

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.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

No two decades did more to transform American society and culture than the 1920s and 1930s. The twenties, coming as they did right after America's first great foreign adventure, World War I, was a modernizing decade more than anything else. Prosperous times, the rapid expansion of road-building and automobile traffic, and the rise of radio, movies, jazz music, new dance styles and other entertainment innovations, electrification, along with a spate of new technologies, from refrigerators and toaster ovens to electric stoves and vacuum cleaners, introduced to those who could afford it a whole new way of living. And then came the shocks of the Stock Market Crash and the Great Depression, devastating economic blows that not only called into question the future of American capitalism but jeopardized the survival of democratic government itself.

South Dakota could not escape the consequences, both good and evil, of these developments. People living in the state's West River region were especially hard hit by the latter decade's droughts and dust storms, which made people wonder about their very ability to survive on the land. To many outside observers, the economic and ecological catastrophes of the thirties symbolized divine judgments against the settlement of the semiarid region west of the Missouri River, the hundredth meridian, or whatever boundary line one might choose to indicate the divide between agricultural viability and hard-pressed challenge.

Paula M. Nelson's The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own is a follow-up volume to her earlier After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, which charts the rapid agricultural settlement of the West River region and the town-building process that was so integrally linked to it during the years between the turn of the twentieth century and American entry into World War I. The original energy, optimism, and aspiration that had animated these pioneers in their quest for land and desire for business success was blunted and discouraged by what Nelson calls "the first great crisis of settlement." After several early years of growth and prosperity, a devastating drought in 1910 and 1911 drove many settlers back to where they had come from and left the area from Martin and Kadoka to Belle Fourche and Buffalo in a state of acute economic stress. The war-borne prosperity of 1917-1918, as U.S. exports to Europe and military mobilization drove up agricultural prices and economic activity in general, was unfortunately short-lived. A brief but sharp economic depression in 1921-1922 devastated agricultural prices and profits, ushering in a decade of tepid growth, faltering business activity, bank failures, and down-sized expectations.

That is where Nelson takes up her story, using the western half of South Dakota as a case study of the difficulties posed by the area's type of semiarid environment, which was normally characterized by relatively low rainfall, high summer temperatures, soils more suited for grazing than for cultivation, and omnipresent wind. It is a narrative designed to produce caution in readers. While acknowledging the tremendous energy, drive, hopefulness, and dedication of the settlers and town-builders who came into the region, Nelson adopts a hard-headed, historically informed attitude about efforts to eke

out a living in the harsh environmental conditions posed by this part of the country. In her view, people needed to modify their practices and expectations from what they had been inclined toward further east. They needed to adapt new methods of farming and to create innovative types of economic and social institutions suited to a place where, as the author puts it in her title to Chapter 3, expansive space entails significant social costs.

Nelson, who is a professor of history, intuitively understands the huge importance of both people and institutions in laying the foundations for successful living. Colorful individuals such as Perkins County farmer and writer T. E. Hayes, county agent William Woods, and federal government employee Lorena Hickok help bring her story to life. But individuals operate within a complex array of social networks and institutions. Thus, we learn about the kinds of challenges families faced on their farms and ranches; pressures on town and city governments to provide services such as schools, roads, and water; initiatives by government agencies and university researchers to help make farmers and ranchers more productive and profitable; technological developments and reformed agricultural practices; and shifts in transportation, reducing the importance of the railroad and increasing reliance upon automobiles and trucks.

At the center of society remained the institutions of family, school, and church. Nelson deals ably with all of these aspects of people's lives, as she does with jobs, home life, recreation and entertainment, social organizations, and civic betterment groups. One gets the impression in reading this book that at least as far back at the 1920s and 30s, South Dakotans ranked high in their degree of "social capital." This is the same point made by social commentators such as Harvard professor Robert Putnam, whose 2000 book Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community highlights both Dakotas as standing atop the list of the fifty states in their levels of volunteerism, philanthropy, civic-mindedness, and political participation.

In a sense, there are two books in one here. First, there is the one about the more "normal" decade of the 1920s, when, despite experiencing a much higher level of economic hardship and failure than most other states, South Dakota participated enthusiastically in a variety of new practices, activities, and organizations that put its people ever more insistently on the path of modernization. The second story concentrates upon the economic havoc wreaked by drought, dust storms, and economic depression and the ways in which South Dakotans endeavored to cope with the challenges emanating from them. We get a brief year-by-year account of the dust storms and a rather detailed summing up of the impact of a wide variety of New Deal programs, especially upon Kadoka, which Nelson has chosen as a typical town that can stand for many of the other towns in the region that she is describing.

