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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES



Bachelor Thesis

**Caroline Henderson's Letters from the Dust Bowl:  
A Window Into An Intercultural Dialogue on Federal Relief for the 1930's Environmental  
Disaster in the Great Plains**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. No part of it has been used in support of another degree from any other institution in the Czech Republic or abroad. All literature and sources have been duly referenced and quoted.

V Praze dne 7.5.2019 (in Prague, date)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This microhistory examines Caroline Henderson's egodocuments written during the Dust Bowl in the years 1930-1940. The thesis is divided into analyses centered on Henderson's agency, emotions, and values in regards to federal relief efforts in her community. These three focal points reveal the ways in which Henderson grappled with the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings that the policies revealed to her. It is argued that this individual-centered approach demonstrates that New Deal policies acquired complex and diverse meanings when implemented at the local level, which often contrasted the broader forms of the narratives surrounding the same policies. In particular, the thesis analyses the extent to which her egodocuments contrast the emphasis on rationality, progress, free negotiation, and reformed agricultural values advocated by New Deal officials.

## **KEYWORDS**

Dust Bowl, Great Depression, Microhistory, American History, Contemporary History

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## **Introduction**

The Dust Bowl was a time of atomization. The static electricity triggered by dust storms in the Great Plains of the 1930's could be strong enough to knock back two adults who touched hands. Radios - often a line of comforting connection between these rural communities and broader societies - frequently cut out. As once fertile lands failed to deliver crops, agricultural communities were driven apart. Some isolated farmers stayed on their lands. Others left, adding themselves to the millions who composed the "Okie" exodus. When New Deal officials traveled to the Great Plains, they witnessed cultures in upheaval, with which they attempted to negotiate on matters of agriculture and economic relief.

This effort has been described in heroic terms, and the scale of the New Deal relief efforts were significant. For example, the Shelter Belt project resulted in the planting of millions of trees, with the purpose of preventing erosion. Organizations like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Soil Erosion service sought similar goals. Officials from these organizations worked alongside farmers to negotiate their implementation in circumstances that would seem incomparable to past disasters, and haunt them long after the storms had passed. To commemorate their losses and raise awareness, the Roosevelt administration also hired photojournalists to document their conditions.

Photos of the dust storms taken by these federal workers show avalanches of dark clouds falling on towns. But this is not the complete story, because the storms were rich for the senses. When sunlight returned, it was possible to see in one's yard deposits of colorful soils that had travelled from across the United States, and predict their origins based on their hues. Their distinct smells made their way into noses, which farmers took to covering with facemasks supplied by the Red Cross; into their mouths, in which it was said to taste like vitamins; and into their lungs, which would suffer from the newly coined and sometimes fatal dust pneumonia.

In the way that these facts add detail to the macrohistorical narratives of the Dust Bowl suggested by its photographs and governmental agents, so do the egodocuments that I will focus on in this thesis. The writings of Caroline Henderson, a farmer who lived through the Dust Bowl, serve to bring texture to contemporary knowledge of the disaster and the accompanying

implementation of federal relief. Henderson revealed the complexities and ambiguities that underlie a narrative often defined by rhetorics of single-minded strength; and of the fears that ran beneath the dialogue of courageous farmers and aid workers. Her story provides a valuable point of reference that lends weight - and sometimes counterweight - to these macrohistorical interpretations of the effects of federal relief in the Great Plains.

## Overview of Sources and Methodology

### *Overview of Sources*

In this chapter, I will begin by describing the secondary sources I have used to contextualize the egodocuments of Caroline Henderson. I use these secondary sources not only for their concrete descriptions but also for their analyses; many of the secondary sources have aided my work in both ways. Additionally, I will describe the primary sources through which I examined Henderson's egodocuments. Following this overview of sources, I will describe my objectives, the structure of my argument, and the importance of this topic.

I have referred to several secondary sources for description and contextualization of the concrete circumstances that Henderson experienced in the era from 1930 - 1940. The first of these sources is *The Worst Hard Time* by historian Timothy Egan. In *The Worst Hard Time*, Egan provides detailed notes about the physical and psychological conditions of the Dust Bowl, which are valuable points of reference for my analysis of Henderson's descriptions.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the book *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*, by R. Douglas Hurt, I use primarily in the chapter on the origins of the Dust Bowl, for its descriptions of the various forces that culminated in the storms.<sup>2</sup> I refer to Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* particularly for its focus on the economic factors that contributed to the Dust Bowl.<sup>3</sup> The anthology of essays titled *FDR and the Environment*, created with the aid of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute and featuring the works of several historians, provides a comprehensive overview of the environmental effects of the New Deal on the Great Plains, as well as its social impacts.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I draw biographical information about Henderson from Alvin Turner's introduction to the collection of letters that he edited. These are the secondary sources

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<sup>1</sup> Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> R. Douglas Hurt. *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981. Accessed April 06, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Worster. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Sears et al., *FDR and the Environment*, ed. David B. Woolner and Henry L. Henderson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).



that I use most frequently for informational purposes; others, which I use for more specific and incidental information, I will address in the content of the subsequent chapters.

The sources mentioned in the previous paragraph also influenced my research through the analytical narratives of the Dust Bowl they provide; and these narratives often diverge. Worster viewed the Dust Bowl as the result of capitalistic exploitation culminating in inevitable tragedy.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Egan focuses on the psychological underpinnings of the Dust Bowl, describes at length its natural causes, and maintains a more sympathetic tone for both the government and Dust Bowl farmers.<sup>6</sup> With some exceptions, essayists in *FDR and the Environment* describe it as a triumph of rational coordination and cooperation, similarly to the New Deal officials they analyze.<sup>7</sup> These frameworks provide room for comparisons with Henderson's analyses of her conditions and those faced by others in her community.

Historians Jess C. Porter and William Cronon analyze narratives of the Dust Bowl that I refer to for context, and also in order to compare them with Henderson's perceptions of the event.<sup>89</sup> Porter's analysis is more concrete, showing the ways in which geographical definitions of the Dust Bowl, for example, diverge according to the perspectives of various authors.<sup>10</sup> I will refer to these perspectives in the chapter *Origins and Definitions of the Dust Bowl*. Cronon analyzes the political and philosophical overtones of the different narratives, with a particular focus on the New Deal narrative advocated by some of its federal officials.<sup>11</sup> Cronon's viewpoint is also valuable for the conclusion that follows my analysis of Henderson's letters, the ways in which I describe how her experiences often diverge from the narrative of triumph promoted by the New Deal officials.

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<sup>5</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*.

<sup>7</sup> Sears et al., *FDR and the Environment*.

<sup>8</sup> Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *The GeoJournal Library Nature and Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 1999, 1347-76.

<sup>9</sup> Jess C. Porter, "What Was the Dust Bowl? Assessing Contemporary Popular Knowledge." *Population and Environment* 35, no. 4 (2013): 391-416.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative."

The primary sources that form the base of this thesis are Henderson's egodocuments from the years 1930 - 1940. Most of them are letters written to friends and relatives; one was written to a government official as well.<sup>12</sup> I mostly refer to the letters organized by Alvin Turner in the book *Letters from the Dust Bowl*.<sup>13</sup> For the most part, Turner left her letters unchanged, with the exception of minor corrections to punctuation in cases when he believed a "benefit of the doubt" was owed, since she sometimes wrote in dim lighting conditions.<sup>14</sup> A few are collected from the digital collection of Mount Holyoke, which are presented in their original, handwritten or typed format.<sup>15</sup> The final source is Henderson's master's thesis, published by the University of Kansas.<sup>16</sup> I refer to the letters mainly in the fifth and sixth chapters; the master's thesis is the main focus of the seventh chapter, on Henderson's values.

### *Methodology and Structure*

During the 30's, federal aid workers collaborated with farmers to implement New Deal environmental strategies in the Great Plains.<sup>17</sup> This process, as well as the cultural transitions that it both influenced and reflected, will be the central theme I analyze through the letters of Caroline Henderson, who was a farmer living through the Dust Bowl. In particular, I will focus on Henderson's agency, emotions, and values - all of which were affected by the Dust Bowl as well as the New Deal - and how they shaped her appraisals of federal aid programs. My objective is to demonstrate that these three focal points reveal ways in which this farmer's reception of federal aid often contrasted macrohistorical descriptions of the New Deal, indicating that the national form of its narrative could significantly diverge from the forms it acquired in local implementations.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 4.

<sup>13</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> "Caroline Boa Henderson Papers." Caroline Boa Henderson Papers | Five College Compass - Digital Collections. Accessed April 06, 2019.

<https://compass.fivecolleges.edu/collections/caroline-boa-henderson-papers>.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Agnes Henderson, "The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1935), 1 - 104.

<sup>17</sup> Sears et al., *FDR and the Environment*, 165.

Before addressing the core of this argument, I devote several chapters to the concrete conditions of the Dust Bowl and Henderson's life. Such descriptions provide background information that is necessary for understanding many of the references that Henderson makes in her letters. In the subsequent three chapters, I analyze the three factors described above: agency, emotions, and values.

The first of these three chapters is titled *The Role of Agency in Henderson's Reactions to Federal Relief* because her lack of material freedom influenced her decisions about federal aid in several ways. Due to her financial circumstances, as well as stories about the poverty that her neighbors faced, she became more cautious. To refuse aid under these circumstances, she suggested, would be an irrational decision, since to accept it would mean a better chance at renewed self-reliance for her family and community.<sup>18</sup> Through the lens of Henderson's agency, therefore, acceptance of federal relief was not a difficult choice; as I describe in more detail in the fifth chapter, she had little that she would be able to bargain with, and she was eager to accept federal workers' environmental reforms in exchange for their help.<sup>19</sup> This reveals how her experience of the New Deal programs differed from many officials' narratives, with their focus on its cooperative aspects and redirection of farmers' agency.

The next chapter analyzes Henderson's acceptance of federal aid through the lens of her emotions. New Deal officials often promoted an image of heroic rationality for those who accepted aid in the region, according to Cronon.<sup>20</sup> But for Henderson, it was defined by feelings of cultural loss, isolation, and humiliation.<sup>21</sup> Such perceptions contrast prevalent images of the New Deal that I describe in the eighth chapter: it was seen, in these cases, as a revitalizing force.<sup>22</sup> While the projects allowed Henderson to survive, they did not enable her to regain the sense of pride or courage that she had once maintained.

