor in the army. There were certainly strict regulations, but given the near constant Army supervision of POWs when they were outside the camp walls and the lack of any public note of transgressions, problems were limited.<sup>526</sup>

Reviews of the POWs as workers were mixed. Hamman noted that the populace initially approached the idea of using prisoners with a combination of skepticism and anxiety. He claimed that locals were “more or less apprehensive of the entire situation from the standpoint of the security of the communities.” The turning point came when the Army showed its ability to handle the prisoners in the camp as well as in the fields, which erased most farmers’ concerns about their safety. The Army proved so successful, in fact, that Hamman noted that “it finally became difficult in some communities to place any workers other than Prisoners of War because they could be used in large crews and removed as soon as the work was done.” While locals warmed to the idea of using prisoners, the actual process of securing their labor involved a heavy dose of red tape. As a result, POWs only entered Colorado fields in significant numbers after the Extension Service, Army, and farmers grew more familiar with the process and more adept at filing for and earning certification for workers from the War Manpower Commission.<sup>527</sup> Eventually, the employers became comfortable with the situation, and Hamman claimed that POWs were “the major mobile force of farm workers” while in the state. He continued: “it is doubtful if the high level of production attained could

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<sup>526</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1944,” 26-28.

<sup>527</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 3.

have been accomplished without the Army and the Prisoners of War.”<sup>528</sup> Yet, Hamman also remembered many arrogant POWs who were convinced that they were not only protected by international law while in the States but also that Hitler would eventually recover and the Germans would win the war. Consequently, some of the more confident (and as it turned out delusional) prisoners thus refused to work much if at all. Additionally, Hamman noted that violence sometimes broke out between prisoners and others in spite of Extension’s best efforts. In one example, he recalled that an American guard assigned to the POWs opened fire on them while they worked in the fields. The guard had been in Europe and had developed an obvious distaste for the Germans – Hamman noted that “he killed two of them for no reason except his hatred of German soldiers.”<sup>529</sup>

In spite of this violent outbreak, however, locals seemed to embrace the Germans once they had become accustomed to their presence and confident enough in their security to utilize their labor. There was perhaps a racial element involved in this surprisingly warm reception from locals to enemy combatants. While some Prowers and Baca residents were of German heritage, it seems that the prisoners’ putative whiteness, rather than a sense of shared heritage, allowed for such a welcome. Indeed, while neither Hamman nor the agents acknowledge such an affinity for the POWs, it may very well have been decisive in determining why farmers, and especially farmers in Baca, received the POWs differently than they did prisoners from Amache or guestworkers from Jamaica. These considerations may have compelled Prowers and

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<sup>528</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “A Resume of the Emergency Farm labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 20.

<sup>529</sup> Hamman, *The Long Journey*, 141.



Baca farmers to become more willing to use German POWs once they had gained some exposure to the workers and their handlers.

Prowers and Baca farmers certainly took longer to warm to prisoners from the Amache incarceration camp. The Japanese American prisoners constituted another component of the new labor force after they arrived in Prowers County in 1942. FDR signed Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, an act that eventually gave the federal government the power to forcibly relocate 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the Pacific Coast to the Mountain West. Historians have addressed several aspects of this decision and its effects on the Japanese American population. Some have argued that FDR decided to sign the order because of military necessity; the thinking was that any person of Japanese ancestry may potentially be subversive and dangerous, so the entire population should be removed from sensitive wartime industry and military bases on the coast. Scholars have also chalked up the decision to temporary wartime hysteria among those who pushed to remove the supposed threats from the region. Still others have looked at a long tradition of anti-Asian racism as an explanation for Roosevelt's decision and for placing these people, many of who were actually citizens, in confinement.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> There are a number of works devoted to the order, the philosophy that led to its creation, and the first stages of evacuation. For an older but still pertinent view see Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1993). More recent works, especially those by Greg Robinson, continue to illuminate how prisoners experienced the camps. See especially Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009). Analysis of the decision and its impact on Colorado can be found in Robert Harvey, *Amache: The Story of Japanese Internment in Colorado during World War II* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004); Adam Schrager, *The Principled Politician: The Ralph Carr Story* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008). Karl Lillquist's recent work addresses prisoner agricultural labor even though he focuses on camp production rather than prisoners as paid labor outside the camps. Karl Lillquist, "Farming the Desert: Agriculture in the World War II-Era Japanese-American Relocation Centers," *Agricultural History* 84, no. 1 (Winter, 2010): 74-104.

As much as they have looked at the decision that led to incarceration and prisoners' experiences while in various camps, historians have done very little to construct environmental histories of camps and life in them. Thankfully, recent articles by Connie Chiang and Robert Wilson have started to view the Japanese American experience through conducting environmental histories of their confinement. Their work provides a template for this chapter by illustrating the value of considering incarceration by appreciating how prisoners related to the new environment, their time working outside the camps, and even how historians should appreciate how incarceration affected the landscape surrounding the camps. The following section on how prisoners related to their environments, the work they did on surrounding farms, and the ways that farmers received them, is an attempt to add to the conversation that Chiang and Wilson started by incorporating a bit of agricultural history about of Amacheans and the camp at Amache.<sup>531</sup>

The Amache camp did not sprout up as soon as FDR passed the executive order so it took several months before Amacheans became available to southeastern Colorado farmers. The first phase of the Executive Order 9066 called for voluntary resettlement, which gave those of Japanese descent a chance to get ahead of the momentum building to remove them from the West Coast. A small contingent of roughly 3,000 Japanese Americans lived in Colorado when the war broke out; most of them lived in a limited number of neighborhoods in Denver as well as some outlying towns such as Brighton. In addition, a small population of immigrants and their children also lived and farmed in

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<sup>531</sup> Two important and relatively recent exceptions are Connie Chiang, "Imprisoned Nature: Toward an Environmental History of the World War II Japanese American Incarceration," *Environmental History* 15 (April, 2010): 236-267; Robert Wilson, "Landscapes of Promise and Betrayal: Reclamation, Homesteading, and Japanese American Incarceration," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 2: 424-444.

the Arkansas Valley. For example, the town of Rocky Ford had a group of Buddhist residents and others lived in Prowers County as farmers: some of them did quite well during the lean Dust Bowl years, which drew some confusion and even ire from their white neighbors who struggled with the elements.<sup>532</sup> A number of voluntary evacuees figured that Colorado would suffice for their resettlement because they knew it sat far enough inland to satisfy the Executive Order or else they knew people in the state who previously settled there. Their resettlement, while comparatively small in terms of the total population in the state, effectively raised the hackles of suspicious Coloradans who bristled at the idea of allowing potential saboteurs into the state.<sup>533</sup> Reports of police and laypeople harassing recent arrivals surfaced in places like La Junta where migrants from the West Coast faced police searches. Governor Ralph Carr actually assigned the Colorado Highway Patrol to watch the border for migrants, though unlike his predecessor Ed Johnson, who gave the same kind of order in 1936, Carr hoped to keep the peace and calculate the number of migrants rather than turn them around.<sup>534</sup>

To some onlookers, Carr seemed an enigma because of his support for the Japanese American community. The federal government initiated a meeting for all western governors to meet and discuss the possibility of moving the suspect population inland after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Wyoming governor Nels Smith offered a typical demonstration of how the governors reacted to the prospect of housing enemies

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<sup>532</sup> See brief explanations of the population pre-World War II in Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, Fourth. (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 302–304; Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson, and Duane A. Smith, *A Colorado History*, Ninth. (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 2006), 324–326. A more complex view of the population's development up to and during the early stages of WW II can be found in Chapters 8–10 in Bill Hosokawa, *Colorado's Japanese Americans: From 1886 to the Present* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2005). The details on the Prowers County families come from *Lamar Daily News*, January 24, 1936.

<sup>533</sup> The *Lamar Daily News* claimed that the population of Japanese Americans increased by about 30%, to roughly 5,000 total in the state. See *Lamar Daily News* May 5, 1942.

<sup>534</sup> Adam Schrager, *The Principled Politician*, 166.

of the state. Smith apparently threatened Milton Eisenhower, head of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) tasked with organizing and executing the forced expulsion, by announcing that “If you bring Japanese into my state, I promise they will be hanging from every tree.”<sup>535</sup> Carr was the only governor who attended the meeting and who argued in favor of constructing camps in his state. Carr contended that it was American citizens’ civic duty to house the potential subversives, and he felt that they would not threaten domestic tranquility. Additionally, he understood that the evacuees could offer labor for agricultural and industrial efforts in Colorado. Indeed, Prowers County farmers understood that as well and in fact welcomed the prospect of having thousands of extra hands on call to work locally.<sup>536</sup>

Yet, a notable and sizeable chorus of resistance emerged that tried to compel Carr to change his mind. Coloradans offered no such reception to any of the other groups, even the German prisoners of war. Residents’ fear of competition for good work once the prisoners arrived explained much of this resistance. For example, members from the Arkansas Valley Cultural and Educational League told Carr that the influx of workers threatened “hundreds of Mexican citizens that work and live” in the valley and so they organized to defend their interests.<sup>537</sup> Another instance of animosity occurred in Prowers County where residents formed the Farm Protection Committee to demonstrate against the camp and the specifically the hiring of prisoners to do any work in the area.<sup>538</sup> Racism and suspicion certainly explain this reaction as well, as the prisoners realized once they made their way to Amache. Resistance to the camp

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<sup>535</sup> Bill Hosokawa, *Colorado’s Japanese Americans: From 1886 to the Present*, 87-91.

<sup>536</sup> See Robert Harvey, *Amache: The Story of Japanese Internment in Colorado during World War II*, 25-48; Adam Schrager, *The Principled Politician*, 140-146; *Lamar Daily News* March 30, 1942.

<sup>537</sup> Schrager, 187.

<sup>538</sup> Schrager, 284.

became so hostile, in fact, that it largely decided the 1942 U.S. Senate race in the state. Since Governor Carr had vociferously argued in favor of establishing a camp inside the state, he faced a considerable backlash from those against relocating the prisoners to Colorado. Indeed, former Colorado governor Ed Johnson opposed Carr in 1942 and leveraged Carr's position on the camp against him in the election. Johnson won by a slim margin – just under 4,000 votes out of the 375,000 cast – and observers opined that Carr “would easily have been elected to the Senate had he remained silent on the Japanese American issue.” Carr's victory in 1938 had supposedly signaled a return for Republican dominance in the state, but Johnson's electoral win, while he was in fact quite moderate, seemed to have less to do with his political allegiance than with his ability to paint Carr as a “Jap lover.”<sup>539</sup>

In spite of Johnson's full-throated condemnation of mass removal to Colorado, construction on the Amache camp began in the summer of 1942 and had barely gotten underway when the first trainload of 212 prisoners arrived at the Granada Relocation Center on August 27, 1942. The federal government used the WRA to manage camp construction throughout the West. As Jason Scott Smith argues, the WRA represented a continuation of the New Deal emphasis on public works as a means to lower unemployment. In other words, Japanese American incarceration actually demonstrates some continuity between the New Deal and war. Indeed, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) actually managed the first stages of camp construction and provided the “personnel, bureaucratic might, and local knowledge essential to executing

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<sup>539</sup> Bill Hosokawa, *Colorado's Japanese Americans: From 1886 to the Present*, 90-94.

