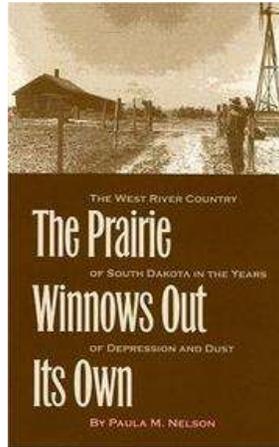


## About the Book



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.

### Synopsis

This, the second of two volumes about the historical development of West River South Dakota during the early twentieth century, provides a hugely interesting and instructive explanation of the economic and environmental cycles of the twenties and thirties and people's efforts — both successful and unsuccessful — to respond to these imposing challenges. Nelson, a professor of history in Wisconsin, is highly qualified to discuss agricultural practices, economic developments, weather and environmental hazards, town life, social and cultural practices, and political negotiation. This is one of the best historical accounts ever written about South Dakota.

### Summary of the Book

No two decades did more to transform American Society and culture than the 1920's and 1930's. 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, 1900-1917*, which charts the rapid agricultural settlement of the West River region and the town-building process 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 as the 1920's and 1930's, 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 1920's, 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 1910-1911 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 1910-1911 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."

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**Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).**

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