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<sup>18</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

<sup>21</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

Lastly, in the chapter *The Role of Values in Henderson's Reactions to Federal Relief*, I argue that the New Deal's federal aid projects, along with the philosophy they conveyed to Henderson, often conflicted with the values that she had held in the past. She felt that the era of pioneers had ended by the time of Dust Bowl, and while federal aid might permit the sustenance of her community, the culture she had known had been lost permanently. Additionally, based on her descriptions of these pioneering values, they were not necessarily opposed to the scientific message of the New Deal officials, and unlike these officials, she did not hold pioneering values accountable for the environmental disaster.<sup>23</sup>

On microhistory, historian Istvan Szijarto writes: "the closer relation to the 'little facts' entails a stronger reality."<sup>24</sup> This is the primary benefit of analyzing federal aid in the Dust Bowl through the lens of an individual's narrative of her experience within it: through this lens, it is possible to find details that bring depth and complexity to macrohistorical narratives. Such a lens has been used with comparative rarity to analyze the Dust Bowl. Worster writes that "as real-life individuals," Oklahoma panhandle residents "are lost to history," their stories both unrecorded and mythologized.<sup>25</sup> He adds that "as with people everywhere who live obscurely, the cowboy in thirties America is a forgotten, inaccessible figure."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Henderson's egodocuments provide a valuable perspective on the Dust Bowl, and one that is often difficult to see due to the scarcity of such documents from her place and time.

Another benefit of this methodological perspective is its ability to highlight the complexities of agency in relation to larger political forces; what Giovanni Levi, in his description of microhistory, calls "the complex relationship between free choice and necessity/constraints that individuals create in the interstices of the contradictory plurality of the normative systems that direct them."<sup>27</sup> As Cronnon notes, the New Deal was characterized by a

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<sup>23</sup> Henderson, "The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West," 12.

<sup>24</sup> István Szijártó. "Four Arguments for Microhistory." *Rethinking History* 6, no. 2 (2002): 210. Accessed April 14, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>27</sup> Giovanni Levi. "Biography and Microhistory." Accessed April 14, 2019. [https://www.valencia.edu/retpb/docs/Florencia/Giovanni Levi.pdf](https://www.valencia.edu/retpb/docs/Florencia/Giovanni%20Levi.pdf).

forceful and self-assured narrative of recovery developed through what its advocates framed as a newly-rationalized farming culture.<sup>28</sup> However, even as Henderson lent her support to this narrative in some instances, she also contradicted many of its features and highlighted her distance from the “normative systems” that, according to Cronon, sought to revise not only the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl, but the lives that continued within it.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout these three chapters, I note when Henderson made broader claims about her community. However, this is the farthest I extend my argument. I do not attempt to make normative claims about the New Deal - to suggest, for example, that it was either misguided or triumphant. In contrast, my ultimate focus is on the ways in which the New Deal aid projects translated into Henderson’s perspective, and what themes lost or gained focus during this process of translation. This perspective of one marginal individual, shaped by a life far from any podium, is illuminating in the layers of knowledge it provides. An individual-centered approach reveals the internal motivations, nuances, conflicts, and experiential depth of everyday life in this small community during a state of momentous change.

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<sup>28</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1357.

## Origins and Definitions of the Dust Bowl

The term “Dust Bowl,” which came to signify both a place and an era, was coined by a reporter in 1935. The federal Soil Conservation Service officialized the name by writing it on their maps of especially drought-stricken areas of the Great Plains.<sup>30</sup> According to these maps, wrote Worster, it included “the western third of Kansas, Southeastern Colorado, the Oklahoma Panhandle, the northern two-thirds of the Texas Panhandle, and Northeastern New Mexico.”<sup>31</sup> While my analysis will mostly focus on Henderson and her community in Oklahoma, this is the territorial definition I will use when describing broader trends. However, it is not the only definition of the Dust Bowl’s territory. Researcher Jess C. Porter writes that the Dust Bowl is often much larger in the American public imagination, and has been defined by historians in various ways over the last century. These historians, as I will discuss later in this chapter, also attach significantly different philosophical and moral meanings to the Dust Bowl.<sup>32</sup>

Concrete and widely agreed-upon features of the Dust Bowl include high temperatures; widespread and persistent drought; chronic dust storms; and catastrophic economic and agricultural losses.<sup>33</sup> While precise dates vary, it is generally said to have lasted from 1930 to 1940.<sup>34</sup> The migration associated with the Dust Bowl is another key feature that writers often refer to, though it has also been a source of academic controversy. During the 30’s, millions of people left the region in hope of better luck elsewhere. However, the idea that this migration was caused exclusively by the Dust Bowl has been disproven. Migrations from the Great Plains were just as common, if not more so, in previous eras. Lastly, a point on which many historian agree is that what truly separated and defined the Dust Bowl was its scale. Researcher George Borgstrom went so far as to include it on his list of the three worst human-caused ecological disasters.<sup>35</sup> Meteorologists have described it as the most significant weather incident of the twentieth

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>31</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

<sup>32</sup> Porter, "What Was the Dust Bowl? Assessing Contemporary Popular Knowledge," 392.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>35</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 123.

century, and historian Timothy Egan described it as the most catastrophic environmental event in American history.<sup>36</sup>

According to historian Sarah Philips, official reactions were muted for the first few years of the Dust Bowl. She notes that Herbert Hoover viewed the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl as distinct phenomena and focused on the Great Depression as a primary issue.<sup>37</sup> In addition, he believed that the root problems of the Dust Bowl were farmers' lack of knowledge and technological awareness, rather than a symptom - let alone one of the causes - of a national economic issue. Neither he nor other analysts in his administration strongly considered the idea of promoting national programs to address the plight of Dust Bowl residents on the scale of Great Depression relief programs.<sup>38</sup> According to Phillips, Hoover and his administration felt that agricultural relief would naturally follow national economic relief; if the economy was cured, agriculture would follow suit.<sup>39</sup>

Researcher A. Dan Tarlock contrasts Hoover's approach with that of his successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who eventually concluded that the Dust Bowl was not only interrelated with the Great Depression, but could be part of its cure - and in order to find this cure, researchers in his administration began studying the past and present conditions of the Great Plains.<sup>40</sup> Like Hoover, writes Tarlock, Roosevelt believed that the disaster had, at least in part, been the result of mismanaged land.<sup>41</sup> He also listened to advisers, among them the economist Rexford Tugwell, who theorized that the Depression was not originally industrial, but agricultural. Tugwell suggested that farmers had sacrificed the long-term good of their communities for temporary personal gains. "Agriculture was to be made profitable," he wrote in 1929, "and this was to be done uncritically and with no attempt to gauge the future or to penalize inefficiency or anti-social techniques."<sup>42</sup> According to Tarlock, he believed this unsustainable production was due to ignorance on the part of the farmers combined with a national support for

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<sup>36</sup> Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

endlessly higher levels of production. For Roosevelt's advisors, in the same way that this overwhelmed agricultural system had aggravated the Dust Bowl, the Dust Bowl had critically worsened the Depression.<sup>43</sup> They saw both as a result of the "Roaring Twenties" approach to investment and consumption, or what Roosevelt called the country's "youthful stage of heedless exploitation."<sup>44</sup> While modern research supports the general outline of his theory, many of its elements have been questioned, for reasons I will discuss later.

Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace raised similar ideas in a 1935 report to Roosevelt.<sup>45</sup> However, he also highlighted the role that the foreign market and World War I had played in the decline of American agriculture.<sup>46</sup> The American economy had been closely connected with Western European economies. Farm exports had been declining until the war, but after the war, the market expanded again - especially for wheat. In conclusion, wrote Wallace, farmers rushed to meet the sudden demand.<sup>47</sup> In 1918, export prices for grains and meats were 45 percent above their pre-war equivalents. Historian Donald Wolster argues that this sudden increase in production, coupled with much more efficient and potentially damaging machinery, resulted in unprecedented destruction that the land could not recover from. Wallace does not reach this conclusion, but he ultimately raises a theory that most modern historians including Wolster would probably agree with. The new market for farm exports financed the payment of interest, and subsequently the United States began lending to European countries. However, after 1928, foreign loans stopped, and with the end of these trade agreements a major feature of the American export economy fell away, "with rural distress and urban unemployment correspondingly enhanced."<sup>48</sup> The new landscape of foreign trade in the 30's, suggests Wallace, was interconnected with both the Great Depression and to the Dust Bowl.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, and National Agricultural Library, prods. "Farm Science and Business News." Transcript. In *National Farm and Home Hour*. 1936.

<sup>45</sup> Wallace, Henry A. "Report of the Secretary of Agriculture to the President of the United States." Yearbook of Agriculture, December 10, 1935, 1-118. Accessed April 6, 2019. <https://archive.org/details/yoa1936/page/n7>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 14.



Based on these notes from Wallace and Worster, it is evident that there were factors in the economy that led to both disasters. However, it is important to note that this is not a comprehensive explanation for the Dust Bowl. According to Hurt, it had several other unique causes that did not apply to the Great Depression. Hurt writes that many of these causes had been present in the Great Plains long before the 30's, and they did not have to lead to such an unfortunate outcome. For example, he notes records indicating that storms had been commonplace events in the Great Plains.<sup>50</sup> Early spring included what southern Great Plains residents had called "blow months" long before the 30's, and several firsthand records of storms exist from the 1800's. Some were severe; a Kansas woman claimed to have swept almost two hundred pounds of dust out of her home after a windy day. "Kansas as a paradise has her failings," wrote a *Wichita Eagle* reporter in 1880.<sup>51</sup> Great Plains news articles from the 19th century include descriptions of storms that are eerily reminiscent of Henderson's notes: the impossibility of sight, prayers to an angry God, the way dust worked itself into every corner, deaths of livestock, and the flight of birds in search of shelter.<sup>52</sup>

Drought, too, was a regular burden: it led to the failure of wheat crops in the early 1900's and several more times over the subsequent years leading up to the Dust Bowl itself.<sup>53</sup> But the drought that ushered in the so-called Dirty Thirties would prove to be worse than any that residents could remember.<sup>54</sup> Goodwell, Oklahoma, registered precipitation nine inches lower than average between 1932 and 1933. Similar patterns occurred in neighboring states.<sup>55</sup> Lack of moisture persisted throughout the winters. Cold weather would further loosen the soil by freezing, thawing, and evaporating whatever liquid remained, leaving the earth a husk. By 1934, the drought in the Great Plains was noted as the most severe in the region's recorded history.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Finally, there was the human element. While a few farmers practised soil conservation, most could not afford to do so, and others simply did not prioritize it.<sup>57</sup> Many of those who did use such techniques abandoned them when wheat prices fell at the end of the Twenties due to the correspondingly increased pressure for immediate gains.<sup>58</sup> Their lands had been vulnerable to erosion long before their arrival, but their tools were a decisive factor in the creation of this new generation of storms. In particular, their plows caused a slow-moving destruction. Such machinery allowed for ever-larger territories to be seeded for wheat and other crops. Plows were expensive for farmers, many of whom were impoverished and relying on credit, so they were driven to plow more and more in order to finance them.<sup>59</sup> The issue was made worse by the population boom in the Great Plains that started at the turn of the century.<sup>60</sup> Despite the growing popularity of agricultural projects in the Great Plains in the early years of the twentieth century, conservationists from the Dust Bowl era concluded that only 26 million of the 32 million agricultural areas in the region could have been arable under better conditions - that is, only if soil conservation strategies were employed.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, it was a combination of environmental, political, and economic factors that culminated in the Dust Bowl. Many who lived through it saw it as a Biblical punishment; the New Dealers saw it as an opportunity for economic reform. Henderson, like most modern historians, saw it as a chain of destructive trends caused by human and natural forces.