Executive Order 9066.”<sup>540</sup> In effect, the WPA laid the groundwork for the mass removal and then left it to the WRA by the time prisoners started to arrive in camps during fall 1942. Just prior to their arrival, the WRA took control of Amache’s development and sought out a construction company once the Army Corps of Engineers had assessed the site and drew up preliminary plans for the camp. The federal government then paid to buy 10,500 acres from Prowers County farmers and helped finance some of their costs to move off of the land. While the camp’s official name remained the Granada Relocation Center because the site was only about a mile from Granada, Colorado, most prisoners and employees who worked in the camp referred to it as Amache. Lamar Mayor R.L. Christy’s requested to name the camp Amache after the daughter of Ochinee, a Cheyenne chief killed in the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864. As a result, the U.S. Postal Service designated the camp Amache to distinguish it from Granada.<sup>541</sup>

Almost immediately, the camp invited criticism and inspired dissent, perhaps because of this dramatic, quick increase in the number of prisoners and certainly because of residual distrust from locals. Regular editorials in the two main Denver papers, the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*, regularly chastised the WRA. The papers leveled accusations of laziness at the prisoners and accused the WRA of allowing them to live the good life in spite of their enemy status. Critics also condemned the WRA for not paying close enough attention to the prisoners, suggesting

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<sup>540</sup>Jason Scott Smith, “New Deal Public Works at War: The WPA and Japanese American Internment,” *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 1 (2003): 67.

<sup>541</sup> See Melyn Johnson, “At Home in Amache: A Japanese-American Relocation Camp in Colorado” *Colorado Heritage* (March 1989), 5-8; and William Wei, “‘The Strangest City in Colorado’: The Amache Internment Camp” *Colorado Heritage* (Winter 2005), 4.

that such lax management might allow prisoners to escape or riot inside the camp.<sup>542</sup> Similar complaints emerged in southeastern Colorado papers, which were much closer to the situation and in that sense the editors and readers may have had more intense feelings about the camp. The editor of the *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, the Republican paper that took over when the Democratic *Springfield Democrat Herald* went defunct, questioned the camp, its residents, and the WRA for treating them so well. He contended that “Baca county [sic] should be put into a concentration camp and the Japs turned loose, it would be much easier for the Americans. They are feeding them better at this camp than Baca county [sic] citizens can afford to buy, and the Japs get a salary on top of this elaborate menu and good quarters to live in, and have the buildings all built for them. We wonder if the captured thousands of Americans are getting the same treatment in Japan? If so we are for treating the Japs a little better, and raising their pay.”<sup>543</sup>

The converse perspective also surfaced during the months of construction and placement. For example, Ross Thompson wrote a number of articles describing the camp and interviewing prisoners to dispel the thought that they had been spoiled and coddled by the WRA. After visiting the camp, Thompson assured readers that the camp was satisfactory and the WRA had done well to make the camp functional but not extravagant.<sup>544</sup> Supporters of the WRA’s mission to protect citizens’ rights also voiced their opinions. A week after the Springfield paper’s editor vilified the WRA, the paper printed a response entitled “We Must Not Hate” that contained a series of requests for

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<sup>542</sup> Robert Harvey covers the debates in Denver papers well. See Harvey, *Amache*, 118-124; Takahara, *Off the Fat of the Land: The Denver Post’s Story of the Japanese American Internment during World War II*, 36-45.

<sup>543</sup> *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, September 3, 1942.

<sup>544</sup> *Lamar Daily News* September 19, 1942.

residents to celebrate humanity, respect the prisoners, and protect liberties and rights. The article argued that part of America's greatness lay in its history and mission: the Bill of Rights, FDR's promise to protect the country's and world's "four freedoms," and our goals in waging the war against tyranny "are not declarations of hate. There is no mention of race or creed or color. There is no mention of nationality or class. These are pledges for all the nations, all the people of the world."<sup>545</sup> Similar exhortations came from the Lamar paper when it printed announcements from the War Relocation Board (WRB) about the necessity of exclusion and the importance of doing the job in "the American way." Everything about dislocation and interment, they insisted, had been done humanely and with the prisoners' needs in mind: "even under the stresses and strains of all-out war, Uncle Sam has his feet on the ground and continues to be what he has always been known to be, a very, very human fellow."<sup>546</sup>

Government officials hoped, and many local residents eventually realized, that the camp could prove a boon for local business interests. Indeed, the influx of prisoner labor was not lost on local farmers and businessmen, as a number of organizations offered proverbial olive branches to camp inmates upon their arrival at Amache. Almost immediately, indeed while the camp was still under construction, the Lamar Chamber of Commerce held a "get-acquainted" dinner for camp representatives to meet Chamber members.<sup>547</sup> There were bumps in the road, however. Reports Officer for the WRA Joseph McClelland remembered one of the meetings between the Chamber of Commerce and representatives of the camp that became rather heated – each group on one side of a long table facing the other and airing their grievances. McClelland claimed

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<sup>545</sup> *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, September 10, 1942.

<sup>546</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, June 04-06, 1942. The paper published the WRB's statements over a three day period.

<sup>547</sup> *Granada Bulletin*, October 17, 1942.



that the economic opportunity carried the day and calmed the tension, as one of the businessmen reminded his cohorts that prejudice jeopardized their wellbeing.

McClelland paraphrased the conversation in a later interview: “The Director [James Lindlay, camp director] had said, if you don’t want ‘em, I won’t let ‘em in. We’ll keep them out there. And it looked like that’s the way it was going. And he [the local businessman] said, gentlemen, just think about this. Here we have a city of 7500 people right to our doorstep, they have money, they need things to buy. Think of the business that we’re losing if we just say they can’t come in. Well, that sort of turned the time. They all got to thinking about the business. And from there on, we had no really [sic] further difficulty in the city of Lamar.”<sup>548</sup> Such evidence suggests that Prowers farmers and businessmen viewed camp prisoners more favorably once they considered how they would benefit having camp residents as consumers and merchants. Once they reached that understanding, local businesses and organizations extended the olive branch to prisoners. For example, the Holly Lions Club held a party for camp members and used talent from inside the camp to entertain their guests.<sup>549</sup> Even the Lamar Retail Merchants Association got involved as part of the welcoming committee when it allied with the Chamber of Commerce to invite camp residents to shop in Lamar and take advantage of the city’s stores.<sup>550</sup>

Locals eventually warmed to prisoners although it took some time to thaw relations. As Japanese American author and journalist Bill Hosokawa claims, Lamar residents “were friendly, or at least not unfriendly” to prisoners, but initially much

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<sup>548</sup> Joseph McClelland interview with Louise Bashford, April 8, 1981. Transcript and audio tape available in Joseph McClelland Collection, Auraria Library Special Collections, University of Colorado – Denver, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>549</sup> *Granada Pioneer*, October 31, 1942

<sup>550</sup> *Granada Bulletin*, October 24, 1942

distrust existed between the two sides. Mildred Garrison remembered a shift in locals' views of the prisoners once they had some exposure to the prisoners' courteous and respectful manner. Garrison, whose husband Lloyd Garrison served as Superintendent of Schools at the camp, lived in Lamar with her husband and children while he worked for the WRA. She recalled that Prowers residents were cold to all newcomers, regardless of race. She claimed that, contrary to their announcement welcoming prisoners into their stores, Lamar merchants initially held back certain coveted items when camp residents visited their stores. In other cases stores more blatantly refused to serve prisoners once the storeowner found out that they came from the camp.<sup>551</sup> A small number of stores actually made their feelings known by posting "No Japs Allowed" signs in their front windows.<sup>552</sup> Shopkeepers eventually relaxed and became more amenable to camp residents, but only when it was evident that camp residents never caused problems or shoplifted. In effect, prisoners had to prove themselves to locals, and it took time. Residual racism existed among those who could not move beyond their prejudice, she noted, but most folks in Lamar started to think more highly of camp residents and federal employees the longer they lived in the area.<sup>553</sup>

Indeed, such initial animosity and suspicion seemed to cloud farmers' perspectives on paid labor during the first year of the war. Before long, usually once they came to appreciate how such labor improved their economic well being, many farmers realized that their need and the workers' abilities gelled well enough to allow

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<sup>551</sup> Mildred Garrison interview with Lousie Bachford, March 26, 1981, 2-3. Transcript and audio tape available in Joseph McClelland Collection, Auraria Library Special Collections, University of Colorado – Denver, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>552</sup> Christan Heimburger, "Life Beyond Barbed Wire: Japanese American Labor During Internment at Amache and Topaz," 33n92.

<sup>553</sup> Mildred Garrison interview with Lousie Bachford, March 26, 1981, 2-3. Transcript and audio tape available in Joseph McClelland Collection, Auraria Library Special Collections, University of Colorado – Denver, Denver, Colorado.

them to hit production goals and enjoy the benefits of wartime demand. Regardless of how they personally felt about the workers, the dearth in agricultural labor made them come to terms with using outside workers. Certainly, no one could have guessed that such a motley array of workers would have found its way into Colorado fields. That they did, and that they helped Colorado farmers to such an extent, suggests how the federal government and Extension Service continued to address farmers' needs and do what they could to satisfy them. Moreover, the numbers of workers, their assistance to area farmers, and the impact on production suggest that the labor program worked during the war and set the stage for a major transition in American agriculture following the war.

#### •Into the Fields•

Regardless of farmers' trepidations about who worked where, the numbers illustrate the Extension Service's effectiveness in supplying labor. The Service controlled the flow of labor into Colorado from the middle of 1943 through the harvest of 1947, with the peak years coming in 1944 and 1945. The groups mentioned here – domestic migrants, Braceros, Jamaicans, German prisoners, and Japanese American prisoners – all worked during that period, but German and prisoner workers only worked heavily until late 1944 and early 1945. Somewhat surprisingly, the number of “local recruits” nearly met the number of imported workers during the period, according to Extension numbers. Statewide, the total number of migrants from Colorado and neighboring states reached roughly 43,000 in 1943, 54,000 in 1944, 53,000 in 1945, 55,000 in 1946, and 38,000 in 1947. The number of guestworkers and prisoners followed the same pattern, moving from 48,000 in 1943, 65,000 in 1944, 75,000 in

1945, 63,000 in 1946, and finally 43,000 in 1947. In totals for the two groups, then, the Extension Service provided at least 100,000 for three years and then over 200,000 in 1945 as the war came to a conclusion. Certainly, the number of workers per farm varied and downtime existed between planting and harvest that did not keep all parties busy or in the same place for the entire year, but the Extension calculations noted the estimated number of farmers served for these years as well. The totals varied from 13,700 in 1943, 16,000 in 1944, 18,000 in 1945, 15,900 in 1946, and 13,000 in 1947.<sup>554</sup>

These figures represent efforts across the state, but the tallies for Prowers and Baca Counties reflect similar undulations and trends. Even then, however, differences in climate and crops led to important variations in how farmers in the two counties approached and employed the workers. Baca farmers focused on wheat and broomcorn – the wheat for obvious reasons and the broomcorn used for packing shipments and for brooms – and both were highly sought after during the war. Prowers farmers looked to sugar beets, likewise a desired wartime commodity. County agents appreciated these variables and also that residents in each county had divergent views on who would fit as workers and how dire the situation actually appeared. For example, Baca County agent Claude Gausman held a meeting in 1942 to take the farmers’ temperature on the prospect of using prisoners in their fields. The overwhelming response, in spite of their “new zest” to contribute to the war effort, was that the only reason to think of utilizing that group for work revolved around controlling wage demands from other workers.<sup>555</sup> Gausman cited no one willing to use Japanese American prisoners other than as leverage. Conversely, similar meetings in Prowers County produced consensus that the

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<sup>554</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado,” 50.

