

Conserving the Dust Bowl: The New Deal's Prairie States Forestry Project

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Conserving the Dust Bowl: The New Deal's Prairie States Forestry Project, by Sarah Thomas Karle and David Karle. Reading the American Landscape Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017. xi, 160 pp. Maps, illustrations, tables, photo essay, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 hardcover, pdf, and ebook.

Reviewer Rebecca Conard is professor of history emeritus at Middle Tennessee State University. Her books include *Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism* (1997).

Conserving the Dust Bowl provides a succinct history of one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signature New Deal projects—the shelterbelt project to curb wind erosion on the Great Plains. The Prairie States Forestry Project (PSFP), its official title, was an ambitious federal response to catastrophic drought and monstrous dust storms that brought agriculture to its knees in this region in the 1930s. Between 1935 and 1942, more than 200 million trees were planted, more or less strategically, in a corridor stretching from the Canadian border through eastern North and South Dakota, eastern and central Nebraska, central Kansas, central and western Oklahoma, and into the Texas panhandle.

In their first two chapters, the authors, drawing on the scholarship of Wilmon Droze, Donald Worster, and others, provide a good overview of nineteenth-century federal land policies and laws that enabled the development of agriculture in the ecologically fragile Great Plains and—once it became clear that rain would not, in fact, simply follow the plow—the two basic approaches devised to change the plains climate: rainmaking schemes and planting trees. Franklin D. Roosevelt's triumph in the 1932 presidential election was a boon to the latter. FDR, who once self-identified as a tree farmer, threw the weight of his office behind soil conservation and forestry as instruments of resource stewardship (chap. 3). Chapter 4 delves into the policy and politics of implementing the shelterbelt idea, which Roosevelt launched with an executive order in July 1934, with funding to come from work relief appropriations. His executive order touched off a debate that had foresters arguing its scientific merits and politicians questioning whether the federal government should be spending emergency funds on a long-term project designed to help farmers in a sparsely settled part of the country. Ultimately, the project went forward, administered by the U.S. Forest Service until it was transferred to the Soil Conservation Service in 1942. For seven years, the Roosevelt Administration kept the project going with annual infusions of work relief funds, ultimately totaling less than \$14 million and coming mainly through the Works Progress Administration (chap. 6). This signature New Deal project, “never fully endorsed by Congress” (97) and initially projected to cost \$75 million, was thus implemented on a shoestring budget.

What the authors do not adequately explain is how a project that came to be associated almost exclusively, in historical memory, with the venerated Civilian Conservation Corps, popularly known as “Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” was, in reality, a very complicated undertaking. Brief passages devoted to funding, land tenure, management, and workers reveal that the PSFP employed a variety of specialists and workers, including women, and relied on cooperative agreements with farmers to achieve what would have been impossible had the federal government tried to repurchase the land: establish “nearly 19,000 miles of disconnected shelterbelts on 33,000 separate farms” (141). The PSFP thus forged an important pathway into what we now call public-private partnerships, one that ultimately left farmers in control of the shelterbelt’s long-term sustainability.

Deeper inquiry into how the PSFP worked on the ground would have been helpful, and would have been warranted considering the authors’ purpose, which is finally revealed only in a concluding chapter devoted to the project’s legacy. In a nutshell, despite inconsistent and often competing agricultural policies that swing from promoting maximum production to encouraging resource conservation, plus widespread use of irrigation technology that is slowly draining the Ogallala Aquifer, the PSFP, the authors argue, “represents a balance among long-term planning, far-reaching national policies, and a willingness to reconsider core values at the local level regarding the federal government’s involvement on private land” (134). They see a “striking parallel” (139) between the looming effects of climate change on agriculture and the federal government’s response to the devastating environmental and economic effects of the great drought of the 1930s, positing that the PSFP is a cogent case study for climate adaptation. Although the authors might have developed their argument more coherently, *Conserving the Dust Bowl* is worth a look by those who continue the noble effort of cultivating a land ethic in the agricultural sector. A good bibliography awaits anyone who wants to dig deeper.

From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965, by Jon K. Lauck. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xii, 246 pp. Notes, index. \$27.50 paperback.

Reviewer C. Elizabeth Raymond holds the Grace A. Griffen Chair in History at the University of Nevada, Reno. She has written extensively about a sense of place in the Midwest and West.

Midwesterners weary of eastern intellectual condescension, or of hearing the charms of their subtle landscape casually dismissed as “flyover