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<sup>57</sup> Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

## The New Deal

In a 1936 statement to the Senate, Roosevelt described the three main goals that would comprise his administration's Dust Bowl relief program, which was a key component of the New Deal. The first: to conserve land. The second: to strengthen and protect the economic status of farmers. And the third: to ensure that consumers around the country would be supplied adequately with the farmers' produce.<sup>62</sup> In 1934, his administration began its rural relief movement by supplying several hundred million to alleviate the drought.<sup>63</sup> For farmers, direct payments were conditional upon evidence of soil conservation efforts. The sum included direct supplements, funds for the purchase of livestock food, or livestock slaughter, and more jobs – mostly in the construction of water containers like reservoirs. The program also included work camps, loans for crops, and relocation aid.<sup>64</sup> In the first half of this section of the chapter, I will list concrete effects of this program, and in the second half, I will analyze the philosophy that grew with their promotion.

According to Roosevelt, the goal of this movement was to combine economic and natural recovery. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) exemplified this goal. Established in 1933, it grew rapidly. In 1935, there were 51 CCC camps working to limit erosion, and within a year that number had grown to 501 camps.<sup>65</sup> Historian James R. Lyons notes that such camps ultimately employed millions of people in search of work, and this work served the valuable purpose of helping to conserve vulnerable lands.<sup>66</sup> Roosevelt saw this not only as a practical solution to land use issues, but also as an educative tool that would help farmers learn how to manage their land according to the freshly revised scientific guidelines of the era.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> United States. Senate. Congressional Record - Senate. Vol. 80-11. Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1936. 3098. Accessed April 7, 2019.  
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1936-pt3-v80/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1936-pt3-v80-4.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3101.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 3098.

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, and National Agricultural Library, prods. "Farm Science and Business News."

<sup>66</sup> Sears et al., *FDR and the Environment*, 121.

<sup>67</sup> United States. Senate. Congressional Record - Senate. Vol. 80-11.

Through the Soil Conservation Service, likewise, the Roosevelt administration sought to educate and aid Dust Bowl landowners. In his 1936 statement to the Senate, Roosevelt said that he regarded it as a program that would not just provide emergency relief in the short term, but also stability for future generations involved in agriculture, with the overarching goal of pursuing the “principle of equality for agriculture.”<sup>68</sup> The administration did not attempt to directly influence communities in the Dust Bowl territory; in a radio broadcast, Roosevelt suggests that he was aware of the conservatism of Great Plains farmers, and of their cultural aversion to bureaucratic measures. Therefore, New Deal officials would seek the input of local farmers and used a decentralized strategy for achieving their aims in the Dust Bowl territories.<sup>69</sup> Roosevelt also ensured that federal mandates could be modified or rejected by state governments according to the wills of their constituents. The agricultural adjustment programs communicated with and acted through not only state level bodies, but also county and township committees in addition to individual farmers.<sup>70</sup> This was a program only secondarily driven by national mandates, and primarily by local negotiations.<sup>71</sup>

The influence of this relief was not only practical but intellectual. The Roosevelt administration’s design marked the beginning of a new type of environmentalist thought. Historian Richard N.L. Andrews suggests that the president’s focus on the human causes of the Dust Bowl underscores a feature of his environmentalist thought that became paradigmatic: the ideal they strove for was what Andrews describes as an “idealized vision...of managed landscapes,” as natural as possible while still involving human influence and economic production.<sup>72</sup> Historian Brian Black notes that this was reflected in the publication of works like Sears ‘Science and the New Landscape,’ in which Sears presented the novel idea that landscapes must no longer be viewed as passive objects but living entities whose fortunes were interwoven with those of their inhabitants.<sup>73</sup> Black also observes that ecologist Frederic Clements made

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 3098.

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, and National Agricultural Library, prods. "Farm Science and Business News."

<sup>70</sup> See Appendix 3.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, and National Agricultural Library, prods. "Farm Science and Business News."

<sup>72</sup> Sears et al., *FDR and the Environment*, 121.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 41.

similar hypotheses, suggesting that humans ought to accept the limitations imposed by climates, and plant according to the natural vegetations that were already growing in specific lands.<sup>74</sup> Based on these historians' observations, it is clear that scientific ecology was being woven into federal decision-making in an unprecedented way.

The statements of Roosevelt and other members of his administration in the National Farm and Home Hour suggest that such a system would be both organic and organized.<sup>75</sup> What he, SCS founder Hugh Bennett, and Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace implied to be inefficient, irrational, and unplanned on the part of the farmers who had played their role in the Dust Bowl would become scientific and systematized.<sup>76</sup> The movement would require some central planning, but it would quickly enable those it affected with the ability to manage their own land rationally, without the need for outside influence. The movement, as described by these three members of the Roosevelt administration in the broadcast, would start by shaping farmers' actions, and ultimately reform farming culture by instilling values of moderation along with the tools to achieve them. The result was a movement shaped by the union of scientific principles and bureaucratic tools for ensuring their implementation.<sup>77</sup>

The latter half of this union was demonstrated by a new emphasis on technical experts and their proposed solutions; they were the new preachers of what Samuel P. Hays, as cited in Black's essay *The Complex Environment*, calls the "gospel of efficiency." Joining the scientists in this gospel, writes Black, were federal bureaucrats and businessmen, all of whom sought to reform agriculture for the sake of economic recovery.<sup>78</sup> One such individual was Gifford Pinchot. According to Black, Pinchot had practiced scientific management during his time as a manager of a timber industry, and then as a forester working on the federal level. His viewpoint was utilitarian, advocating the idea that the reform movement should seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people.<sup>79</sup> Black notes that this feature was embraced by Franklin Delano

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>75</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, and National Agricultural Library, prods. "Farm Science and Business News."

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Sears et al., *FDR and the Environment*, 21.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 57.

Roosevelt himself, and he believes that it distinguished his environmentalism from that of his cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, who emphasized combat and the raw, physical experience of nature.<sup>80</sup> On the other side of the scale, writes Neil M. Maher in his essay *A Conflux of Desire and Need*, these views also differed from John Muir, who believed that nature should be maintained not just for practical reasons, but for the sake of spirituality and the wellbeing of nature itself. In direct contrast to such a statement, Roosevelt said, “aesthetic considerations... play a very small—in fact, a negligible part.”<sup>81</sup> The emphasis of this Dust Bowl environmentalist movement was practical and intellectual; Roosevelt’s primary concern was to restore an economic balance through ecology.

Maier observes that environmentalism was stirring not just in the federal government and highbrow literature, but also in the general public of the thirties. The “Fresh Air Funds,” for example, raised money for urban teenagers to take vacations in the countryside. According to Maier, the leader of the movement, Edward Bok, believed that city conditions were dirty, unhealthy, and spiritually dull.<sup>82</sup> The Agrarian movement in the South echoed the Fresh Air Funds, standing against the dangerous modernity of cities and in favor of the simplicity and beauty of nature.<sup>83</sup> In this era of confrontation with nature, many within both the public and the government were eagerly listening for a new approach to the relationship between Americans and the land.

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

## A Short Biography of Caroline Henderson

Henderson's home state was unique among the Dust Bowl territories in several ways, one of which was the extent of its struggle during the Thirties.<sup>84</sup> In 1936, two WPA officials were tasked with recording the social conditions of the Great Plains. In their evaluation of 800 counties, they concluded that many areas of Oklahoma fell into the category of "high intensity" drought, with the effect of significant economic losses.<sup>85</sup> Along with economic problems, writes Worster, tuberculosis and other diseases were "rife" in the state during the 30's.<sup>86</sup> According to Worster, it is likely that the extent of these diseases was underestimated, due to the reticence of many farmers to admit to needing aid. The Red Cross, for example, only provided a fraction of the necessary aid due to a miscalculation of relief needs.<sup>87</sup> The extent and variety of the issues they faced during this era was unprecedented, according to Egan.<sup>88</sup>

The state was also politically complex. Its equivocations about New Deal programs caused a degree of inefficiency that did not occur in neighboring states, to the extent that "the New Deal had few long-lasting consequences" in the state, according to Keith L. Bryant Jr. of the Oklahoma Historical Society.<sup>89</sup> Worster notes that Oklahoma residents voted 73% to give Roosevelt his first term, and again voted him into office with 67%.<sup>90</sup> However, he argues that many residents were in fact suspicious of New Deal programs. In 1933, writes Worster, Secretary of the Interior Ickes suggested that a proposal to build dams was too expensive, and that it was more sensible for Oklahomans to move, leaving their land public. The Boise City News retaliated: "[Ickes is] entirely ignorant of the possibilities this country affords." 40,000 Oklahomans voiced their protest against his idea.<sup>91</sup> Such a reaction was not out of place to some

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<sup>84</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>85</sup> United States. Works Progress Administration. Division of Social Research. *Areas of Intense Drought Distress, 1930 - 1936*. By Francis D. Cronin and Howard W. Beers. Washington, DC: Works Progress Administration, 1937. 33.

<sup>86</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>88</sup> Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Keith L. Bryant, Jr., "New Deal," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=NE007>.