<sup>555</sup> Claude Gausman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, November 01, 1941 to December 01, 1942,” 12, Folder 54, Box 8.

labor situation demanded farmers use every possible means at their disposal, at least during the crisis. A committee of local farmers agreed that prisoner labor should only be used if workers were heavily supervised and the placement proved temporary; the workers were to be removed from the field as soon as the work had been finished.<sup>556</sup>

There is not much evidence as to why Baca farmers became more willing to use a mix of migrant and imported labor rather than the prisoners, but they found enough alternatives to camp labor to satisfy their needs, especially for those who used workers to harvest broomcorn and wheat. Broomcorn rose in popularity among Baca farmers soon after a farmer who had previously been successful with the crop on similar land in Kansas succeeded in harvesting some in Baca in 1887. By the middle of the twentieth century, Baca County farmers supplied nearly one-third of all broomcorn in the U.S. The plant has long fibers at the top that can be chopped and the fibers, after being separated by hand and left to dry, became materials used principally in brooms and as packing material. The plant grows well in dryland conditions, especially in the sandy soils found in Baca County. It was hardy, cheap to plant, drought resistant, fast growing, and economically viable, especially when railroads gained access to the county in 1926. Moreover, the plant became desirable during the New Deal when conservationists recommended the plant to protect against wind and water erosion. The government paid farmers to use drought resistant crops to guard against erosion through the Agricultural Conservation Program of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, so broomcorn farmers received financial benefits from market sales as well as federal subsidies. Given the need for brooms in new wartime industries, on

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<sup>556</sup> Jack N French, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1941 to September 01, 1942," 5, Folder 13, Box 67.

ships, and in barracks, as well as the demand for the bristles as lightweight and flexible packing material for shipping overseas during the war, broomcorn boomed during the war. Unfortunately for growers, the crop proved labor intensive because no mechanical equipment existed that could be adjusted to cut the straw at such a tall and awkward height. Consequently, hand labor dominated the industry until it started to decline in the 1970s because other materials made better brooms and the lack of manual labor options precipitated the decline.<sup>557</sup>



**Figure 26: Mature broomcorn in Texas. Notice the height, which made it difficult to use any machinery to harvest the shafts. Courtesy Library of Congress.**

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<sup>557</sup> Baca County Survey, conducted by Colorado Preservation, Inc. and accessed via their website: [http://www.coloradopreservation.org/crsurvey/rural/baca/sites/baca\\_resources\\_agriculture.html](http://www.coloradopreservation.org/crsurvey/rural/baca/sites/baca_resources_agriculture.html)

Its eventual decline notwithstanding, broomcorn production dominated the labor market in Baca County. Farmers' initial effort during the war to find workers in 1942 focused on local workers and volunteers; officials urged shutting down schools and encouraged farmers to decrease acreage temporarily so that fewer people could still produce effectively. This changed in 1943 when contract labor became a considerable part of the labor pool. During the 1943 harvest 1,895 men worked for 170 farmers (thus nearly 20% of county farms) even though the Extension Service did not have full control of labor arrangements and German prisoners, who farmers identified as the premium choice, were not yet available en masse by the fall. Yet with the workers available, 1943 marked a record one for broomcorn production, and Roy Haney became the "Broomcorn King of Baca County." Haney devoted 6,000 acres to the crop and hauled in roughly 1,200 tons worth \$300,000 – quite a treasure.<sup>558</sup>

Extension also helped farmers in 1944, leading to another banner year for broomcorn. That was thanks in large part to the more than 2,100 workers who assisted Baca farmers on 262 farms to meet their production goals. Some of these workers came from Camp Trinidad, which opened its doors to allow 300 POWs to work the fields during harvest in the fall. In addition, the Baca County Labor Association sponsored migrant workers and most of them stayed outside Springfield in the former CCC camp. Many of these workers hailed from places like Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri, and stayed in temporary housing constructed specifically for broomcorn workers.<sup>559</sup>

Extension also arranged for 100 Mexican Nationals to assist with the harvest. Most of

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<sup>558</sup> Martin Eriksen, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, April 16, 1943 to November 30, 1943," Folder 55, Box 8; *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, September 30, 1943.

<sup>559</sup> Martin Eriksen, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1943 to December 01, 1944," Folder 56, Box 8.

them stayed in and around the small town of Walsh, generally in broomcorn sheds or temporary worker housing akin to where other migrant workers stayed. The federal government helped to offset costs in both cases by providing army guards for the prisoners and managing the contracts to import Mexican workers as well as necessary camp construction and repair.<sup>560</sup>

The following year, with the American war machine at full throttle, similar production demands for broomcorn and wheat necessitated the continued use of outside workers. Nearly 1,100 workers found gainful employment in Baca County and more farmers looked to Extension for assistance in landing valuable hands than had in 1943 or 1944. Again, German prisoners played an important role, primarily because farmers started to search them out when it became apparent that they generally stayed for the entire harvest. In many cases, migratory labor from neighboring states left the area before the harvest started or at least before it was done, meaning that farmers who relied on workers to haul in their crop found themselves scrambling if their workers abandoned them during the season. The prisoners stayed at the CCC camp again although the West Baca County Farm Labor Association sponsored them in 1945. The combined labor force helped reach federal goals for broomcorn – Baca farmers grew nearly 20,000 tons of it for nearly \$4.5 million in 1944 and almost 11,000 tons worth \$2.5 million in 1945.<sup>561</sup> There was less need for outside workers in Baca to harvest the broomcorn once demand dropped following the war, but the war years had been good to Baca farmers. While most farmers focused on broomcorn, crops such as onions,

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<sup>560</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 17, 25.

<sup>561</sup> Martin Eriksen, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Baca County, December 01, 1944 to November 30, 1945,” Folder 57, Box 8.



potatoes, and wheat also garnered attention and produced profits, giving nearly every kind of farmer in the county a solid foundation on which to build in the postwar years.<sup>562</sup>

Wartime production led to similar benefits for Prowers farmers, although Prowers farmers who utilized the labor program focused almost exclusively on sugar beets. Sugar beets' dominance as a cash crop in Prowers County had been the norm since beet farming started there near the turn of the century, so the war did not greatly upset regular procedures. Furthermore, beet growers and refiners had been orchestrating seasonal labor since that time, and in spite of a drop in demand for both beets and workers in the 1930s, the return of good weather and increasing consumer/military demand left growers again pining for outside workers. Before 1943, beet growers tried to solve their labor problem by recruiting every available local hand to help in the fields. In fact, Republican Governor John Vivian believed that Arkansas Valley farmers needed his help to maintain production until they found an alternative. Vivian challenged federal policy by freeing eligible farm boys from the draft; he even went so far as to ask for military uniforms that farmers could wear while in the fields so that no one could construe their work as somehow unpatriotic or less vital to the war effort.<sup>563</sup> He wrote Secretary of War Stimson several times to request that the army "grant general furloughs to soldiers to permit them to work on farms" because "our farmers are unceremoniously and, in many instances, short-sightedly taken in the draft." He implored Stimson to release farmers to their homes or "there is likely to be a scarcity

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<sup>562</sup> Two examples of this optimism and boosterism are found in *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, December 13, 1945 and *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, December 27, 1945.

<sup>563</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, March 25, 1943 and *Lamar Daily News*, April 22, 1943.

of food in Colorado probably never before paralleled.”<sup>564</sup> Fortunately, the Extension Service stepped in when it did (less than two weeks after Vivian wrote a final letter to Stimson), as most private companies and even corporations lacked the means to recruit enough workers to satisfy farmers and the War Department had no intention of releasing all farmers.

The Extension Service approached the labor problem as it had nearly every other issue it faced, by sending agents into the field to work with farmers to figure out a solution. Claude Gausman, an agronomist trained at Colorado A&M in Fort Collins where he played basketball and baseball, had built connections with the Extension Service and other Extension employees during his time at school and entered the field prepared to cooperate with farmers. Once Claude Gausman arrived in Prowers in 1943 – he replaced his friend and former college classmate Jack French – he focused intently on the labor problem. Gausman had been the agent in Baca County since 1939 so he was already quite familiar with the region and had made connections in the two counties through his work in Springfield.<sup>565</sup> He spoke with 370 farmers about their labor needs once Extension took over the program in May 1943, a number higher than even peak wartime demand in Baca. Unfortunately, Gausman’s initial recruits fared poorly; most of the workers did not do much well and the rate of attrition was high as most were either let go or left of their own accord.<sup>566</sup> The group included a number of American Indians from New Mexico as well as African Americans from Oklahoma in late 1942,

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<sup>564</sup> “Governor Vivian Renews Demands Army Farmers Be Released,” *Denver Post*, April 16, 1943; R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II*, 203-204.

<sup>565</sup> Digital Collections of Colorado show Gausman as a member of sports teams and a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity during his days in Fort Collins. See <http://lib.colostate.edu/digital-collections/>

<sup>566</sup> Claude Gausman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1942 to December 01, 1943,” 18-21, Folder 14, Box 67.

but the local newspaper reported several problems with the newly arrived workers, including cases of drunk and disorderly behavior as well as an attempted rape of a local woman.<sup>567</sup> Even though farmers were “critically short” of labor, they looked for alternatives to this round of workers because of such legal issues. Of course, one could also consider that race may have played a role in the icy reception by Baca and Prowers farmers. Certainly, the limited number of African Americans in the region suggests that few farmers had previously dealt with any African Americans and therefore they might have been reticent to deal with them. Moreover, farmers remained quite suspicious about Jamaican guestworkers as well, a reticence that perhaps suggests their unwillingness to use black workers when other laborers were available. The accusations of rape and disorderly behavior could thus be viewed as part of this racial anxiety akin to whites’ concerns about the image of the “negro rapist” that permeated race relations near the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>568</sup> Regardless of their motivation, and fortunately for farmers who resisted hiring black workers, a crop of newly-arrived prisoners, American Indians, Mexican Nationals and conscientious objectors combined to meet demand for the harvest that fall, as nearly 3,000 workers took to the fields to bring in the year’s beets.<sup>569</sup>

Indeed, by that fall with the camp’s construction concluded, nearly 1,000 prisoners worked the fields to help boost local harvesting efforts. Local beet farmers claimed that the labor dearth would cost them roughly 60,000 tons of beets during the

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<sup>567</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, June 29, 1942.

<sup>568</sup> Gail Bederman’s work on manliness and civilization explores the issue of the negro rapist in terms of both race and gender and is one of the better treatments of this friction between white and black Americans. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>569</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, September 10, 1942

1942 harvest, and they looked to the camp for workers. The camp General Assembly voted unanimously to aid them and sent 141 volunteers into local fields to help bring in the beets.<sup>570</sup> Local businessmen were quick to thank the prisoners for saving their harvest. Representatives from the Great Western Sugar Company printed words of thanks in the camp newspaper, attributing the good harvest to prisoner labor in their time of need. The Great Western labor commissioner claimed that camp workers had a 90% efficiency rating in the fields and that the workers deserved the company's genuine thanks for working so hard and so well.<sup>571</sup> In addition, individual farmers placed other notes in the camp newspaper to demonstrate their gratitude, including beet farmers from Holly who appreciated prisoners' efforts during the 1942 harvest.<sup>572</sup> Prisoner labor continued to be an important factor in agricultural production during 1943 and early 1944. The camp newspaper claimed that some 1,428 Amacheans took seasonal leave in 1943 and celebrated their contribution "towards the 'Food for Victory' campaign during the year in harvesting [the] nation's variety of perishable food products."<sup>573</sup> Another 945 workers left the camp during the harvest of 1944.<sup>574</sup>

These numbers suggest that the camp residents offered significant assistance to Colorado farmers. Yet the slow decline implies that using camp workers became less common after the first year and almost non-existent by 1945. The camp population peaked in late 1942 at 7,318. The number of residents stayed relatively high even into 1944, when just over 6,000 prisoners lived in Amache, though nearly 1,000 of those

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<sup>570</sup> *Granada Pioneer*, November 14, 1942.

<sup>571</sup> *Granada Pioneer*, December 24, 1942.

<sup>572</sup> *Granada Pioneer*, December 24, 1942.

<sup>573</sup> *Granada Pioneer*, November 3, 1943.

