

## The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression

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## Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, book review editor

*The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression*, by Paul Bonnifield. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979. pp. xii, 232. Photographs, maps, bibliography, index. \$12.50.

*Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, by Donald Worster. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. pp. x, 277. Photographs, maps, index. \$14.95.

The dust bowl, coinciding as it did with the Great Depression of the 1930s, left a lasting impression on many who lived through that period. Its effect on the lives of the people, the utility of the land, and the general economics of the time was extensive to say the least. Strangely enough, it was more than forty years before any historian has attempted to provide a truly informative book on the subject. Now two books on the dust bowl have appeared at almost the same time. Both writers have examined the center of the drought and dust storm area—Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Paul Bonnifield provides a readable story of social history, of hardworking people who struggled to survive poverty and weather that was frequently unfriendly to agricultural pursuits. Dry years with dying grass, plagues of insects and rodents, overgrazing, and fires left the ground barren and subject to extreme wind erosion. The arrival of farmers with their plows probably added to the intensity of the dust storms but did not cause them. Farmers developed dry-land farming methods and sought to conserve moisture and protect the soil with cover crops. With the new technology and its development of the tractor, the combine, and other large-scale equipment there came a new set of conditions for the farmer. It was no longer possible to con-

tinue subsistence farming; they now became commercial farmers, overproducing on farms that were too small to meet the demands for larger crops and more expensive equipment.

Bonnifield concludes, though, that despite the Depression, the economy of the dust bowl was no worse than other areas of the United States and in some ways it was better. The railroads and the oil and gas industry provided money and employment for the area. Many farmers decided to stay with the land rather than migrate to California or elsewhere. The farmers who remained began to reduce the possibility of wind erosion with the development of new methods. The federal government made efforts at solving the problem, but the author is highly critical of these attempts, calling them "woeful, a story of oscillating, procrastinating, and deceiving while attempting to remove the residents from their land and homes."

An important aspect of this book is Bonnifield's excellent use of local sources and interviews. His story touches upon the daily lives of the people who lived through these troublesome times. Indeed, this is one of the strong points of the book and makes for lively, interesting reading. At the same time it is a weakness because it fails to provide an adequate overview of the dust bowl and its wider impact.

Donald Worster likewise relies upon the memories of survivors of the period to recreate the trauma of the dust storm and the bitter hardships that followed. He feels that the dust bowl could not be blamed on illiteracy, overpopulation, or social disorders. It was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately and self-consciously set for itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all that it was worth. To him the dust bowl suggested that a capital-based society had a greater hunger for resources, a greater eagerness to take risks, and a lesser propensity toward restraint than societies based on other principles.

Worster claims that the dust bowl was more devastating economically than the Depression. He concludes that the dust storms were "unqualified disasters." The people of the area, according to him, were caught in a larger economic culture and were dependent upon its demands and rewards.

In contrast to Bonnifield, Worster feels that the migrants to California were not the victims of the government as much as victims of an exploitative agricultural system: of tractors, one-crop specialization, tenant insecurity, disease, and soil abuse. Of the total migration from Oklahoma, only a small percentage came from the area of the intense dust storms. He too is critical of the efforts of the New Deal to cope with the problems.

## THE ANNALS OF IOWA

His study of the worst ecological disaster in the history of the country has important implications for today. He concludes that another severe dust bowl is inevitable. The Great Plains cannot be pushed to feed the world's increasing appetite for wheat without becoming a sterile desert. He proposes two alternatives as a solution: learn to discipline the world's numbers and wants before nature does it or help less fortunate nations to raise their own wheat in order to make them self-sufficient in ways that are ecologically sound.

Excellent photographs and maps add much to the interest of both books. These two histories are "must" reading for anyone concerned about the ecological balance in the United States, the repeated threat of possible droughts and their impact on the agricultural industry, and the economy in general of the Southwest and Midwest.

ARLINGTON, VA

HOMER L. CALKIN

*The Road West: Saga of the 35th Parallel*, by Bertha S. Dodge. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980. pp. vii, 222. Illustrations, map, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$15.95.

This work, evidently an expansion of the author's *Story of Inscription Rock* (Canaan, N.H.: Phoenix Publishing, 1975), attempts to describe travel from the Rio Grande to the Colorado River over the southern Colorado Plateau before the railroad. It remarks on early Spanish ventures west, tells about the entry of American fur hunters into Arizona, and concentrates on the wagon road of Edward F. Beale and the hardships of the first emigrants who used it. The book includes quotations and paraphrases from several unpublished or hard-to-find sources and a section of well-reproduced photographs of pioneers never before seen. Especially useful is the complete transcript of the L. J. Rose claim against the government for damages at the hands of Mojave Indians in 1858.

In the spring of 1858 Leonard John Rose moved from Van Buren County, Iowa, accompanied by his family and the families of S. M. Jones and Alpha Brown, with the intention of settling in southern California. In Kansas they picked up the smaller party of John Udell and proceeded to New Mexico, evidently with the plan of going by the Gila Trail. At Albuquerque, however, they were induced by some Americans to take the newly surveyed road due west through Zuni Pueblo to Beale's crossing of the Colorado River. Harassed by Indians (probably Hualapais), they persevered and managed to get across the mountains to the river with only the loss of some cattle and two

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