<sup>90</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 38, 41.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

of the less popular New Deal programs.<sup>92</sup> This opposition was epitomized by their election of governor “Alfalfa” Bill Murray, who said that “despotism by judicial control is just as bad on the liberties of the people as a military despotism,” and called for martial law in the state thirty-four times during the early years of the Dust Bowl.<sup>93 94</sup> And while Oklahoma faced a brief rebound in the 40’s, following the injections of aid and stabilizing programs, what ultimately followed the Dust Bowl in the state was a second environmental collapse.<sup>95</sup> Most of the momentous achievements that federal aid workers and farmers during the Dirty Thirties had achieved were forgotten; conservation principles failed to consolidate into long-term programs.<sup>96</sup>

This ambivalent attitude to governmental influence is a complex topic that I will analyze more thoroughly in the chapters following this introduction. However, first I will discuss some of the context in which this attitude developed, especially in terms of cultural conflicts and anxieties about Oklahoma. It is from the word “Oklahoma” that the term “Okie” comes from: a word coined in the 30’s that describes the mass of migrants from the drought-stricken plains. By the end of the decade Oklahoma had a 18.4% smaller population than it had in 1930.<sup>97</sup> Worster notes that such migrations from rural areas were not unusual even before the Dust Bowl, but it is true that the typical Southwestern migrant’s economic condition and cultural status had deteriorated as a result of the disaster.<sup>98</sup> He suggests that as the rates of disenfranchised “Okies” rose in other states – especially California – so did the prejudice with which they were greeted. A prevalent idea of the time was that the failure of the Oklahomans’ farms indicated biological weakness of the farmers. Eventually, California closed its borders entirely to migrants.<sup>99</sup> The defensiveness of Oklahomans noted by Worster, then, may not have been just a reaction to the concrete details of governmental interference, but to a sense of hostility from the nation as a whole.

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>93</sup> "Oklahoma's 9th Governor, Alfalfa Bill Murray." In Oklahoma Moment. Oklahoma Horizon TV. November 17, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmyZzcGGBF4>

<sup>94</sup> Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 110.

<sup>95</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 229.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



Similarly, writes Worster, there was a widespread misunderstanding among early governmental officials about the simultaneously sophisticated and destructive nature of farming in Oklahoma. While poor, mostly illiterate, and mostly off the electrical grid, Oklahoman farmers had not been lacking in modern agricultural technology or methodology; Oklahoma before the Dust Bowl had been a world of tractors and business.<sup>100</sup> According to Worster, a congressman travelled there on behalf of a committee on migrants and was surprised by the industrialized nature of the farms. Many governmental officials had suggested that the Dust Bowl territories practiced outdated, superstitious, and backwards farming methods. In fact, they found that Oklahomans used tools that were modern for the time, and the extent of their agricultural mechanization was greater than in any other state. It was over-farming, writes Worster, not a lack of up-to-date knowledge or tools, that played out into disaster.<sup>101</sup> He concludes that it was a desperate urge to produce for an ever-expanding wheat market in the twenties that drove their mechanization.<sup>102</sup>

In her letters from 30's, Caroline Henderson reflected on the effects that this polarizing transition period had on her own community in Eva. Eva was in the Oklahoma Panhandle: the geographic heart of the Dust Bowl according to the most common map of affected areas. The panhandle was the point of origin of the Black Sunday storms, which deposited 300,000 tons of soil over a range as far as the Atlantic Ocean and New York City. Henderson had often struggled with her land - it had been in a drought for years before the official arrival of the Dust Bowl in 1930 - but her tone became more urgent when the storms came. It was in the 30's that she began addressing letters to government officials and reminiscing more frequently on the effects that federal involvement had on her community.

Henderson was, geographically speaking, a central person in the Dust Bowl - but she was not typical otherwise. Although she was religious, she rejected the evangelical church in Eva. While she always had friends in Eva, and wrote letters to many other farmers in the broader

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 53.

region, this marked one of several points of unease between Henderson and her neighbors. This was exacerbated by Henderson's decision to provide a thorough education for her daughter.<sup>103</sup>

Henderson's differences might be explained in part by her comparatively liberal upbringing. Born in 1877, she was raised in a well-off agricultural family in Iowa.<sup>104</sup> Her father's success on his farm permitted him to fund education for his children. Henderson attended a prestigious university, graduating in 1901. Subsequently, she spent several years teaching languages in primary schools.

Following a near-fatal illness, Henderson decided to conclude her teaching career, and instead return to a life of farming. She moved to the Oklahoma Panhandle, where she met her husband, and together they founded a farming operation in Eva.<sup>105</sup> In her spare time, she continued her education by reading a diverse array of materials, including the Bible, newspapers, classic novels, poetry, and both popular and academic magazines. She also habitually wrote to her friends and family.<sup>106</sup> This hobby became more vital during the Dust Bowl years, when it became a source of income for her.

For Henderson, the Dust Bowl meant the end of the happiest chapter of her life; Turner wrote that "the very qualities of life she enjoyed were destroyed by the dust."<sup>107</sup> This included not only her day-to-day sources of contentment, like a clean house, but also the values that she had once tried to live by.<sup>108</sup> While Henderson's economic situation improved significantly in the 50's, her emotional and physical health did not recover.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, she maintained a deep attachment to Oklahoma, and only left near the end of her life, to stay with her daughter in Arizona; and she died during a return visit to what she called her "long beloved home," a few months after her husband, in 1966.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 16.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

## The Role of Agency in Henderson's Reactions to Federal Relief

Henderson's letters reveal the negative effect that she perceived the Dust Bowl to have on her sense of agency. To a large extent, she lost her ability to make long-term decisions, reap the rewards of her labor, buy anything except the most necessary items, and take risks. She found herself unable to pursue many of the everyday actions, rituals, and habits that had composed her life before the storms. The encroaching limits set by the Dust Bowl led H to feel increasingly sympathetic to structural changes in her community. As a result of her loss of agency, along with the other two factors that I will address in the next chapters, she became more receptive both the New Deal in its broadest sense and the influential local projects that accompanied it.

In 1931, the second year of the Dust Bowl, Henderson wrote a letter titled "Bringing in the Sheaves" that she later published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In this letter, she described an attitude of cautious optimism about her family's ability to fulfill the necessary actions of farm life. Unlike when she was a child on her father's farm, in this year she was braced by modern equipment, including tractors and combines.<sup>111</sup> With some pride, she described the harvest they had reaped as a small family of mother, father, and child: hundreds of acres of "bright, hard, full-kerneled" wheat and barley in only a few weeks. Such pride was tempered by her memories of her childhood farm. She felt that her father would, when viewing her machinery, "expect retribution, and perhaps - in a sense - he would be right."<sup>112</sup> In this sentence, she hinted at the influence that the emergent Dust Bowl already had on her perception of the role she played in the deterioration of the environment. It also reflects a repeating theme in her letters: a tension between actions and beliefs. This tension manifested as an ambivalent stance on machinery, which she used despite her qualms about its destructive consequences.

Henderson's discomforts with machinery were not just ideological but practical. They required expensive maintenance; a repair might cost as much as fifty-two bushels of crop. Such an expense concerned her in a time when she saw many neighboring families crippled by debts

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

to the companies that sold them machinery and parts for repairs.<sup>113</sup> As her financial situation became more precarious, Henderson worried more about such expenses, and was careful to avoid mistakes with machinery. In a 1932 letter to Evelyn Harris, a friend and fellow farmer, she wrote that a careless action could throw her family into ruin due to its potential costs.<sup>114</sup> “We cannot afford expensive mistakes,” she wrote, “and are trying to proceed cautiously, with the least possible outlay.”<sup>115</sup> She was also more dependent on machinery due to her age, another and interrelated factor about which she frequently expressed concerns. As middle-aged farmers, the Hendersons could no longer rely on their bodies for the manual labor that might have sustained them in the case of mechanical failures.<sup>116</sup>

Despite being free from debt, and producing more crop than the norm for her family, in 1932 they made a negligible profit that left her feeling that “the proportions are all against us”; her family struggled to finance everyday necessities that would sustain them and prevent their farm from failing completely.<sup>117</sup> “All sense of security for our old age has vanished,” she wrote to Evelyn in 1932.<sup>118</sup> She was demoralized by the amount of work she had to produce for small purchases. For example, she would have to sell one hundred and ninety-two chicken eggs for a pair of overalls. Adding to her perception of limited options, the local banking commission had become non-responsive to her inquiries, a nearby bank closed, and financial institutions had mostly stopped making new loans. By the early thirties, her financial freedom had already been significantly curtailed.

Water was another factor that left her with a sense of limited agency. In a 1931 letter, she wrote two pages about the implications of her empty well. This forceful image of the drought made her keenly aware of the severity of her situation.<sup>119</sup> Livestock had been dying due to lack of adequate conditions, and she wrote of the cattle “begging loudly.”<sup>120</sup> In a December 1932 letter

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

to Alden, she recorded going for several days without even drinking water, with the exception of what they managed to salvage from melting ice.<sup>121</sup> Food for her family was not as significant a concern as water, with the main effect being that she could not afford the variety she had in the past. If the president arrived for dinner, she joked sadly, he would have to eat the same meager diet that her family had been living on.<sup>122</sup>

Nonetheless, Henderson pursued many of the same activities that had composed her life before the storms. In another letter from 1932, she told Evelyn that she and her family continued to work as much as they could - “really harder than ever.”<sup>123</sup> In the early days of the Dust Bowl, it appears that work provided definition and purpose for her life: she spent her days caring for their livestock, maintaining her land as well as she could in the drought, and grinding wheat for cereal.<sup>124</sup> In an effort that she suggested to be designed to restore a sense of normality, Henderson also grew flowering plants in her home, and wrote about the comfort they brought her. She wrote that their patterns of growth and blossoming gave her some hope that natural laws still applied, despite the perpetual lack of rain and disastrous conditions on her doorstep.<sup>125</sup> Through these small actions, it seems that she attempted to preserve her agency and the accompanying sense of normality they reminded her of.