<sup>574</sup> Christian Heimburger, "Life Beyond Barbed Wire: Japanese American Labor During Internment at Amache and Topaz," 32n56. Found online at <http://centerwest.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/heimburger2008.pdf>.

were recent arrivals from Tule Lake incarceration camp, so we can estimate that the camp had lost about 25% of its original population within the first two years. The number continued to gradually decline until the end of 1945, though roughly 2,000 residents of the camp left Amache and chose to stay in Colorado after the war.<sup>575</sup> There are several reasons for this decline. Obviously, the slow but steady move to relocate prisoners to other parts of the country or admit them to colleges or sign them up for military service caused a decline in the number of workers. Other developments compounded that problem. For example, Amacheans often moved to local farms and effectively engaged in sharecropping on local owners' lands, according to Joseph McClelland. McClelland, a graduate from the University of Missouri where he majored in Journalism, earned a job with the WRA and moved to Denver in July 1942. Within weeks the WRA reassigned him to take a position at Amache, where he served as Reports Officer and Center Photographer, responsible for distributing information inside Amache as well as to the general public as he documented daily activities. McClelland claimed that once area farmers began to appreciate Japanese American farmers for their skills and technique – “even though they were in Colorado” –many relocated families entered partnerships with the agriculturalists. For example, McClelland remembered several camp families who attained passes and then lived with a local family: “usually it wasn’t a hard labor standpoint, it was a leasing standpoint where they shared the profits” akin to sharecropping. In essence, he argued that

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<sup>575</sup> There are no exact population numbers for the camp but two examples demonstrate the slow decline. See Melyn Johnson, “At Home in Amache”; Mel M. Yazawa, “Amache Internment Camp” in David J. Wishart, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, available at <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.asam.002>

prisoners' knowledge and diligence made such arrangements possible and constituted a unique opportunity that no other group of wartime workers enjoyed.<sup>576</sup>

Growing dislike for the work and for their status on local farms also contributed to declining numbers of prisoners willing to work for locals. Laboring in beet fields proved especially arduous; even if the worker took pains to protect him or herself by practicing proper technique, stoop labor took a toll on the worker's body. In addition, the facilities where prisoners stayed while on leave were often subpar, in spite of the agreement that farmers signed to offer decent accommodations for workers. Farmers provided "a variety of make-shift shelters – anything from wooden frame houses, to old train coaches, barns, and tents." A survey of Amacheans showed that 83% of those on leave had no bathing facilities and 31% had no toilet facilities. The same survey suggested that workers had often been confused about the payment system, not only in terms of how much they were due to make but about the schedule as well as the specifics of their contract. These conditions frustrated prisoners and certainly caused some of them to hesitate when considering work outside the camp.<sup>577</sup>

The work requirements on the camp's own acreage constituted another reason for the decline in available labor by 1945. The WRA had hoped that each camp could eventually become mostly self-sufficient by having prisoners harvest fruit and vegetables as well as work with livestock and swine. The project farm employed more evacuees than any other industry at the camp, and the workers succeeded in using the camp land to their advantage and to meet the evacuees' dietary needs. The variety of

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<sup>576</sup> Joseph McClelland interview with Louise Bashford, April 8, 1981, pg. 13. Transcript and audio tape available in Joseph McClelland Collection, Auraria Library Special Collectionss, University of Colorado – Denver, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>577</sup> Christan Heimburger, "Life Beyond Barbed Wire: Japanese American Labor During Internment at Amache and Topaz," 15.

fruit and vegetables, coupled with the 1,000 head of hogs, 800 cattle, and 16,000 chickens, offered more than enough for the camp so the WRA actually shipped the surplus to other camps. In fact, sixteen railroad cars full of vegetables left the camp for other centers in 1943, when the camp produced a crop worth nearly \$190,000. The evacuees produced common commodities like corn, alfalfa, and wheat, in addition to more original and unusual crop varieties like Napa cabbage and daikon – crops new to the region. The camp’s success illustrated the prisoners’ agricultural ability, and it spoke to the leadership employed by Farm Superintendant Ernest Tigges as well as the fact that the camp enjoyed junior irrigation rights.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> Karl Lillquist, “Farming the Desert: Agriculture in the World War II-Era Japanese Relocation Centers,” 83-95; William Wei, “‘The Strangest City in Colorado’: The Amache Concentration Camp,” 6.



**Figure 27: "Part of the Irish Potatoes being grown on the center farm," Jun 4, 1943. Courtesy Western History/Genealogy Dept., Denver Public Library.**

Even the camp faced worker shortages, however, and camp officials became increasingly frustrated that the farm did not reach its full potential. The labor issue represented the culmination of several factors, including the prevalence for evacuees to take seasonal leave, segregation of loyal from disloyal evacuees, internal strife, low pay for the work, and cultural beliefs. In addition, the number of evacuees who relocated to other parts of the country increased after 1943; the total camp population declined so obviously the number of workers available for any employment dropped as well.<sup>579</sup> The labor scarcity caused such problems, in fact, that the camp sold off portions of its farm acreage to local residents when it became clear that not enough evacuees would

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<sup>579</sup> Karl Lillquist, "Farming the Desert: Agriculture in the World War II-Era Japanese Relocation Centers," 85.



contribute to production. The manpower issue had become so acute by 1944 that the camp director issued a directive “that required anyone applying for seasonal work to first work two weeks in the center.”<sup>580</sup> The farm’s output, much of which sustained the camp population while also helping to feed evacuees in other camps, was remarkable given their labor constraints.

By 1943 and 1944, then, the potential camp labor pool slowly evaporated until the camp closed in January 1946, which forced area farmers to find alternative labor sources. Fortunately, the Extension Service had total control of the labor program by the end of 1943, so it supplied farmers and growers with the workers they needed. To their credit, farmers also organized into labor organizations designed to funnel workers into the region and then disperse the workers as necessary on members’ farms. For example, Prowers agent Gausman noted that 1943 included negotiations with the Holly Beet Growers Association as well as the Lamar Beet Growers Association as each group looked to supplement their labor pool with outside workers. The newly established East Prowers County Farm Labor Association similarly reached out to Extension in hopes of augmenting local supplies in 1944.

The county agent encouraged farmers to utilize the new associations to concentrate their labor demands, thereby making it easier to assess how many farmers needed how many workers and for what work. Yet such associations were often rife with problems, especially in their early stages. Once the associations took over worker management, they had trouble arranging work orders with members, they found it difficult to keep workers on for the whole season, and the process took time and energy

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<sup>580</sup> Christian Heimburger, “Life Beyond Barbed Wire: Japanese American Labor During Internment at Amache and Topaz,” 21.

since association members were new to such responsibilities.<sup>581</sup> The associations found it easier to reach out to migrants from neighboring states because they could recruit such workers without much help from Extension. That often proved complicated as well, however. According to the *Lamar Daily News*, Colorado farmers expected nearly 7,000 migrants to work in the state in 1944. Many of them had previously made connections in Prowers County, so farmers assumed that the migrants would simply follow the same path again from Texas and Oklahoma into Colorado. Unfortunately, problems arose. Heavy rains in the planting season of both 1943 and 1944 meant that farmers had no clear idea of how much they could produce and consequently no clear sense of the contracts they should orchestrate with domestic migrants. As a result, migrants proved reticent to commit and often picked up and left Prowers farmers in search of alternatives in neighboring counties and even other states. The bottom line was that each group posed a series of challenges and promised a number of benefits, and farmers often found it best to defer to the Extension Service to coordinate the labor regime.<sup>582</sup>

The pattern of combining migrant and guestworker labor continued in 1945, 1946, and 1947, until the final call for wartime production and the dissipation of Extension's labor efforts in Prowers. Supplemental labor came from German prisoners of war in 1945, when Extension helped repair and replace a number of buildings and camps that temporarily housed contract labor. For example, Extension funded housing for POWs in two camps owned by sugar companies; the Holly Sugar Corporation owned one facility and American Crystal Sugar Company the other, and combined the

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<sup>581</sup> Claude Gausman, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1943 to June 01, 1944," 26, Folder 15, Box 67.

<sup>582</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, March 24, 1944.

two housed 339 workers in 1945. Extension also contributed to repair migrant camps, again remodeling or repairing hotels, warehouses, and colonies owned by prominent local sugar companies.<sup>583</sup> Problems tended to sprout up when the various groups mingled in the fields, so Extension employees made a concerted effort to separate the disparate workers; in 1945 that meant Mexican Nationals focused on east side farms and German prisoners toiled in the western part of the county. Jamaican workers also played a role, albeit a comparatively small one.<sup>584</sup>

This mix of workers toiled in Prowers through 1946 and most of 1947, although 1945 constituted the peak year for county residents' utilizing contract labor during the war. The East Prowers County Farm Labor Association operated from 1945 to 1947 and brought in evacuees, Mexican Nationals, and prisoners; the West Prowers County Farm Labor Association ran for the same period and utilized Mexican Nationals, Jamaicans, and prisoners. These groups looked to Extension to provide labor, but as had been normal in Prowers County, private enterprise took much responsibility for attracting labor for themselves, especially in terms of sugar processors and their contracted growers. They dealt with inclement weather and faced competition in surrounding states, where Kansans, Nebraskans, and others vied for satisfactory migrant labor from the same pool that Colorado farmers had used. The pool slowly shrank with the quick return of German POWs and the relocation of Japanese Americans in 1944 and after, and the influx of discharged service people coupled with the migrant and immigrant workers only made up so much slack. In both 1946 and

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<sup>583</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 24-33.

<sup>584</sup> A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program," 33; Max Mills, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1944 to December 01, 1945," 28, Folder 16, Box 67.

1947, the state made arrangements with Kansas, Kentucky, and Texas to funnel migrant workers to Colorado to supplement the group of Mexican Nationals.<sup>585</sup> In effect, Prowers farmers dealt with their labor problems by capitalizing on federal intervention as well as by organizing into associations devoted to procuring labor as needed by county farmers. The combination worked well enough to meet demand, keeping production humming and creating a nice financial boon to area agriculturalists.

#### •Making it Work•

The Extension Service became a jack-of-all-trades during the war by assessing local labor needs, identifying the groups most likely to work well given the circumstances, and procuring the workers to satisfy demand. It also spearheaded two other important tasks in securing wartime labor by settling on a pay scale and helping train workers unfamiliar with the crops and conditions found in southeast Colorado. The county agent then found himself in familiar territory, as he had been performing similar duties of watching the federal purse strings and educating his constituents since the 1930s. This theme held true with wartime responsibilities, including the need to promote conservation techniques and facilitate the genesis and maturation of soil conservation districts in both counties. These various responsibilities combined when the agent cooperated with farmers to pay and educate contract labor. The task tested the core of Extension's *raison d'être* by requiring patience, an ability to work with locals, and knowledge about effective land use techniques, in addition to demanding familiarity with government protocol and prerogatives. It challenged agents by forcing them to

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<sup>585</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 4-5. There is no clarification on the persons involved but it seems most likely that both white and Hispanic workers made the trip into Colorado for seasonal work during these two years.

juggle their constituents, the laborers, and the need for conservation while also attempting to meet production goals necessary for the war drive.

Of course, educating workers only became a concern once the government recruited and placed foreign workers and convinced migrants to hit the Colorado fields. In their review of the Emergency Farm Labor Program, Hamman and Anderson noted the importance of state-to-state relations and America's ability to negotiate with foreign governments to facilitate the imported labor programs. They rightly emphasized the "concessions" necessary to attract workers, including government payment for transportation and the guarantee that imported workers would receive the same wages that local, domestic workers garnered for the same jobs. Additionally, the War Department insisted that prisoners of war also receive prevailing wages for similar work and the WRA set stipulations for prisoners as well.<sup>586</sup> The payment system relied on county agents to coordinate wage boards for each county where wartime labor might work that then deliberated once they heard testimony from local farmers, farm workers, and anyone else with pertinent information. That county wage board then submitted its findings to the State Director of Extension who turned it over to the federal Farm Labor Office. The board also helped establish adjustment committees that settled disputes between growers and workers about working conditions. The arbitration committees included a representative of the Extension Service, a member of the sponsoring association, and a "disinterested party," in addition to a member of the local Labor Branch to represent the workers, and finally the interested farmer. Again, the county

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<sup>586</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 35-36.

agent helped oversee this and facilitate the necessary intervention by serving as a bridge between federal and local interests.<sup>587</sup>

In the end, prices varied according to the work and the time spent doing the work, such that weeding fetched different rates than harvesting, and sugar beet work meant different money than a day spent harvesting broomcorn. Additionally, the Extension Service set out a general table for employers and workers as a guideline for hourly work; payment by tonnage also existed though most of that concerned prisoners.<sup>588</sup> The system also appeared generally fair, at least in terms of how the wages were determined; wages reflected the going rate for agricultural labor, and the workers had a number of safeguards in place to ensure that they were not being taken advantage of by their employers. Theoretically, all workers had such protection, beginning with the federal government's assurance that their wages and working/living conditions would be acceptable. This parity stirred some unrest among domestic workers who rarely had any such protection from exploitation, had no contractual agreement for housing, and no other insurance that they would be retained through the season. Consequently, competition between domestic and local workers and contract labor started brewing soon after the guestworkers and prisoners arrived in late 1942 and early 1943. Discontented local/domestic workers conspired against employers, fomented dissent among the workers, and tried to subvert the influx of laborers that they believed sabotaged their chance at taking advantage of the wartime boom. Many farmers who declined to tap imported labor because of these problems decided to work

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<sup>587</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 36.