The Great Depression constituted the third huge crisis that occurred in West River South Dakota after European settlers arrived in large numbers there (the first two being the 1910-11 drought and the World War I years). Residents either learned to cope and adjust to conditions, or they got out altogether. Twelve of the eighteen plains counties in the area lost twenty percent or more of their population between 1930 and 1940. The sorting out and downsizing processes that had begun soon after the drought of 1910-11 took on added significance during the thirties. Town dwellers and people living on the land alike had to reassess their situations and try to come up with creative ways of adjusting to conditions that allowed for no simple solutions. Someone recounting this story might be tempted to conclude by saying that the tenacity, drive, hard work, and

innovativeness of the region's residents enabled it to transcend its nightmare-like conditions and "reach for a better tomorrow," but Paula Nelson is too good a historian and too realistic an analyst to trace an over-rosy picture. She concludes on a sober note: "The pioneer generation's vision of a thickly populated plains, with all the proper appointments, blew away in the dust storms of the Depression; the pioneers' bequest to their successors was not success but a regional character shaped by eternal struggle and persistence through years of defeat."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Kadoka Press on April 24, 1927, called western South Dakota "the greatest 'next year' country in existence." (xiv) Do you agree with this characterization? Why or why not?
2. A basic premise of this book is that converting the grasslands of West River South Dakota to tillable cropland was, at best, a questionable action and, at worst, a disaster. Others, from the federal government report The Future of the Great Plains and the Resettlement Administration's movie "The Plow That Broke the Plains" (both in 1936) to Frank and Deborah Poppers' more recent call to convert the region into a "Buffalo Commons" have likewise questioned the possibility of conventional agriculture in the western part of the state. What is your opinion on the issue?
3. If the agricultural population in West River South Dakota is strictly circumscribed by climate and limited resources, what potential for town growth and development do you believe exists in the region? What actions can people take there to improve their economic potential?
4. Do you think Paula Nelson's strategy of using Kadoka as a typical West River town works well to describe conditions there? She relies heavily on newspaper reports to describe conditions. Does that make sense, or do you perceive any hazards in the approach?
5. The history of white settlement in western South Dakota during the early 1900s can be viewed as a series of cycles of "challenge and response." How effective do you think people's responses were to the challenges and hardships they faced?
6. As experts pushed the idea of diversified farming ("The cow, the sow, and the hen"), increasing numbers of rural people followed their advice. (19) Discuss the effectiveness of this technique. What have been the long-term consequences of this transformation?
7. History, from one perspective, is a story of change and continuity over time. What changed and what stayed the same in the West River region during the 1920s and 30s?
8. What role did women play in the household economy, and what was their importance in society? (chap. 3)
9. Coming to the realization during the twenties that it would never become "a young Chicago," the town of Kadoka found itself caught, according to Paula Nelson, "between its ambitions and its realities." (62) Discuss what this meant for the town and what it meant for small towns in general over the course of their histories.
10. The author notes, "As with all small towns, a few energetic, involved individuals disproportionately shaped the social world." (62) Has this been true in your experience? Some call it the 80/20 rule (80 percent of the work gets done by 20 percent

of the people). Is this inevitable? What might be done to get more involvement from the entire citizenry?

11. The relationship between the individual and community is always a dynamic one. Towns shape the people who live in them and vice versa, Nelson contends. How do you look at this situation?

12. Matters like cleaning up the town, electrification, and water development posed major challenges during the 1920s. (chap. 4) How do present-day problems facing small towns compare?

13. South Dakota towns were increasingly shaped and influenced by outside forces that their residents had no control over. (91) How has this situation changed since then?

14. What are “the social costs of space”? (chap. 5) Can we ever eradicate or transcend the problems posed by relatively low population and long distances in South Dakota?

15. What impact did the “Dirty Thirties” have on the West River region? (chap. 6) Are those circumstances likely ever to recur?

16. Do you think it curious, as the author does, that West River people harbored “a willingness to accept aid combined with a thoroughgoing contempt for and distrust of the federal government”? Do you think the psychological concept of “cognitive dissonance” applies here?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Paula M. Nelson is a child of the Minnesota prairies. She grew up in Gibbon, a town with a population of 888 in the south central portion of the state in a family with roots in Norway and Sweden. At seven, she sang a hymn in Swedish at her brother’s baptismal service. History was her first love. As a child, she spent many hours playing “Homesteader.” Majoring in history in college, she earned her bachelor’s degree at Southwest Minnesota State (1973), her master’s at the University of South Dakota (1977), and her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa (1984). Her doctoral dissertation, “After the West Was Won,” became her first book. The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own became her second book, detailing the experiences of the West River homesteaders as they confronted the crises of the twenties and thirties in the region. Nelson has won high respect as a historian for her work, including a variety of articles published in historical journals and for her edited volume, Sunshine Always, a collection of Joseph and Alice Gossage’s courtship letters from Rapid City and Vermillion, published by South Dakota State Historical Society Press in 2006. In the works is a book about the early years of Canton, South Dakota.

Nelson lives with her husband and four cats on an acreage west of Platteville, Wisconsin, where she has been a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville since 1987. She spends her spare time in her more than half-acre of flower gardens and in antique stores refreshing her love of material culture.

[SUPPORTED WITH FUNDING FROM THE SOUTH DAKOTA HUMANITIES COUNCIL]