While she had these small freedoms, Henderson’s age, her economic conditions, and the state of the farm led her to a strategy in which her actions were driven by caution and anxiety. This was perhaps heightened by her awareness of how many farmers suffered far worse conditions than her family, and she fearfully recalled several stories in her letters of those who had been less fortunate. One neighbor had been in the region longer than most and had perceived the potential value in wheat early on. He had had success before the Dust Bowl - but in the thirties, he became destitute and lost almost a thousand acres of land that had once sustained him. In the end, deciding it was time to move on in search of better land, he was “old, half-blind,

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

almost barehanded,” in Henderson’s words - and left to try to forge a new life for himself.<sup>126</sup> In a letter to her friend Rose Arden, she wrote of five children who fell ill with typhoid fever, shortly after they had lost most of their belongings. Henderson could see no way for them to improve their condition.<sup>127</sup> Stories like this appear to have framed and overshadowed her life. They most likely reinforced the fears that Henderson had written about to Evelyn: that a miscalculation or stroke of bad luck might cause ruin.<sup>128</sup>

One of Henderson’s few significant freedoms was the ability to leave. When Evelyn asked her in 1935 why she had not left despite the failure of conditions to improve, Henderson replied, “it is a fair question, but a hard one to answer.” A large part of her reason was, she later explained, the emotional bond that tied her to the land. To leave it would be “unendurable,” she wrote.<sup>129</sup> Another aspect was the financial risk of moving. Despite the current conditions of the land, the Hendersons had made investments that would be costly to start anew, and might not bring any better returns since the rest of the nation was struggling through the Great Depression.<sup>130</sup> Like so many of the potential actions she considered, Henderson made this decision with care and fear.

In these letters, Henderson presented an image of a lifestyle in which her actions, habits, and hopes had been paralyzed. Her life became centered the anxious maintenance and evaluation of resources: machinery, physical health, water, and money. As I will discuss in the next half of this chapter, the curtailment of freedom caused by the Dust Bowl coincided with an increase in Henderson’s interest in New Deal programs and federal assistance. This is one of the clearest and most direct explanations for why she came to accept it despite her initial reservations. Henderson also suggested that this was true for others in her community as well: she believed that many came to accept federal relief due to a sense of necessity and the potential for greater agency that could accompany financial aid.

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>129</sup> Henderson, "Letters from the Dust Bowl," 542.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

Henderson had expressed doubts about the government's commitment to its promises and its ability to create positive changes. Projects like the radio, telephone, plumbing, modern heating, and electricity had never fully reached Oklahoma, she noted in a 1932 letter to Evelyn. She had few hopes that they would ever do so; Oklahoma seemed to her forgotten on the national scale.<sup>131</sup> Increased taxation also contributed to Henderson's skepticism. She had read an estimation that it took tenfold more wheat to pay taxes in 1931 than it had a decade ago.<sup>132</sup> Her comments suggest that she typically had a cynical stance on the government.

However, her letters reveal a pattern in which her lessened sense of agency coincided with an increase in her respect for governmental influence. In 1935, she wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace and informed him that she felt the programs had greatly improved the economic well-being of farmers in her community.<sup>133</sup> While farmers may not have felt comfortable with the principle of federal influence, according to Henderson, she wrote that many were nonetheless grateful for the financial aid provided to them.<sup>134</sup> She believed that many of the policies were simultaneously controversial and popular. An AAA program, for example, offered funds for farmers to reduce their land holdings. Many farmers in the region needed such funds in order to avoid homelessness, said Henderson, so they accepted it despite the conventional opposition to aid that she believed to form one of the bases of their "self-respect" and self-perceived "manhood."<sup>135</sup> The AAA program not only met the Administration's goal of stopping production on highly damaged lands - an effect that Henderson said some farmers were skeptical about - but provided a lifeline for such farmers. Similarly, in addition to stopping production, the New Deal's SCS established soil conservation programs that farmers could participate in for financial benefits. Henderson praised their use of terracing methods, which captured what little moisture found the earth and conserved it for farmers to produce some meager crops on their lands.<sup>136</sup> She felt that much of her state would have become uninhabited

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<sup>131</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 117.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

had the programs not been enacted on a large scale and had farmers failed to cooperate with them.<sup>137</sup>

According to Cronon, the New Deal's implementation in the Great Plains had been portrayed by New Deal officials as a triumphant narrative of cooperation and recovery led primarily by "enlightened scientific experts."<sup>138</sup> Based on Henderson's appreciative letter to Wallace, this is an accurate description.<sup>139</sup> However, it can be contextualized in a more complex way by her letters to friends about everyday life in the Dust Bowl. These letters feature an ongoing anxiety about scarce resources, stories farming families forced to start over, and premature deaths from illness. In this context, despite the administration's emphasis on the language of negotiation, is not likely that accepting aid in such a situation would seem like a difficult or even debatable choice. The letters referenced in this chapter suggest that for many farmers, including Henderson, political and ideological issues paled in the context of the storms, which had narrowed their attention to matters of simple survival.

To decline aid under such circumstances would require them to choose to live in possibly life-threatening conditions rather than using tools that could support their families. It is not surprising, through the lens of the limited freedom of action, that farmers in her community chose to participate in federal aid projects, even when they might disagree with Roosevelt on an ideological level. Therefore, to the extent that the federal aid projects in the Dust Bowl territories could be thought of as the result of cooperative negotiation, as the New Deal officials framed them, it was a very limited form of negotiation, because many of the farmers had almost nothing to bargain with, and only extremely dire alternatives to choose. This reveals one of the primary ways in which the New Deal narrative of the Dust Bowl relief efforts differed from first-hand experiences of them.

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>138</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

<sup>139</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 140.



## The Role of Emotions in Henderson's Reactions to Federal Relief

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance,” said Roosevelt in his 1933 inaugural address.<sup>140</sup> The statement epitomizes the New Deal's emphasis on progress driven by calm rationality. A different interpretation of the relationship between emotions and the New Deal's conversion of “retreat into advance” can be seen in Henderson's letters. Hopelessness, along with other negative emotions - grief, “confusion of mind,” humiliation, loneliness - were the primary feelings referenced by Henderson in her letters.<sup>141</sup> It seems that this is not just because she used the letters as introspective tools, but because emotions were a primary source of information in her life during the Dust Bowl; her everyday life had become confined for the reasons described in the previous chapter. Emotions could be seen as peripheral forces in a negotiation involving rational actors, according to the New Dealers. But for Henderson, they were part of its core, because they were among the few constant sources of feedback in her solitary world. At many stages of her relationship with the New Deal programs, emotions - including fear - affected the process with which she interpreted, experienced, and rationalized to herself their implementation in her community.

One of Henderson's most frequently cited emotions in these years was “hopelessness”: this word occurs several times in her descriptions of her circumstances, especially in the post-1935 letters. Due to the invasive dust, maintaining a clean home was a “hopeless” task; the state of much of the land was “practically hopeless”; in a response letter to a New York reader of her published letters, she wrote that she suspected he “must regard [them] as hopeless.”<sup>142</sup> It appears that this emotion was shaped by several factors. First, her resilience, which she had viewed as an essential trait of pioneers, wavered by the mid-thirties; in 1936, she wrote that every new year eroded the strength of her and her husband.<sup>143</sup> Secondly, she felt that her community as whole had been irrevocably damaged. Henderson's 1935 thesis was written as a

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<sup>140</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D. "First Inaugural Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt." Address. Accessed April 8, 2019. [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/froos1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/froos1.asp).

<sup>141</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 140.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 139, 147, 155, 157.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

memorial to previous pioneers, and she concluded it with the mournful note that their way of life “will soon be lost to memory except as it survives in the pages of books.” She felt that even if the Dust Bowl were to pass - which she expressed uncertainty about - farming life had disintegrated and been forever changed for the worse.<sup>144</sup>

Her limited sense of agency during the thirties was interrelated with this sense of hopelessness, which eventually compelled her sympathy for federal influence. The central emotion she linked with the possession of agency, which she wrote about in her thesis, was a “love of the soil.”<sup>145</sup> This feeling was founded on the principle of independence. For example, she described how “actual settlers paid slight attention to the legal authority...if the land suited them, this of itself seemed sufficient justification.”<sup>146</sup> In other words, she believed that pioneers prioritized their independent relationship with the land over human conventions and rules. Moreover, the phrase “the land suited them” suggests that she perceived a natural law to exist among pioneers and the land, which bound them together and was “justification” enough for their presence there. This pioneering urge was, she said, “one of the important formative motives in American history.”<sup>147</sup> Moreover, the interconnectedness of pioneers and the land appears to be central to Henderson’s personal sense of duty to the land. The situation during the Dust Bowl had become the reverse of what she believed it should be; ideally, according to Henderson, those who “loved the soil” would support the nation as a whole through their work on the land. In this state, she believed, farmers would be the heart of the United States, but now they had lost much of their connection with the land, along with the hope and resilience that such a connection would accompany.<sup>148</sup>

“Despair” is another word that she used to describe her state of mind during the Dust Bowl.<sup>149</sup> Her daily life became centered on a continuous battle against dust, which negatively affected her mental and physical well-being. On many days, she would need “excavate” her

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>145</sup> Henderson, “The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West,” 1.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>148</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 148.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 99.

houseplants and sweep the dust from the floors, which formed layers so deep that they made waves.<sup>150</sup> Outside, light would frequently be reduced to “late twilight” by noon.<sup>151</sup> Many mornings would begin with the stressful news that there was no water being pumped.<sup>152</sup> These individual sources of despair were worsened by the poor state of her land. 1935 was her fourth year without profit.<sup>153</sup> Her life had once consisted of what she had perceived to be challenging but surmountable struggle with the land; by the mid-thirties, with the loss of her agency, it had become mournful.

However, in other ways, her reactions to emotions and her limited agency had divergent effects. While economic conditions led Henderson to prefer material conservatism, the emotional effects of the Dust Bowl led her to feel unanchored. And, while the loss of material stability caused conservatism of action, the loss of emotional stability caused Henderson to consider solutions that she had not in the past - most notably, that of federal aid. These two forces of emotional volatility and conservative actions, though appearing to point in opposite directions, both served to predispose her to New Deal programs: poor material conditions led her to endorse it for the practical reason that it offered money, and poor emotional conditions led her to lose confidence in the ways of the past to meet present conditions.

She was willing to accept a degree of federal influence that she would have viewed as oppositional to the pioneering ethic that she promoted in times of relative prosperity. Many of the values she had held in the past were no longer applicable or binding. This was accompanied by an emotional transition, as feelings of pride shifted to the sense that she was “humiliated.” As she repeatedly sold wheat below sustainable prices, she felt that her identity as a self-sufficient individualist was compromised. This feeling was so acute that she wrote “of all our losses in recent years the most distressing is the loss of our self-respect.”<sup>154</sup> This self-respect was interwoven with her philosophy of interdependence with the land. When she lost it due to the Dust Bowl, she was willing to negotiate not just because of material losses, but because of the

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

loss of emotional barriers to aid. Therefore, while she appreciated the aid on a material level, she also saw it as yet another component of a deteriorating sense of culture and identity among farmers that she had written about in her thesis.