<sup>588</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 37.

themselves and their families harder and longer to negate the need for potentially problematic outside workers. This largely offset the demand for year-round workers but did not assuage the necessity of utilizing seasonal labor, which of course brought farmers back to the Extension Service looking for assistance in supplying workers.<sup>589</sup>

Agents faced additional problems training the workers that they had placed on area farms. The differences in language and culture between themselves and most of their trainees caused an obvious rift. The work schedule also caused problems: for example, the three-month long separation between planting and harvesting seasons meant that workers either had to find employment in the interim, move to another locale, or head back home. Therefore, there was little consistency within the work crews from season to season and even more fluctuation from one year to the next. As a result, Extension employees and county agents reached out to workers to promote efficient and safe practices, in hopes that such education could bring new workers up to speed and maintain a steady rate of production in spite of their lack of experience. The push for efficient production reflected the fact that Extension understood the Emergency Farm Labor Program's fragility. In other words, farmers had access to labor, but there was no guarantee that the workers would be effective or that a number of them might simply stop working without a moment's notice. The number of workers, while generally sufficient, also posed a problem because many farmers had to make due with a minimal labor force. If they had been accustomed to using ten workers, but only five became available during the war, then the five workers had to do their job efficiently and safely. Any injury or lax effort meant a dip in production.

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<sup>589</sup> A.J. Hamman, "Annual Report of A.J. Hamman, State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1944," 13; F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 40-41

The Extension Service attempted to train both farmers and workers to ensure that the entire system ran as smoothly and effectively as possible. For example, agents held training programs for foreign workers and offered additional training for a crew leader of POW workers so that all parties had some organization and the workers had at least some knowledge about local conditions and practices. The Service put together bulletins and pamphlets, in addition to using motion pictures, as Hamman believed that certain groups learned better through different mediums. Extension even offered informational pamphlets in the workers' home languages to further the learning process. Such methods often proved successful, as Hamman claimed that the Mexican immigrants and Spanish-speaking migrants usually took the pamphlets home with them to their barracks or camp and read the literature in their off time.<sup>590</sup> The bulletins and leaflets often included basic instructions on labor-saving techniques specific to each subset of hand labor jobs in the region, such as picking string beans, potatoes, peaches, and even topping sugar beets. Extension designed the pamphlets to show growers and workers proper form and to implore that they use the best, meaning the most efficient, methods available. Extension also emphasized that farmers could expedite this process by holding meetings to demonstrate how some jobs could be done with fewer workers than normal or how farmers could best pool trucks and machinery with neighbors to save time and man days of work.<sup>591</sup> It was part of a larger scheme to cut down on waste and maximize the resources at hand; in that way educating farmers appeared in tune with repairing vehicles, picking the right crops and seeds, and meeting quotas. The Service held meetings and seminars for farmers to prepare them to supervise and

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<sup>590</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 38-39.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 38-40.



instruct their workers in a productive fashion. Agents also held extra sessions for farmers and companies that presumed to use either prisoners or Mexican Nationals so that they could be schooled on the differences in culture, language, expectations, and, in the case with prisoners, how to maintain safe, secure relations.<sup>592</sup>

How each group responded to Extension's efforts, even whether they proved amenable to such instruction, differed. On the one hand, Hamman claimed that Jamaican workers had no taste for anything broaching agricultural education and bristled at the thought of spending time reading or watching the Service's films. Hamman noted their apathy with distaste but never ventured a guess as to why they resisted instruction.<sup>593</sup> On the other hand, some workers took advantage of the opportunity to learn new types of farming or new techniques; some even used their prior knowledge to their advantage when working in the fields. One example is Rüdiger Freiherr von Wechmar, later German Ambassador to the United Nations and Chair of United Nations Security Council, who worked in Kansas and Colorado while stationed at Camp Trinidad. He remembered his time in the fields fondly: "I learned how to harvest corn, *besenkraut* (broomcorn) and potatoes, and I applied my knowledge for the beet harvest of my farm labor days in Spandau. Between the man-high corn stalks and the *besenkraut* bushes we learned how to take care of rattlesnakes, which sometimes crossed our paths. The locals explained how to deal with snakes: grab their raised tails and then whirl them like a whip in the air. Thus the bowels of the animals are pushed

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<sup>592</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, "Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947," 38-39.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 38-39. See also the description of Jamaican workers offered in Max Mills, "Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, December 01, 1944 to December 01, 1945 " 28, Folder 16, Box 67.

to their head, they bite and kill themselves with their own venom.”<sup>594</sup> Certainly, the majority of workers likely sat somewhere between those who Hamman described as disinterested and the enthusiastic von Wechmar. But the Service provided training to the entire laboring population and then left it to the farmers and workers to put that training to use.

The Extension Service records and the agents’ thoughts on educating the workers might also reflect a racialization of the workers and an underlying assumption about the workers’ experience, their desire to learn, and their ability to grasp the material. Again, Hamman and the agents seemed to focus most of their disappointment on the Jamaican workers, and again the criticism reflected a sense that the Jamaicans were somehow disconnected from the work, uninterested, and even perhaps lazy. There is no accounting for Jamaicans’ general ability in the field or their prior knowledge of the work, so it is difficult to assess why they may have been lukewarm to the instruction, if indeed they exhibited such ambivalence. Moreover, Hamman and the agents may have generalized about the groups according to a few isolated examples and consequently lumped workers together unfairly. As a result, we can speculate that, according to the agents, a few Mexican Nationals interested in instruction and enthusiastic about the brochures supposedly represented the groups’ predilection for education while a small number of Jamaicans who appeared disinterested came to characterize the whole. Unfortunately, in this case as in others, neither the agents nor Hamman had much reason to clarify their sentiments or offer much evidence to support their interpretations, so we are left to speculate a bit about their assessments.

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<sup>594</sup> Quoted in Kurt Landsberger, *Prisoners of War at Camp Trinidad, Colorado, 1943-1946*, 181.

The agent's job continued once the workers arrived and farmers started their seasons by conducting "continuous follow-up" with farmers to assess their experience in light of the educational sessions. The Colorado State University Department of Economics and the Experiment Station on campus in Fort Collins regularly contributed to the instruction by doing field research and investigating ways to save money. The Extension Service also resolved to spread new ideas and methods as quickly as they had been discovered and practiced, assuring that they disseminated the most modern agricultural methods to all farmers. It especially promoted adopting technological advances as another way to maximize production while saving labor. Experiment Station workers modified a power manure loader to load bundled grain and put tools on beet cultivators for cross blocking sugar beets – two methods to cut down on arduous labor. The Service also reached out to private industry and individual inventors in the hope that their efforts might save labor and maintain production. It convinced state sugar processors to organize a foundation to work on new beet implements and join forces with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to experiment with technology to cut labor costs.<sup>595</sup>

A broader, public push to use technological innovation to cut into time and labor costs also emerged during the period. Frequent notices of inventions and implementations filled southeastern Colorado newspapers, evidence that folks from across the region experimented with – and then claimed to own – the "next best thing." In some ways, this turn to science and innovation for solutions to obstacles to production had a lengthy tradition. In one case, C.T. Peacock developed the technology to build a damming chisel and furrow seeder to maximize soil moisture and improve

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid., 38-40.

conservation without hampering production – an instrument that Peacock hoped could help farmers maximizing profit even when “cooperating with nature.”<sup>596</sup> Other instances of this push for innovation to save on labor costs and increase production occurred during both the 1930s and 1940s. Much of this invention dealt with sugar beets, most likely because the beet industry proved both labor intensive and highly profitable. A new type of beet harvester device developed in Wyoming promised to “revolutionize the entire beet growing industry” as it did “everything to a sugar beet but refine it and put it in your coffee.”<sup>597</sup> Another tool, dubbed “Schnabel’s Machine,” could auto-contour one’s field, helping conserve soil and save manpower while doing it – an additional instance of trying to wed conservation with lower labor costs because of the Dust Bowl.<sup>598</sup> The premium on lowering costs and maintaining production continued during the war, though the cause had shifted. The weather and soil exhaustion compelled farmers to think about efficiency during the 1930s, but the dearth in labor prompted a similar focus during the war. Many farmers hoped that technological innovation could solve both problems.

#### •Conclusion•

Two aspects of the Extension Service’s management of the wartime labor program warrant special attention. First, it produced remarkable results and evidenced the role that local and state officials played in placing labor successfully. The county agent set meetings and deliberations with local interested parties, and relayed his findings to the state committee, and the state representative determined not only need

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<sup>596</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, March 18, 1939.

<sup>597</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, January 07, 1939.

<sup>598</sup> A.J. Hamman, “Annual Report, Extension Service, Prowers County, November 01, 1936 to November 30, 1937,” 51, Folder 8, Box 67.

but also conditions and payment for the various positions. Obviously, the federal government negotiated with other countries to import labor and made the decision to both intern potential subversives and allow prisoners of war to work in the U.S. Extension took the consequences of those policies – the able-bodied workers – and translated the motley array into a largely viable work force that met farmers’ demands and helped win the war. Consider the numbers: From 1943 to 1947 Extension averaged 59,210 workers recruited, transported, or placed, and 15,455 farmers served statewide. Furthermore, they did this at a relatively inexpensive rate, averaging \$153,878 a year cost to the Service (and therefore taken from the federal allotment for the program). There is no way to accurately assess how much these workers produced or what the new labor force allowed for statewide production given variables like climate and number of farmers using labor, for example. Yet, Extension noted a dramatic improvement in statewide numbers; broomcorn moved from 66,000 acres harvested in 1942 to 104,000 by 1945 while sugar beets jumped from 132,000 in 1941 to 152,000 in 1945.<sup>599</sup> In this case, Extension calculated the total number of acres harvested to validate its effectiveness, equating increased acreage to increased production. This impact and the contribution to the “Food for Victory” program are impressive.

The labor program reflected a sense of urgency that only national emergencies can elicit. Between 1943 and 1947, the Colorado Extension Service responded to the crisis as it had to the dual crises of depression and drought: it relied on county agents to distinguish what farmers needed, when they needed it, and how best to satisfy their demands. In the process, A.J. Hamman and F.A. Anderson coordinated a dramatic

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<sup>599</sup> F.A. Anderson and A.J. Hamman, “Resume of the Emergency Farm Labor Program in Colorado, 1943 to 1947,” 38-39.

population shift as the Emergency Farm Labor Program recruited workers from four countries and throughout the Great Plains and American West. Indeed, the wartime amalgamation of different races, guest workers and domestics, prisoners and POWs, resembled a mixing of peoples that may have been absolutely unique to the American homefront during the war. The program was largely successful for Colorado farmers looking to produce, helping sugar beet, broomcorn, and wheat farmers especially, as it sent needed labor into the fields where the workers helped fuel the war effort. It is fair to contend that this augmented production proved critical in America's ability to fight a two-front war over the course of four years. Problems existed throughout the time that the program coordinated labor in the state. Racism, bureaucracy, and inefficiency all played a role in souring some workers on their experience working in America. Most farmers certainly appreciated workers' efforts, even if some remained reticent to embrace them or treat them as equal participants in mobilization. It is somewhat surprising that the process went as smoothly as it did, considering the number of moving parts that had to work together to make the system function. When all was said and done, and the Allies had won the war, the Emergency Farm Labor Program had coordinated the placement of over 250,000 workers on Colorado farms, putting workers in the fields and helping farmers produce the food to win the war.