Henderson not only saw this abandonment of old codes in herself, but in her neighbors. According to Henderson, some had resorted to means they might not have in the past. For example, in a 1936 letter to Evelyn, she noted that one of her neighbors sold part of their well, rendering it unusable. To Henderson, this symbolized an abandonment of hope that the land might be used by future generations.<sup>155</sup> She believed that this “disintegrating tendency” was prevalent among farmers. Land that had once been part of a local farming culture - in the hands of families she knew - was regularly being taken over by various financial corporations and companies.<sup>156</sup> And despite the New Deal projects in her community, she described her region in terms of its “pitiful reminders of broken hopes and apparently wasted effort. Little abandoned homes where people had drilled deep wells for the precious water, had set trees and vines, built reservoirs, and fenced in gardens...everything now walled in or half buried by banks of drifted soil.”<sup>157</sup> As she suggested in these passages, this “disintegration” coincided with the loss of old ways of life was the failure of farming culture in a more general sense - and it was this failure, along with the corresponding humiliation that it evoked for her, that led farmers like her to be open to various new methods for coping, including federal relief.<sup>158</sup>

The sense of humiliation was perhaps compounded by her sense of isolation from the rest of the country. Henderson felt that stereotypes about farm life perpetuated the idea among urban residents that farmers had an easy life and faced generally favorable circumstances. She considered farmers a “minority group,” meaning that the national consciousness no longer viewed them as central to its existence, far from central concerns of policy-makers.<sup>159</sup> This view was, indeed, present among some urban Americans. She noted one commentator who believed that the poverty of Dust Bowl farmers was an “alibi,” and that the true reason for their lack of

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>157</sup> Henderson, “Letters from the Dust Bowl,” 545.

<sup>158</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 144.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 148.

resources was laziness.<sup>160</sup> Because of this impression, it seems that Henderson felt emotionally isolated when reading the news, which revealed to her that Americans often lacked sympathy for farmers in the Dust Bowl region. On the other hand, she also emphasized in her letter to Wallace that the situation in the Dust Bowl would be difficult for outsiders to fully comprehend. “Nothing that you see or hear or read will be likely to exaggerate the physical discomfort or material losses...[or] mental effect,” she wrote.<sup>161</sup>

Isolation was also a personal burden for Henderson. She seemed to feel that her very presence on the land, the history she had written into it, was eroding. One moment that she came to view in symbolic terms occurred when she saw the cornerstone that had marked an edge of her property for years be accidentally dragged by a tractor that was passing by on the road. This occurrence struck Henderson as a reminder of the land’s “preparation for human occupation” - and correspondingly, with its loss, the fragility of her imprint on the land.<sup>162</sup> This impression was compounded by the loss of other families, either to death or departure - of the 136 properties that were once occupied, she wrote, only eight were still inhabited in 1936.<sup>163</sup> In such isolated circumstances, there were few sources of feedback other than dust and her own, inner emotional world, which became increasingly dark as the years passed. This sense of isolation is evident in her letter “Dust to Eat,” in which she begins with an overview of the emotional effects of the Dust Bowl and leads into a discussion of her perceptions of federal aid. By contextualizing her perceptions of federal aid in emotional terms, she suggests that her acceptance of it was not the result of courage and rationality so much as the loss of resilience and community-mindedness that had once defined a cornerstone of her identity. She indicated that this was true for other farmers in her community as well, emphasizing that they would, if possible, be self-sufficient - not just because this would be practical, but because independence was one of the values of their community.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>162</sup> Henderson, "Letters from the Dust Bowl," 545.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 144.

Henderson focused a large section of this letter to this theme of emotional loss and sacrificed values. However, she took care to balance it with a tone of appreciation and respect for the governmental projects. While she had initially doubted Roosevelt, she wrote to Wallace that the sympathetic and sincere response of the aid workers affected her impression significantly.<sup>165</sup> She noted that she believed federal efforts as the only source of some semblance of normality in the Great Plains, and a source of emotional relief. She appreciated the dialogue with which federal workers approached aid efforts, and the degree to which they allowed the programs to be modified by local governments. Wallace, as well, contributed to this impression with his response to Henderson, in which he thanked her for “understanding some of our farm problems and the courage with which farmers are meeting them.”<sup>166</sup> In this quote, he reinforces two characteristics of federal influence that also occur in Henderson’s letter to him. The first is that federal workers attempted to sympathize with farmers who accepted aid. The second is their emphasis on courage, which, as I will describe in more detail later, was a defining characteristic of the overarching New Deal narrative. This narrative directly contrasts Henderson’s interpretation of the Dust Bowl, which was defined by hopelessness, despair, humiliation, and isolation.

In the previous chapter, I described how farmers’ limited agency complicated the narrative of negotiation presented by federal workers. I believe that the role of the “severe stress” farmers experienced, as Henderson described it, further complicates this narrative by contrasting their emphasis on courage and optimism.<sup>167</sup> She suggested in her letter to Wallace that many accepted the New Deal programs because they felt its financial contributions were necessary for their survival, not because they endorsed its projects - and they often expressed significant reservations about how it clashed with their values.<sup>168</sup> Her letters convey two opposing forces in her emotional response to the New Deal. On one hand, she felt that her community needed the federal projects and significantly benefited from them; moreover, she felt that they might rebuild farmers’ self-sufficiency. On the other hand, she felt that the New Deal was a further burden on

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

her sense of dignity, and something that she could not reconcile with the values that had defined her identity before the Dust Bowl. Lastly, they failed to correspond with any improvement in Henderson's emotional state, which throughout the Dust Bowl was defined by humiliation, despair, isolation, and hopelessness. These emotional factors can partly explain why she and the farmers she described often moved against their traditional values, which I will analyze in the next chapter.

## The Role of Values in Henderson's Reactions to Federal Relief

Henderson's limited agency and emotional state contributed to her decision to accept federal influence in her community despite several of the values that she presented in her letters and Master's thesis. Such values, which I will discuss in this chapter, included a pioneering ethic, individualism, freedom from external influences, and creative experimentalism. She also believed that rural communities could have been the bedrock of the nation, and that an unmediated relationship with the land would be a source of not only personal happiness, but communal good.<sup>169</sup> As federal policies were implemented, she entered a period of introspective negotiation with these values. This negotiative process is similar to a literary analysis she made in her thesis. She wrote: "the motives of human action are not definitely sperable. They cannot be precipitated like chemical elements from a solution. They are more like the colors blending in the rainbow. It is hard to tell where blue ends and green begins."<sup>170</sup> By interpreting the letters through this framework, I argue that Henderson's motives were the result of a multitude of influences; they were not merely a result of her values, but also the emotional and material effects of the Dust Bowl. Due to these conflicts among emotions, values, and material constraints, Henderson ultimately saw the Dust Bowl era as a blank space in the narrative of her identity as a farmer who was - and could no longer be - driven primarily by values.

One of the values she described in her thesis was community-minded individualism. She believed that this individualism, combined with ruralism, could have been the root of national, communal, and personal health. She wrote that humans have a distinctive urge to find solidity in their lives, something concrete that could sustain their spirits. Urban life, fractured and unpredictable, could not provide such a psychological mechanism without the underlying support of those who lived closer to the land: pioneers.<sup>171</sup> It was due to their work, believed Henderson, that the nation found itself not only economically, but spiritually.<sup>172</sup> She believed this belief strengthened in urban cultures as the Dust Bowl persisted; it was backed, she believed, by the

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<sup>169</sup> Henderson, "The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West," 103.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



sense that individualism ought to be combined with a sense of community service rather than greed.<sup>173</sup>

While it formed one of her core values under certain circumstances, Henderson did not believe that individualism in itself was necessarily a positive quality, nor something that could always be achieved. In her letter to Wallace, she wrote that some farmers in her communities saw the only purpose of land as the production of material value, which she described as an unhealthy impulse. In contrast to these farmers, she described those who perceived it to be a family project, designed to support those they loved, and by extension their society as a whole. She believed that “real farmer[s]” like these had a pioneering spirit that required them to be both entrepreneurial and responsible stewards of the land.<sup>174</sup> This form of individualism was not, she wrote, “rugged or ruthless,” but “patiently and hopefully experimental.”<sup>175</sup> Henderson also believed that individualism was largely made possible by youthfulness, due to the strength enabled by it. She sadly noted a sculpture commissioned by the governor, which showed a youthful farmer standing alone on the podium. This was someone she believed could only be seen in the form of stone, rather than real life, due to the “disintegrating tendencies” of her culture; she wryly noted that despite attempting to represent youth, in fact it conveyed to her “weary and perhaps frustrated old age.”<sup>176</sup> While Henderson felt that it was difficult to live by for this reason, she attempted to however she could. During the Dust Bowl, she attempted to maintain her open-minded “experimentalism” by reading from a wide variety of sources, and maintained a skeptical attitude toward the many ideologies she encountered.<sup>177</sup>

However, it seems that Henderson felt individualism in her own community had already been undermined to a large extent before the New Deal by the Dust Bowl; and because it had already been undermined, those values would not be reflected in the acceptance of federal influence. She felt that the ability to pursue an individualist lifestyle had been affected not only

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>174</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 143.