The presence of such workers complicates our understanding of how land use in southeastern Colorado changed during the 1930s and 1940s. By bringing in such a considerable number of outside workers, the Extension Service effectively absolved itself of worrying about the maintenance of the yeomen ideal in American agriculture. The idea of a family farm no longer held the same kind of political or ideological

weight during or after the war as it did during the New Deal, when agencies like the Resettlement Administration and others promoted the existence of small operators on Plains homesteads. Obviously, the largest farms needed the most workers, so the labor program at least implicitly contributed to their continued success and, probably, continued expansion. In that respect, the large operations stood more ready to take advantage of the program, produced more commodities to sell during the war when the market was healthy, and entered the postwar world having received just about all the help that they could have wanted. That they emerged from the war so economically healthy, with the level of federal and state support for their production, represented a product of the labor program.

The racialized labor regime also represented an important product of the program in that it demonstrated how farmers' success relied in part on the hard work put in by others. Farmers sustained themselves through the lean years by relying on both federal subsidies and the formation of a state-led labor program that provided inexpensive seasonal labor during the war. Many of the farms that did not need laborers during the 1930s certainly noted a shortage of workers during the war, and the government responded. That the government brought in such a diverse army of laborers to promote agricultural production is notable, but it does not seem that the workers' welfare was as much of a priority. While the guestworker and prisoner programs included minimum wage guarantees and promises of suitable living and working conditions, neither the Extension Service nor the government seemed to pay much attention to the plight of the worker.

New Dealers had focused intently on the idea that poor land made poor people but seemed oblivious to the flip side that emerged during the war, that rich land still made poor people. Instead of attending to issues of rural poverty among small owners and tenants as they had during the New Deal, the Roosevelt administration largely neglected to consider what the new prosperity in agriculture meant for the people who worked to make it possible. Indeed, by prioritizing the persistence of agriculture in the area the federal government, state government, and local farmers needed some form of largely dispensable and replaceable labor force that cost little and required minimal overhead. The various forms of guest and prisoner labor satisfied that need but the system did not allow for much flexibility for the workers. In some cases, like the Japanese Americans from Amache who refused to work outside the camp, workers could choose to not work if the work did not meet their expectations. For braceros, Jamaicans, German POWs, and even some migrants, however, not working had consequences. Migrants could lose any good faith they had fomented with other farmers in the area. Both Mexican and Jamaican workers could be sent home immediately and thus made to forfeit the opportunity to make some money during the war. The prisoners could face martial punishment or, at the very least, different work responsibilities at the POW camp.

To some extent, then, the war allowed producers to capitalize on both markets and an abundant labor pool. While this dissertation has attempted to explain how federal and Extension Service policy made that possible, the very nature of the system promoted farmers' prosperity even when it meant that others contributed significantly to that success. Put another way, these folks were able to stay rooted in place because of



the workers who consistently moved through, or were effectively funneled through, the region. The workers constituted a necessary piece of this puzzle and became a crucial component of the larger shift from family to industrial farming that accelerated during the 1930s and 1940s. Observers credited farmers for making this shift and, as this dissertation has argued, the drought and depression certainly initiated adaptations that allowed for the persistence of agriculture. In that sense, then, New Deal conservation was largely successful, but it is unclear, and presumably doubtful, whether the workers would consider their time in Colorado fields as a success.

The other important point about the Extension Service's efforts is to consider the labor programs as logical derivations of the federal government's previous interventions in rural America. In other words, the labor crisis mandated immediate action and the state's response to the crisis was made easier because of the strong federal presence already at work in the countryside by the start of the war. The federal government had already worked with farmers by using the Extension Service; Extension employees, most prominently county agents, had worked directly with rural Americans during the 1930s and into the 1940s. Agents' roles certainly changed over that time, but once agents arrived in Prowers and Baca Counties and established themselves during the first years of the New Deal, they were there to stay. By the start of the Roosevelt administration they largely worked to make a place for themselves in rural communities, building relations with constituents and focusing on education as a way to improve agricultural practices in both Prowers and Baca Counties. Their role changed a bit with the onset of the New Deal, as they began facilitating subsidy programs for production reduction and, more generally, started to carve out a niche for themselves

acting as interlocutor between an expanding state and struggling farmers. Education remained a priority during the New Deal, as it did during the war, but the 1930s and 1940s witnessed a shift toward sustainable production that increasingly incorporated instruction about conservation and resource protection. By the war, the push for economic benefit and the continued promotion of farmers' economic welfare took on a different guise. While the Extension's role as labor broker represented a more active and interventionist example of their influence, the wartime labor program remained grounded in local connections between agents and farmers, it promoted farmers' needs, and it used instruction to facilitate efficient and sustainable cultivation. In effect, the Extension Service changed in accordance with state expansion during the 1930s and 1940s; it took on more responsibility in part because the federal and state governments leaned more heavily on it to bridge the gap between the citizen and the state.

This consistency complicates what historians have called the "transformation thesis" that seeks to explain the war's impact on the American West. Gerald Nash introduced the thesis to work as a general interpretation of how the war transformed the West from backwater region to national standard bearer, effectively breaking the West's colonial relationship with the East.<sup>600</sup> Conversely, historians such as Roger Lotchin and others have argued that most wartime changes proved temporary and that the war simply aggravated tendencies already at play in the region, including migration and urbanization.<sup>601</sup> Few historians have subsequently argued so vehemently for either side

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<sup>600</sup> Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). Nearly every book published about the war after this work had to deal with the thesis in one way or another; most often the subsequent literature investigated one part of Nash's argument to consider his general position.

<sup>601</sup> Roger Lotchin, *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

since Nash introduced the thesis. Many historians like Marilyn Johnson and Kenneth William Townsend have utilized case studies to investigate seem to find how particular cities, races, or industries generally find evidence of both change and continuity.<sup>602</sup> Furthermore, even analyses of the same groups or cities or industries provide divergent interpretations. For example, historian Louis Fiset argues that the wartime experience in the fields actually helped Japanese Americans prepare for the postwar world and lessened white racism against them because of closer contact between the groups.<sup>603</sup> While also looking at the Japanese American experience, Roger Daniels finds that the war had mixed results on that community. Racism was a constant and had basically “stretched back to the earliest contacts between Asians and whites on American soil.”<sup>604</sup> Thus, even though the war sped up assimilation and resettlement moved communities away from the West Coast, some aspects of Japanese American life did not change.

This study of southeastern Colorado suggests that the war engendered no such transformation – at least not when we consider it as a solitary event. While much of the postwar world certainly looked different than it had in 1929, or even 1939, such variations represented the culmination of New Deal *and* World War II influence on area residents. In other words, the transformation thesis does not account for change over time: only when we consider both periods, and more specifically how the war built on changes engendered during the 1930s, can we appreciate how the war accelerated transitions in the region. For example, Prowers and Baca County farmers came out of

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<sup>602</sup> Marilyn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Kenneth William Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

<sup>603</sup> Louis Fiset, “Thinning, Topping, and Loading: Japanese Americans and Beet Sugar in World War II,” 123-134.

<sup>604</sup> Roger Daniels, *Prisoners without Trail: Japanese Americans in World War II*, Revised Edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 1.

the war in a tight relationship with Washington, D.C. Yet the government's role as labor broker proved temporary and farmers never had the luxury of having the state funnel workers to them in the same way again after 1947. The prisoners left, the POWs returned home, and the migrant labor stream slowed after the war. Moreover, the folks who had migrated to cities or to other parts of the country to find work in wartime industries rarely returned to the area. Consequently, farmers had to find new ways to produce, especially in terms of planting and harvesting labor-intensive crops like broomcorn and sugar beets. This trend of outmigration and farmers looking to farm more efficiently started during the Great Depression.

Certainly, farmers looked to technological innovation as a chance to save on labor during the war, but such attention was not new. The wartime boom meant that they had more money to spend on such technologies and mechanical developments. This then contributed to what David Danbom calls the "production revolution" – an explosion in production and a new type of farming centered more on highly capitalized farms and the use of science. Willard Cochrane argues that the impetus to substitute technology for human labor and animal power had influenced farmers for over a century. Such improvements cut into the need for labor and made farmers more efficient in preparing the soil, planting, and even harvesting. Moreover, scientists started to experiment with different plant varieties and fertilizers designed to control pests, insects, and weeds; the new combination "had the effect not only of decreasing labor requirements but also of increasing yields per acre."<sup>605</sup> Inexpensive labor was still

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<sup>605</sup> Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 127.

available to a limited extent, but agricultural production slowly became more manageable by a smaller number of people.

The changing size and number of farmers represented another trend that accelerated with the war but had been present during the 1930s. Farmers who capitalized on wartime production had money to spend to expand their holdings; in many cases these farmers lived in areas where out-migration led to abandonment or landowners' desire to sell their property at minimal cost. As a result of these new opportunities, the average farm's size in Baca and Prowers increased dramatically over the 1940s and the early postwar period, even as the number of farmers declined over the same period. Moreover, these large farms tended to have less diversification than their smaller counterparts, as owners quickly identified the most marketable commodities and grew cash crops that could take advantage of growing consumer markets. Several historians have suggested that the larger farms had more capital, in part because they profited immensely from wartime mobilization, and that the capital allowed them to spend more money on expanding their holdings and mechanizing their farms. As a result, according to this logic, a smaller number of successful farmers gobbled up available land that had been populated by small operators who managed largely marginal enterprises.<sup>606</sup>

The government also continued supporting American farmers by maintaining a safety net to ensure that there was no attrition in postwar America as had happened during the 1930s. The New Deal legacy is evident in this emphasis on providing

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<sup>606</sup> Brief explanations of this shift can be found in Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis*, 132-136; Carolyn Dimitri, Anne Effland, and Neilson Conklin, *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy* (USDA, Economic Information Bulletin Number 3, 2005), 4-6, available at [http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/259572/eib3\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/259572/eib3_1_.pdf).

financial assistance to farmers. Indeed, “since the passage of the first Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in 1933, farm price and income support programs have been the core of agricultural policy in the United States.” Federal policy has shifted to some extent since the 1980s when it started to focus more on convincing farmers to produce marketable commodities and more akin to direct government payments instead of subsidies designed to control supply and demand.<sup>607</sup> As it had during the Dust Bowl, Great Depression, and World War II, then, the government continues to prioritize keeping farmers farming even if it means a significant national investment in their well-being.

This meant maintaining the guestworker programs beyond the war, a steady source of labor that combined with seasonal domestic migrant labor to satisfy growers’ needs into the 1960s. Mechanization became more important to growers after the war as a way to save on labor costs, but farmers continued to use seasonal labor for both sugar beets and broomcorn into the 1950s. This reflected two key points: first, farmers could save money by having workers do some of the stoop labor instead of extending capital to pay for it; second, technology developed slowly in terms of both crops such that manual labor remained a necessary part of production. The bracero program continued until 1962 and it supplied a majority portion of seasonal workers across the Arkansas Valley. As they had during the war, farmers noted that their ability to contract with these workers as well as their leverage to send workers home if they perform poorly and replace them with other willing workers. Local workers seemed undependable in comparison, as did the domestic migrant labor force that consisted of

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<sup>607</sup> Carolyn Dimitri, Anne Effland, and Neilson Conklin, *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy*, 9.

Hispanic workers who traveled into the region from Texas and New Mexico. Members of both the local and regional labor groups still worked in the area, but farmers seemed most comfortable with the braceros for their reliability, work effort, and low wages. In many ways, this system looked remarkably similar to the one in place during the 1930s. Private individuals recruited a few workers, but sugar beet companies and local collectives did most of the heavy lifting to bring workers into the region, just as they had in the 1930s. The guestworkers were of course new in the sense that the two governments had a firmer agreement after the war than just taking advantage of the permeable border as workers had before the war. For the most part, though, workers funneled to the areas where they were needed, especially on beet and broomcorn farms, and farmers used them during planting and/or harvest before they returned home.<sup>608</sup>

In addition, the government continued to fund farmers who practice conservation on their property, another example of New Deal policies remaining an important part of government-farmer relations. The war did very little to upset the maturing conservation state. For example, the Baca County soil conservation districts continued to function at a high rate, offering members machinery and technological assistance, as well as physical help, to furrow or till the contour or plant shelterbelts or terrace their fields or any other method that they employed before the war. Indeed, support for local districts grew on the eve of the war as the Two Buttes district emerged in 1941 to join the Western and Southeastern districts already in place in Baca.<sup>609</sup>

Similar enthusiasm in Prowers translated to its first soil conservation district when

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<sup>608</sup> M.R. Douglas, "Migratory Labor in Colorado: Colorado Legislative Council Report to the Colorado General Assembly," (Denver, CO: December, 1962), 12-45.

<sup>609</sup> *Springfield Plainsman Herald*, October 09, 1941.

farmers authorized the Arkansas Valley Soil Conservation District in 1941.<sup>610</sup> County residents added the Prowers County Soil Conservation District in 1943.<sup>611</sup> Certainly, federal subsidies and assistance in conserving soil and water helped persuade farmers to join, but the district's creation evidenced sustained support for the cause. The federal government's presence in rural America shifted during the war, and part of that happened in response to the weather as the sense of immediacy that accompanied the Dust Bowl evaporated when the rain returned. Yet state and county officials remained on the scene during the war and continually reminded farmers of the need to protect their resources. The county agents maintained their involvement in conservation activities and consistently promoted the need to think about the postwar world. Indeed, through dust, rain, and war, county agents continued to act according to their constituents' needs.

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<sup>610</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, December 08, 1941.

<sup>611</sup> *Lamar Daily News*, October 06, 1943.



## CONCLUSION

### There and Back Again?

The *Denver Post* published an article lamenting the long, hot summer and invasion of unwanted pests: “Colorado farmers already plagued by a debilitating drought are now fighting the arrival of crop-eating insects who like the hot, dry weather that has settled over the state and elsewhere. ‘It’s to the point where we just feel beat up,’ said Harry Strohauser, who has already let 500 acres of corn on his 3,500 acre Weld County spread die to conserve water.” The article also quoted Rick Davis’s opinion on conditions. Davis, farmer on 600 irrigated acres near Julesburg, felt that “No matter what man does, Mother Nature has a way of getting around it.”<sup>612</sup> The *Post* printed the article on July 20, 2012.

The cycle of drought and economic instability that has plagued the Great Plains over the last century and a half continues today. Southeastern Colorado remains inhospitable country. As Chapter One showed, settlers slowly came to understand the challenges that the semi-arid environment posed; current residents have long appreciated those challenges and face them daily. Things are not likely to change dramatically in the near future: the most recent economic recession has certainly taken a toll, as has the last ten years of drought. While most residents refuse to mention it aloud, a down economy, a lack of water, and hot temperatures are scary omens, reminiscent of the 1930s.<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> The Denver Post, July 20, 2012 via [http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_21116040/first-drought-now-pests-are-descending-parched-colorado](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_21116040/first-drought-now-pests-are-descending-parched-colorado).

<sup>613</sup> For example, see “Drought puts Baca on Edge,” *Pueblo Chieftain*, April 25, 2011, available online at <http://www.chieftain.com/>.

Another aspect of life in Prowers and Baca today seems similar to the 1930s, namely the presence of the federal government. The state's intervention in rural America largely explains how people can continue to farm and live in the region. The names of the programs and the agencies involved have changed since the Dust Bowl days, but the federal government's intervention in the rural economy during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s set the stage for much of today's agriculture. Chapter Two explained the origin of federal involvement under both the Hoover administration and during the early New Deal years. Hoover's response to the Great Depression nudged the federal government towards a more activist role in American agriculture, especially with his Agricultural Marketing Act that enacted a round of production controls designed to stabilize commodity prices. Hoover missed an opportunity to reach rural America through the Extension county agent; his unwillingness to increase federal spending to support the Extension service and his general refusal to offer direct financial assistance to Americans meant that most southeast Coloradans received little help, or even the appearance of help, from Hoover's administration. With FDR's election, however, and especially with his decision to fund the county agent program, he started to immediately build not only political support in the countryside but also foment strong relations between the farmer and the agent. Subsidies helped tremendously in that regard, as agents became responsible for promoting farmer participation in such programs and ensure their compliance with federal regulations that would warrant financial assistance. These subsidies kept many farmers afloat during 1933 and 1934 while they also increased local support for the county agent.

Those subsidies still matter in the region, as, according to the Environmental Working Group (EWG), the combination of wheat, corn, and sorghum subsidies have effectively kept farmers afloat since the war. The EWG tallied the number of recipients of various subsidies and the total money that the USDA spent on the subsidies by calculating totals provided by the USDA. For Prowers County, 1995-2011 (see Table 4):<sup>614</sup>

Program	Recipients	Subsidy Total
Conservation Reserve Program	867	\$87,795,183
Wheat Subsidies	1,336	\$67,214,577
Disaster Payments	1,007	\$30,619,881
Corn Subsidies	659	\$25,188,223
Sorghum Subsidies	1,156	\$16,730,080

For Baca County, 1995-2011 (see Table 5):<sup>615</sup>

Program	Recipients	Subsidy Total
Conservation Reserve Program	1,583	\$122,426,727
Wheat Subsidies	1,916	\$100,260,721
Corn Subsidies	521	\$52,278,320
Sorghum Subsidies	1,721	\$46,390,610
Disaster Payments	1,420	\$44,230,787

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<sup>614</sup> The Environmental Working Group offers a database for such federal payments, searchable by state, county, and even congressional district. For Prowers see <http://farm.ewg.org/region.php?fips=08099>.

<sup>615</sup> See Environmental Working Group data for Baca at <http://farm.ewg.org/region.php?fips=08009>.

The subsidy programs reward growers of certain commodities that the USDA decides are most valuable to the market – the number of farmers who primarily or even exclusively grow those crops suggests a level of soft coercion from the federal government. Yet the farmers continue to farm in large part because of such federal involvement.

Chapter Three expanded on this theme of federal subsidies by looking at how farmers and the state responded to the Dust Bowl. Extension county agents and federal agricultural experts instituted a three-pronged strategy to stabilize the farm economy in light of the Dust Bowl. First, they bought up submarginal land to remove it from production. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, the Resettlement Administration (and later Farm Security Administration), and even the Soil Conservation Service contributed to the purchase program during the 1930s and beyond. The most noticeable legacy of the push to retire submarginal land is the Comanche National Grassland, a 440,000 acre expanse across southeastern Colorado composed of lands retired during the New Deal and after. The purchase program retired the land by buying out farmers, and since most of them had little chance for success on denuded land, the program effectively gave them an opportunity to get out from under debt and move out of the region. It also made the retired lands available for recreation. The Grasslands, formally created in 1960, are now managed by the U.S. Forest Service and offer several campgrounds and hiking trails.<sup>616</sup>

The agents also helped facilitate the second phase of the state's response to the Dust Bowl by promoting soil conservation among dryland farmers in Baca County. The

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<sup>616</sup> See R. Douglas Hurt, "The National Grasslands: Origin and Development in the Dust Bowl" *Agricultural History*, 59, no. 2, The History of Soil and Water Conservation: A Symposium (Apr. 1985): 246-259; Michael E. Lewis, "National Grasslands in the Dust Bowl" *Geographical Review*, 79, no.2 (Apr., 1989): 161-171.

agents coordinated efforts by several federal agencies, most notably the Soil Conservation Service, and educated farmers on how to protect their most valuable resource. Importantly, most of the soil conservation programs included subsidies, so farmers received funding if they agreed to try to strike a more measured balance between production and conservation. The formation of the local soil conservation district represented the key moment for Baca farmers because it maintained federal financial support for conservation but gave them local control over managing their own soil conservation regime in the county. District members had access to instruction, machinery, and labor, and received federal financial assistance as needed to buy up nuisance lands as well as in individual subsidies. In other words, the districts enabled farmers to conserve the soil and their widespread embrace of the district idea represented their willingness to practice conservation during the 1930s and beyond.

Indeed, Baca County still maintains a county-wide soil conservation district, another legacy of New Deal land use policy, and we can see the legacy of government-subsidized conservation there today. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that the USDA instituted in 1985 reflects the same motivation that led to the Agricultural Conservation Program of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act enacted in 1936. According to the USDA, the CRP “is a voluntary program available to agricultural producers to help them use environmentally sensitive land for conservation benefits. Producers enrolled in CRP plant long-term, resource-conserving covers to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion, and develop wildlife habitat. In return, FSA [Farm Service Agency] provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance.” The principal agency in charge of the program, the Natural

Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is the present-day incarnation of the Soil Conservation Service. Employees of the NRCS team with members of local soil and water conservation districts to promote enrollment in the program. Again, we see the combination of federal and local entities working together to protect natural resources by enabling farmers to retire parts of their acreage through compensating them for their decision.<sup>617</sup>

The following pictures suggest that the CRP made quite a difference in both land use regimes and farmers' willingness to remove acreage from production. Moreover, even the temporary retirement of such lands and the replanting of native grasses helps keep another Dust Bowl from recurring. Baca farmer Rosalie Bitner agrees, suggesting that "CRP has most definitely been instrumental in controlling erosion, preserving wildlife, and generating a healthier economy for Baca County's agricultural community." The USDA also argues that the rehabilitation and retirement program helped maintain the topsoil during the first few years of the current drought cycle. While "Baca County faced one of the worst drought periods on record" from 2001-2004, "the landscape was blown and dry, but no soil drifted into the neighboring fence rows and no blowing sand darkened the skies." In essence, "the land was prepared to weather the harsh conditions" because of the agricultural conservation efforts pushed by the USDA. Certainly, one can assume that the USDA is at least a bit guilty of tooting its own horn, but the CRP has had an indelible impact on farmers and the landscape. The CRP is also a perfect representation of how changes enacted during the 1930s continue to influence land use on the Colorado Plains. Even then, however,

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<sup>617</sup> Farm Service Agency, "Program Fact Sheets: Conservation Reserve Program" (USDA, 2010) available online at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov>.

not everyone is willing to participate in such programs, so their acreage will always be susceptible to blowing and drifting (see Figure 28). Neither local nor federal proponents can force people to opt into the program, just as farmers had to choose to participate in the New Deal programs that aimed to accomplish the same goals.



**Figure 28: Picture of the CRP in action. Field on left is part of the program while field on the right is under production.**  
Courtesy Farm Service Agency.

As much as the Dust Bowl compelled local and federal responses, it also led to some more subtle changes, like the general trend of farmers expanding acreage on the Colorado Plains. A cadre of New Dealers increasingly pushed for fewer and larger farms on the Great Plains, but only the combination of drought and depression could realize that piece of the three-part plan to change Plains land use. The dual crises combined to force many owners and tenants from the region, opening up land that more established and capital-rich neighboring farmers could buy up to expand their holdings. Consequently, the number of farmers declined from 1930 to 1950 but the size of the average farm increased over that same period. That trend portended a dramatic shift

away from the family farm following the war, as more and more industrial farms and agribusiness outfits now dot the landscape in the region than some might have thought possible. The bigger farms seem more capable of surviving economic downturns and periods of drought than marginal operators, meaning that attrition played out on the Plains and steadily diminished the number of smallholders still operating in the region.