<sup>175</sup> Henderson, “The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West,” 12.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>177</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 8.

by the Dust Bowl, but also by the subsequent influx of large companies, predatory speculators, and “suitcase farmers,” flighty individuals who sought profits from the land but were eager to leave as soon as they had made some money.<sup>178</sup> In her letter to Evelyn about such farmers, she suggested that the Dust Bowl had fostered greed; the greed of stores that raised their prices in advance of financial aid deliveries to farmers, and the greed of farmers who sacrificed long-term stability for short-term gains. It is due to the loss of these factors that she wrote of the “vanishing frontier” in her thesis; she believed it had been composed of those ethical individualists who, as she described in the same letter to Evelyn, had already left or abandoned their culture by the time the federal government sought to intervene and help the region.<sup>179</sup>

Henderson believed that both the Dust Bowl and federal relief conflicted with the actualization of ethical individualism, though in different ways. It seemed to her that federal aid reflected the lack of this form of individualism by encouraging farmers to accept aid. This interfered with many features that Henderson had described as essential to a healthy farming culture. For example, it interrupted the direct engagement with the land that farmers had once had the freedom to pursue: planting their own crops, selling their produce, and struggling but overcoming the inevitable obstacles presented by a life interconnected with an ecology that had always been tempestuous.<sup>180</sup> Instead, the government encouraged them to kill sick livestock and paid them not to produce. It presented new guidelines for them to follow that were designed by scientists and officials from Washington. As a result, no longer were they to follow their own direct, intuitive, and experimental approaches to land management. The dialogue between farmers and the land became secondary to the dialogue between farmers and government officials; it was the officials, now, who were in primary dialogue to the land, and the farmers had become, from Henderson’s perspective, disempowered onlookers.<sup>181</sup>

Due to this loss, Henderson believed that the “vanishing frontier” would never return, but considered the possibility that individuals could still reflect its the qualities that had defined it. In

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<sup>178</sup> Henderson, “Letters from the Dust Bowl,” 544.

<sup>179</sup> Henderson, “The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West,” 9.

<sup>180</sup> Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, 99.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

a letter to Evelyn, she wrote that some farmers would, she believed, use federal aid as a stepping stone, and quickly become self-reliant again when they had achieved a foothold. In this way, she reasoned that they could maintain an authentic identity in which their values were aligned with their actions. She additionally noted that such farmers were “not asking for special favors.”<sup>182</sup> In a demonstration of these values, she wrote in another letter to Evelyn, Oklahoma was among the first states in which farmers progressed from the most direct forms of federal aid. Henderson saw this development as a sign of the strong and productive individualism of her community.<sup>183</sup>

Henderson expressed gratitude for the New Deal programs, and noted that several farmers in her community accepted the importance of AAA programs. She believed that such programs had saved many large parts of Oklahoma from complete desertion. In her letter to Wallace, she wrote that that many who were upset with the government were not engaging in “fair play,” and were making accusations against the government that were difficult to justify. For example, she did not believe that the projects were “damaging,” in contrast to those she described.<sup>184</sup> She also expressed disagreement with those who “persist in their right to do nothing” rather than engage in federal projects. She called them “rugged individualists,” using the term in a very different sense than she had in the past. Here, she uses the term in a cynical way, to refer to those whom she thought were isolating themselves from projects that would not only help the good of the community, but help her personally as well - for example, she wrote that sand from her neighbors’ unkempt fields blew into her own, which she had conserved according to governmental guidelines.<sup>185</sup> However, her overall impression of the New Deal’s influence in her community was ambivalent. “The sum expended seems to us truly enormous,” she wrote, “and the extent of aid required is most unusual in a section where pioneer traditions of self-help and neighborly assistance are still strong.”<sup>186</sup> In this sentence, she captured the way in which the aid discomfited her due to the way in which it contrasted the value she placed on self-sufficiency combined with local responsibility.

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 144.

In this way, Henderson suggested that the value she placed on individualism clashed with the New Deal. Moreover, her letters indicate a loss of faith in some of the values themselves, not just their ability to find expression. Federal aid did not merely contribute to the dissonance between values and actions, she suggested, but arrived in a world in which it seems that many of her values were already in a state of tumult, which she believed expressed itself in both ambivalence, extremism, and superstition. Henderson believed that as the emotional and material conditions of farmers deteriorated, their ideologies became rootless. She believed, for instance, that many farmers had fallen victim to the “winds of doctrine,” succumbing to extreme views that they would not have in the past.<sup>187</sup> For example, she noted the rising popularity of preachers who were certain that “fervent prayer is the one thing needful to bring relief,” and a “true Job’s comforter” who told his followers that the Dust Bowl was the result of sinful behavior.<sup>188</sup>

Distasteful of such tendencies, Henderson consciously attempted to avoid extremism. For example, although she ultimately condemned the “Russian experiment” of communism, noting with fear the unfolding of the Stalinist era, she nonetheless corresponded with a communist from New York, Eli Jaffe, who was fascinated enough by the Dust Bowl to ask if he could visit her town. Due to Henderson’s persistent search for diverse perspectives on the world and the Dust Bowl, she accepted, but before she could meet him he was beaten in Claremore for his political views.<sup>189</sup> Such violence reflected not only the extremism in her community, but her frustrated inability to gain full access to diverse sources of knowledge. This frustration manifested in her letters as a state of indecision and distrust. She was disenchanted with capitalism, communism, and christianity, at least in its evangelical form; such ideologies, she felt, had fallen far from the values she wished to live by.<sup>190</sup> The spectre of foreign dictators - Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini - further eroded her confidence in the ability of governments to enact positive values. “They all look alike to me now,” she wrote to Jaffe.<sup>191</sup> While she was surprised by and admiring of the influence of federal projects in her town, her praise often maintained an undercurrent of

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 142, 175.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

trepidation; and she seemed to value such projects for their concrete effects rather than ideological allegiance.<sup>192</sup>

Henderson was disillusioned by the year 1940: she felt that broader ideologies failed to capture the spirit of the values that once composed her identity.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, the values integral to Henderson's identity, as expressed in her master's thesis, often became impossible for her to enact due to the conditions of the Dust Bowl. She believed that this loss of values was common among farmers, and these "disintegrating tendencies" led Henderson to believe that her community was a shell by the era of the New Deal.<sup>194</sup> In contrast to the emphasis on courage and renewal emphasized by the New Deal's advocates, Henderson's letters reveal her impression that many of her values were not only lost, but irrecoverable. Rather than enabling farmers like herself to recover such values, she believed that the New Deal had provided sustenance in a form that was helpful, but not enough to bring back the essence of her community.

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

## Conclusion

Henderson's egodocuments from the Dust Bowl reveal three themes that differ from certain political interpretations associated with the New Deal relief programs. First, the actions of federal relief workers did not lead Henderson toward a sense of empowerment, and she felt her actions were distant from her ideals; on a broader level, she did not have faith in the ability of farmers to live again by the values that they had maintained before the Dust Bowl and New Deal. She had accepted federal influence in her community when she had few alternatives, and for this reason, it can only be considered a negotiative process in a limited sense. Finally, her emotions during this time were predominantly negative, and she described her daily actions as shaped largely by fear and material conservatism.

All of these factors contradict narratives of the New Deal as told by many of its contemporary advocates. According to historian William Cronon, the New Dealers contextualized the Dust Bowl as a narrative in which an environmental tragedy caused by farmers' "self-deluding hubris and refusal to accept reality" would be transformed, by the heroism of aid workers, into a triumph of rational environmentalism.<sup>195</sup> It was these federal experts who would manage to show farmers how to work together, funnel their courage towards constructive ends, and teach them how to farm more sustainably, thereby curtailing the possibility of future storms.<sup>196</sup> Cronon does not address the political or scientific values of these beliefs, but focuses instead on their "narrative implications."<sup>197</sup> He concludes that this prominent self-told narrative of the New Dealers relies on several factors, which I will compare with my analyses of Henderson's egodocuments in the following pages.

In her letter to the Secretary of Agriculture titled *Dust to Eat*, Henderson began with several notes of gratitude. However, her main focus was the impossibility of New Dealers to understand what it was like to live with the land - it was, she told him, "indescribable." This focus distances her from the viewpoint that the New Dealers, as described by Cronon: he writes

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<sup>195</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 1357.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 1359.

that they framed themselves as possessing a thorough knowledge of the Dust Bowl, including knowledge of the mindsets of farmers who lived there. Moreover, Henderson's descriptions of the depressing realities of her daily life reveal the dark undercurrents unaddressed in this narrative, which Cronon believes to be centered on the theme of retrieving "a happy ending" from a state of disaster.<sup>198</sup> Beneath this heroic narrative of reform, suggested Henderson in her letter to the Secretary of Agriculture, were lives entirely and perhaps permanently rewritten by the storms. She further emphasized this possibility in her letter to her friend Evelyn, in which she noted the failed remnants of federal projects and "apparently wasted effort": empty wells, empty homes, and abandoned reservoirs.<sup>199</sup>

Another way in which Henderson's narrative of federal relief efforts differs from that of the New Dealers is related to her emphasis on her limited range of actions. She wrote that she, along with many farmers in her community, were "regimented" by poverty, and did not feel inclined to take risks in their day-to-day lives. For example, according to Henderson's letter to Wallace, some farmers had not wanted to participate in the federal projects, but they felt that it was the only viable choice due to the significance of the financial rewards associated with it. It was a choice, believed Henderson, between survival on the land and desertion. This adds a different tone to what Roosevelt had described as the federal intention to develop their projects through cooperative measures with local farmers, thereby making it their own.<sup>200</sup> Since, according to Henderson, they only participated due to necessity - and often in spite of ideological opposition to the New Deal projects - it was not a fully cooperative or negotiative effort. Moreover, Cronon writes that the New Deal officials sought to "encourage cooperation among Plains farmers" themselves, and in this way their narrative also differed from that of Henderson.<sup>201</sup> From her perspective, federal plans were divisive in her community. While many accepted aid, she believed that only some farmers agreed on the values associated with it, and there was not a clear consensus in her community about whether the projects were worthwhile.

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 1361.

<sup>199</sup> Henderson, "Letters from the Dust Bowl," 541.

<sup>200</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, and National Agricultural Library, prods. "Farm Science and Business News."

<sup>201</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1357.

Finally, the New Deal narrative as described by Cronon stands in stark contrast to the values described by Henderson. The Dust Bowl had occurred,” writes Cronon in his description of the New Deal officials’ perspective, “because people had been telling themselves the wrong story and had tried to inscribe that story - the frontier - on a landscape incapable of supporting it.”<sup>202</sup> The central failure of the farmers, then, would be their adherence to the pioneering ethics that Henderson had wrote about in her thesis. In contrast, Henderson believed that the Dust Bowl had been a consequence of the opposite: of farmers who failed to live according to what she perceived as the essential qualities of pioneers. Their individualism was “rugged and ruthless,” rather than centered by an interest in communal good and the health of the land. Through Henderson’s interpretation of those who pursued “the frontier,” it did not stand in juxtaposition to reform and sensible land management - in fact, Henderson believed her pioneering ethics were shaped by an interest in “patiently and hopefully experimental” approaches to farming, which is reminiscent of the New Deal’s emphasis on scientific management.<sup>203</sup>

These three factors demonstrate the transition that occurred as the traditional narrative of the New Deal’s implementation in the Dust Bowl progressed to the level of this farmer’s perceptions of herself and her local community. While the dialogue on the national level was shaped by optimistic rhetoric, Henderson’s was characterized by a stark confrontation with the perhaps permanent disappearance of a lifestyle she had once loved. While the former emphasized empowering cooperation and negotiation, Henderson emphasized the chaotic and divisive effects of New Deal programs in her community, along with her lack of agency. And while New Deal officials framed their movement in opposition to the mythos of the frontier, Henderson believed that scientific reform and sensible management could be united with this value. The New Deal narrative transformed on her local level, blending into the realities of her daily existence in ways that frequently contrast its macrohistorical shape. Such a transformation does not negate this macrohistorical tone, but reveals its significant capacity for diverse meanings and interpretations by individual farmers who lived through the Dust Bowl.

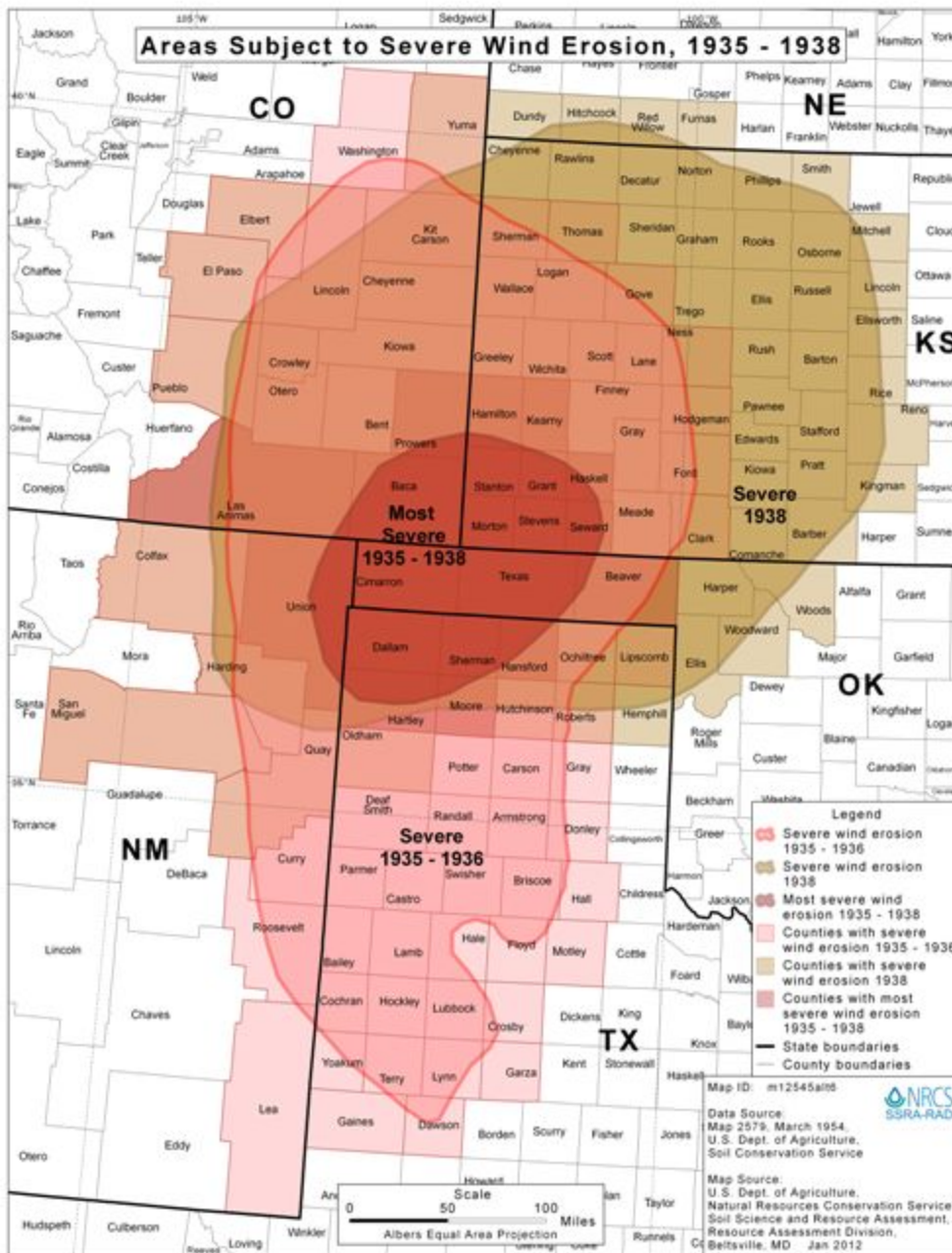
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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 1360.

<sup>203</sup> Henderson, “The Love of the Soil as a Motivating Force in Literature Relating to the Early Development of the Middle West,” 12.



## APPENDIX 1



*A map of the territories affected by Dust Bowl wind erosion. Prepared by the Soil Conservation Service. Henderson lived in the left section of Texas County, in the “Most Severe” category.<sup>204</sup>*

<sup>204</sup> Extent of Dust Bowl Map. March 1954. Resource Assessment Division, US Department of Agriculture, National Resources Conservation Service, Washington, DC.

## APPENDIX 2



*A storm in Goodwell, Oklahoma, 1937.<sup>205</sup>*



*A family in Oklahoma during a storm, 1936.<sup>206</sup>*

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<sup>205</sup> Emma Love. June 4 1937, at Goodwell, Oklahoma. June 4, 1937. National Geographic Society, Washington, DC.

<sup>206</sup> Arthur Rostein. Fleeing a Dust Storm. 1936. Humanities Texas, Austin.

### APPENDIX 3



*A federal worker speaks with some farmers, 1939.<sup>207</sup>*



*Roosevelt shakes hands with a farmer in Texas, 1932.<sup>208</sup>*

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<sup>207</sup>Russell Lee. A Government Official Talking to Two Farmers. August 1939. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>208</sup> FDR and Farmer En Route to Warm Springs, GA. October 23, 1932. Digital Archives, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Texas.

## APPENDIX 4

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THE AMERICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE JOURNAL

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(Jan 1937)

### LETTERS

Our Own Letter from the Dust Bowl

Eva, Okla.,  
Dec. 8, 1936.

Mr. Walter Rott,  
Manila, P. I.

Dear Neighbor - across the world:

I've just been reading again your friendly letter which brought to me so much stimulus and encouragement. I'm sorry that even after the long delay I cannot write the kind of "postscript" to my Spring letter that we know you would be happy to receive. It would be most gratifying if I could assure you out of the year's experience that "sudden the worst turns the best"; that the long-dry rains did come in time to save the struggling wheat and prepare the ground for feed crops; that the all-but-vanished grass has started again to restore our ruined pastures to usefulness; and that rain fell through the season of growth had sufficed to produce ample supplies of grain and forage for our stock and poultry this winter. Unfortunately not one of these statements would be true.

For 1936 we must record another year of failure. Yet that failure might so easily have been changed to moderate success by one good rain in late July or August that we do not altogether despair. As I write I can hear the tractor labouring along on the north field while Will is laying up a fresh set of terraces in the hope that next year may give us all a

better chance. It seems impossible to dispense with that little word *hope*, even though at times we are conscious of the pain of hopes too long deferred.

Soon after my last letter was mailed, Will suffered a painful accident which might easily have proved a permanent handicap. While he was unloading a barrel of coal oil, it slipped and fell, bruising one ankle severely and, I still believe, fracturing some of the smaller bones. At that time the dust storms were at their worst. For a while it seemed that perhaps, regardless of desire, we could not go on. There were many days, as I struggled to care for the stock, when I could not see from one of the farm buildings to another through the blinding, choking clouds. Dust was piling up every

where, filling gateways, burying machinery, drifting around the buildings, making the less traveled roads almost impassable. The mere matter of getting milk or even water to the house in a condition fit for use presented a difficult problem. Will improvised a crutch from a short length of pump rod and after the first few days helped all he could to direct and carry on the outdoor work, actually crawling on hands and knees the length of the barn left to break open the bales of Colorado alfalfa and get it ready for me to drop into the mangers. In spite of his being almost compelled to do the things he shouldn't have done, the injured ankle slowly regained its shape and strength and the recovery is one thing to be grateful for as we look back over a difficult year.

The wind and dust continued without much abatement through March and April and early May. The first sign of any hopeful change came with a light rain on May 17 though the following week of high winds destroyed most of the benefit. By this time any lingering hope of wheat production in our vicinity had faded away, though limited areas in the extreme eastern part of the country returned small yields. The ground was too dry and hard to permit satisfactory preparation for spring planting, though Will had done some listing and "chiseling" as well as the condition of the soil would allow. On June 4 as if to confute all theories about the diversion our moisture-bearing winds to Greenland and such attempted explanations of the long-protracted drought, we had one tremendous rain—a regular "gully-washer"—when two and a half inches poured down in half an hour. The unworked soil could not absorb it fast enough, especially as there is strong tendency for the fine wind-ground silt to coat over the surface, closing the pores of the soil as if with a thin cement and preventing natural penetration. So much of this precious moisture proved ineffective for actual crop production, broke over contour and terrace lines and finally formed several "playa" lakes in the neighborhood in basins which have no outlet. One of our neighbors now plans to pump some of this still standing water back upon his fields.

During the fall these temporary lakes furnished sanctuary to immense flocks of seagulls, possibly driven inland by storms along some coast or attracted by the hosts of grasshoppers which had helped to complete the damage done by the drought. It was a new and delightful interest to us to watch the strong, impetuous flight of these gulls as they skimmed low over our fields or massed in silvery shimmering clouds against the darkening horizon as they returned at nightfall to the sheltering lake. All at once they were gone and we saw them no more.

That heavy rain on June 4 before a seed was planted was our only source of moisture through the growing season aside from two or three drought showers which scarcely dampened the surface. As you asked about the contour farming, you may be interested to know that we are more than ever convinced of its usefulness for our locality. Where our terrace lines remained unbroken and held the water back to soak slowly into the soil, the effect upon production was noticeably beneficial. From one small field where the water had stood, which was sowed to

(over)

A 1937 letter written by Henderson and later published in the Chamber of Commerce Journal.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>209</sup> "Caroline Boa Henderson Papers." Caroline Boa Henderson Papers | Five College Compass - Digital Collections.

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