The conservation legacy is in some ways, then, a mixed one on the Colorado Plains. The push to conserve resources, especially soil, gained ground during the late 1930s because that time represented a confluence of divergent conditions that made farmers more amenable to it. To put it another way, the Dust Bowl offered immediate evidence that the land regime needed some adjusting, the state and federal governments backed farmers with financial and institutional assistance, and farmers practiced conservation voluntarily. The farmers sustained conservation in part because they remained in control and the federal government continued, and continues, to subsidize the activity. The operators who participated in the programs effectively made money to not plant their fields, and most of them had enough acreage that they could diversify by leaving some fallow per government regulations and planting commodities on other parts of their property. This combination provided an economic safety net and gave farmers a chance to accumulate capital; that capital then allowed them to mechanize their farms, expand their holdings, and contract seasonal labor, three key components of what experts call modern agriculture.

In that respect, the series of New Deal agricultural policies facilitated these slow transformations, and in the process changed the face of American agriculture. The family farm, an image and ideal Americans have long celebrated, slowly started to



disappear before the changes during the 1930s cemented that transition toward large operators and industrial farming took hold. The Dust Bowl instigated this change in Baca County especially, as small operators simply could not sustain themselves in the face of such a crisis. In an unusual and perhaps unforeseen way, however, this may have actually led to wider acceptance and practice of conservation. The Homestead idea did not work in the arid West, and even the Expanded Homestead Act and other amendments failed to guarantee success for dryland farmers. Indeed, it seems that small holders often felt more pressure to mine the soil and thus leave it vulnerable to erosion. As a result, the trend of fewer but larger farms and the maintenance of conservation subsidies may have actually been the best thing to happen to curtail destructive land use in the region. In that respect, the response to the Dust Bowl worked as it was supposed to – much of the submarginal land in the area is now retired from production, conservation districts exist in both counties to promote good stewardship, and subsidies encourage voluntary conservation. New Deal agricultural policies initiated these developments.

At the same time, it is apparent that farmers in both Baca and Prowers Counties still look to water as a way to mitigate the effects of an arid environment. Even with the successful adoption of soil and water conservation, farmers continue to look for additional security. As Chapter Four showed, residents in the Arkansas Valley, especially those with access to river water, focused on how expanded irrigation operations could mitigate crisis. Prowers farmers who enjoyed irrigation believed that, rather than a dramatic reappraisal of their practices as was happening in Baca, the key to economic turnaround was to provide more water, more consistently, to irrigators. Such

advocates for expanded irrigation convinced the federal government to build them a dam and retaining reservoir that could hold Arkansas River water until farmers needed it, thereby providing them more stable and reliable water for their crops. They eventually won the Army Corps of Engineers' support, and that body finished the John Martin Dam and Reservoir in 1948. Even before this construction, however, irrigation seemed to make life in Prowers more stable and prosperous than for their neighbors in Baca. That trend has continued.

That stability and the push for water help explain why Baca farmers pushed so hard to tap Ogallala Aquifer water as soon as they discovered the store beneath the ground. As William Ashworth writes, "groundwater is the glass slipper that has transformed this Cinderella landscape [the high Great Plains] into a princess. Under the sand hills, under the shortgrass prairie, under the rich harvest of corn and wheat and cotton, lurks an ocean: the Ogallala Aquifer."<sup>618</sup> While scientists and hydrologists knew of the aquifer and the first attempts to capitalize on the water for irrigation date back to 1911, use expanded dramatically after World War II. At that point, the federal government widely subsidized or directly funded drilling projects designed to tap the aquifer for agriculture. Additionally, irrigation technology improved and made it more likely that farmers could institute personal pumps at minimal charge and with relatively small investment. The inexpensive machinery allowed farmers in southern Prowers and throughout much of Baca to access water for the first time and opened the possibility for more stable and secure production. It seemed an answer to their prayers, but, alas, of course the ocean has a finite amount of water and farmers are draining it quickly. By

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<sup>618</sup> William Ashworth, *Ogallala Blue: Water and Life on the Great Plains* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 10.

1950 the Aquifer irrigated 4.5 million acres; as of 2000 that number sat at 16.5 million acres. Irrigators are draining the source at over ten times the natural rate of recharge, meaning that the Aquifer has no way to keep up with demand and will be sapped in the relatively near future. Moreover, farmers' devotion to fertilizer is jeopardizing the aquifer water by introducing a number of harmful chemicals into the groundwater reserves and polluting the reservoir.<sup>619</sup> Therefore, while farmers who never had access to irrigation now do, the Aquifer seems less like a viable long range alternative and more like a temporary resource. David Danbom notes that nearly half of the aquifer is now gone after only 45 years of sustained use – “a natural resource millions of years in the making was in danger of being frittered away in less than two generations.”<sup>620</sup>

Irrigated farmers in Prowers County also face water supply issues today, as they have since the first white Americans settled the region and tapped the river. The Arkansas River and its tributaries reflect the decade-long drought that flared up during the summer of 2012. In 2006 the reservoir hit its lowest point in water capacity in thirty years.<sup>621</sup> In fact, as recently as 2009 the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Colorado State Parks jointly purchased an additional 3,000 acre-feet of water from the city of Colorado Springs to ensure that the John Martin Reservoir had a permanent pool worthy of sustaining fish and wildlife so as to appease recreationists. The drought and users' divergent demands had so depleted the reservoir that officials worried about the fishery and the animal population that relied on the reservoir to survive.<sup>622</sup> Put another way,

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<sup>619</sup> Manjula V. Guru and James E. Horne, *The Ogallala Aquifer* (The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., 2000), 6-10, [http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/ogallala\\_aquifer.pdf](http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/ogallala_aquifer.pdf).

<sup>620</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* Second Edition (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 244.

<sup>621</sup> “John Martin Reservoir Drying Up,” June 25, 2006, available online at <http://www.kktv.com/home/headlines/3423251.html>.

<sup>622</sup> “John Martin to Add Water,” *Lamar Ledger*, May 21, 2009, available online at <http://www.lamarledger.com>.

even as locals viewed the water in new ways, as a place for outdoor enthusiasts as well as a container for irrigation water, they quibbled over how to utilize the water and found that they never had quite enough to keep everyone happy.<sup>623</sup>

The nature and character of agricultural labor changed quite a bit over the span of this study, and the picture we have of laborers in the region today seems very much like what it was coming out of World War II. As Chapter Five described, the drought and depression temporarily cut off what had been viable labor streams from both Mexico and surrounding states like Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico. The sugar beet companies facilitated the push for seasonal labor and eventually broomcorn farmers adopted similar tactics of recruiting, housing, and utilizing the workers through the periods of labor-intensive work. The drought and depression effectively cut off those labor streams, however, by diminishing both worker supply and demand. The combination of Mexican and domestic migrant labor reformed during the war, as the federal government instituted a number of different programs to deliver workers to farmers who needed labor to produce for war. Chapter Six detailed the Extension Service's role in managing the Emergency Farm Labor Service, a program that employed a wide, and unique, array of workers on southeastern Colorado fields. The chapter's investigation did not account much for the plight of the workers, but it did show that the farmers received about everything they could have wanted from the federal government. The state organized the programs and negotiations to bring in the workers, the Extension Service managed it, and the farmers reaped the benefits.

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<sup>623</sup> Pictures of people commiserating around the piles of dead fish at the bottom of the reservoir and an explanation of the push for a permanent pool can be found in J. Edgar Chenoweth Collection, Folder 28 Water – John Martin Reservoir 1948-1965, Box 78, University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, Colorado.

The wartime labor program evidences two main themes that run through this dissertation. First, the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service worked with farmers every step of the way from 1933 to 1945. The county agents effectively became the face of federal intervention during the New Deal and the war, a twelve year span that witnessed arguably the largest expansion of federal influence in the lives of everyday Americans in U.S. history. In very general terms, the agents moved from educators, to financial managers, to labor brokers, and always worked to fit themselves into their communities. They effectively stayed true to the language of the Smith-Lever Act that gave rise to the national Extension Service. The Act offered agents an opportunity to be “the mouthpiece” to educate the people and reach them through “personal contact...by going onto his [the constituent’s] farm, under his own soil and climatic conditions” and working with him to improve his results.<sup>624</sup> They did this by instituting production reduction schemes, by organizing soil conservation districts, and by working with farmers and workers during World War II to promote safe and efficient production.

The agents were seemingly omnipresent, holding meetings, answering calls, stopping by locals’ homes, and publishing newspaper articles. And while the agents earned their keep by representing the farmers, they were also beholden to the state and federal governments. The state is another constant in this study and how individuals related to the federal government is a second important theme within this dissertation. The federal government facilitated white American settlement in the region by first taking the land and then by passing a series of policies aimed at encouraging settlers to try their luck in the region through land programs. Washington seemed to take a more

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<sup>624</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 1937.

reserved approach to intervening in the region from the 1890s through the 1920s, but the federal influence started to ramp up again during the Hoover years. The New Deal of course raised federal involvement in American social, political, and economic life to a whole new level. The state sustained that heavy involvement through the war years and beyond. Importantly, much of its concentration on the region seemed to be in favor of farmers. The subsidy programs, the promotion of conservation, the offering of labor, and other examples illustrate that farmers largely held a place of prominence in American life during the interwar and war years. This was not necessarily akin to the agrarian ideal, but the level of attention that Washington focused on Plains farmers, especially those who lived in the Dust Bowl region, demonstrated a predilection to treat farmers as an important constituency. Farmers did not always desire such attention, and they often criticized the government for bureaucracy, misguided policies, or inefficiency. For the most part, though, farmers in the two counties effectively maneuvered within the expanding, and expansive, federal government to determine what they wanted and how to get it. Their success in that regard is central to this story.

It is unclear whether the region will ever truly reach a point of stability even with continued federal and Extension support. Drought and economic downturns continue to wreak havoc on locals. Population decline is evident, especially in downtown Springfield, where a number of shops have closed, leaving the county seat looking relatively desolate and depressed. Lamar seems much more bustling, and with good reason, as its population is more than double that of Baca County. The town has a much more diversified economic base, is home to the Lamar Community College, and has a downtown full of restaurants, bars, and local shops. Judging by such superficial

qualities, one might assume that Prowers residents are much more secure than their neighbors to the south. Yet, there is no escaping the fact that they are still largely subjected to the fluctuations of an always volatile agricultural market and an always unpredictable climate. Since farmers make up such a significant portion of the population in the region, if farmers are hurting financially then there are ripple effects throughout the entire community. Yet, Prowers residents are quick to point out that tough times are tough all over, that having access to irrigation does not matter much during a drought, and that the federal government had more to do to keep farmers solvent.

Now, perhaps more than ever, residents of the Colorado Plains rely on federal intervention. That relationship, and the amount of money that the federal government spends every year to keep farmers on the land in southeastern Colorado, is difficult to characterize. In some ways, of course, agricultural production is the backbone of the nation's economy, providing commodities for domestic and international consumption. Yet the level of federal involvement in that production, whether through price-stabilization or resource conservation subsidies, calls into question the value of farming in such an arid environment. Perhaps early explorers like John Wesley Powell and Zebulon Pike had a point about the practicality of agricultural settlement on the High Plains. The environment really may not be suited to intensive cultivation.

To their credit, and although it has taken a long time to move in that direction, residents have moved away from the type of production frenzy that contributed to the Dust Bowl. Conservation districts play important roles in both counties by helping members make land use decisions based on sustainable production. The NRCS

maintains a presence and the county agents continue to patrol area farms, lead community meetings, and work to stabilize the population and the economy. Farmers and the federal government have retired hundreds of thousands of acres and are taking better care of their property than perhaps ever before. Growers still face challenges. Water sources are finite and even the flowing Arkansas will never meet users' demands. The wind will always blow and the sun will always beat down on the soil. Many residents seem stuck in a perpetually marginal existence, unable to make a lot of money but secure enough to stay on their land. It is doubtful that the Plains will ever reach a point of stasis, so farmers will have to handle the ups and downs if they choose to stay in the region. In that respect, little has changed in Prowers and Baca Counties in the last 80 years.



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