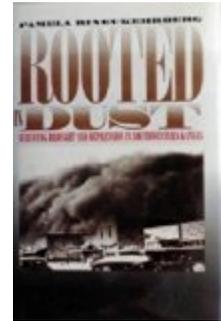


H-Net Reviews

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Pamela Riney-Kehrberg. *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. xiv + 249 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0644-3.

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Projects featuring oral histories invariably appeal to me because I love a good story. Getting to know the people involved in any particular historical event or movement gives me great satisfaction as I find myself nodding in agreement or muttering out loud about something someone the author has introduced me to has reportedly said. Essentially, oral history brings history directly to me, the reader, and makes me feel like a participant. Perhaps that is why I was so completely engrossed by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg's *Rooted In Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression In Southwestern Kansas*. Riney-Kehrberg excels at wedding oral history with statistics and more traditional historical tools and offers readers an entre to the Kansas Dust Bowl of the 1930s that is both scholarly and intensely personal.

The focus of Riney-Kehrberg's study is what she calls "the heart of the Dust Bowl" (197), sixteen counties located in the southwestern corner of the Kansas. Fifteen of these counties were classified by the federal government in 1936 as "very severe drought areas" (197). Unlike most other studies of the Kansas Dust Bowl that focus either on the environment, federal policies, or those persons who

migrated, Riney-Kehrberg's book is about those persistent folks who for any number of reasons chose to stay behind. It is these individuals and families that speak to us in Riney-Kehrberg's book and tell us how they managed the challenges of the 1930s.

Central to Riney-Kehrberg's story is her argument that "the Dust Bowl was not simply a phenomenon of the 1930s. As long as Euro-Americans have inhabited the area, they have witnessed the repeated occurrence of drought and dust storms" (178). By way of comparison Riney-Kehrberg examines the terrible years of drought and agricultural depression in southwestern Kansas during the 1890s, pointing out that during the last decade of the nineteenth century "the frontier line actually receded" (8) as "the population stampeded east once more" (7). However, as Riney-Kehrberg explains, after the turn of the century a relatively homogeneous population of "white, old American stock, with a few scattered German and Mennonite communities, and an even thinner population of African American farmers" (8), buoyed by their optimism and hopes for successful farming, settled the Kansas frontier once again. Over the next twenty years the population of southwestern Kansas boomed, as folks moved onto farms and into towns and cities. In Riney-Kehrberg's estimation, by 1920 the frontier stage in southwestern Kansas appeared to have finally passed. Yet throughout the 1920s settlers continued to arrive in the area as fifteen of the sixteen counties experienced growth rates in excess of twenty percent.

Memories of the disastrous 1890s faded as people in southwestern Kansas prospered – farmers with large-scale wheat production, developers with increased oil and gas exploration which resulted in the discovery of

vast reserves, and business persons as opportunities for commercial development ensued. This “frenzied”(14) period of optimism, speculation and growth “shaped people’s expectations of the rewards of farming in southwestern Kansas”(12). Unfortunately, what people did not realize was that the all-important weather experienced during this period was not the norm for Kansas. Rather, the average rainfall during the 1920s was consistently higher than normal.

In the spring of 1931 everything changed in southwestern Kansas. Riney-Kehrberg explains that crops were bountiful that year but winter wheat prices were so low that farmers could not even cover their cost of production. Drought set in after harvest and lasted until 1939, and the Kansas Dust Bowl area gained notoriety across the nation as the most hopeless area in which to live.

The myth of hopelessness and total despondency of those who did not leave is exploded by Riney-Kehrberg in a compelling chapter on attitude and confidence. Her respondents confirmed how “love of their communities and their desire to see the Dust Bowl’s recovery”(134) caused many persons to hang on. Pride in their ability to survive and optimism that they could cope on their own terms bolstered many families. Further, Riney-Kehrberg states, that even those living in the worst-off areas were indignant with reports in the national press about the supposedly sorry state of southwestern Kansas. Additionally, farmers were angry at government and press reports that they were responsible for causing the Dust Bowl because of alleged “improper farming techniques”(133) employed during the 1920s. Their reaction to this negative publicity was to insist that Kansas was usually the best place to live and that Kansans certainly were not responsible for the weather. Riney-Kehrberg notes that some residents, in an effort to prove to “outsiders” that those living in the Dust Bowl were not crazy for staying put instead of migrating, pointed to government weather summaries that described western Kansas as “a very pleasant region in which to live and ... usually favorable for farming”(135).

Riney-Kehrberg also challenges historical interpretations that blame federal government policies for causing migration out of the Dust Bowl and into California and other areas. On the contrary, Riney-Kehrberg concludes, “the outcome of federal farm programs within the Dust Bowl was a rural population that was far more stable than could have been expected otherwise”(111). Close analysis of Kansas census figures indicate that approximately twenty-five percent of the population left; obvi-

ously, then, seventy-five percent remained where they were. Riney-Kehrberg attributes the high percentage of those who stayed put to federal farm programs which worked against rural depopulation by allowing families to remain where they were instead of encouraging them to relocate to other areas where social services were already overburdened.

Riney-Kehrberg argues that there were additional reasons to stay in the Dust Bowl of southwestern Kansas other than just pride and access to social services. In comparing the greater number of persons who chose to stay in Kansas during the 1930s to the relatively fewer who stayed during the drought of the 1890s, Riney-Kehrberg determines that farmers in the 1930s had heavier investments in land and equipment than did those in the 1890s. Accordingly, she concludes that financial obligations kept more farmers tied to the land in the 1930s than had been the case during the 1890s. Kin networks and the ability to engage in subsistence activities also featured into the decision to stay rather than migrate. As Riney-Kehrberg succinctly states, “in many ways the experience of the 1930s confirmed the obvious: It was best to enter hard times with financial and emotional resources large enough to provide a cushion against economic and environmental disintegration”(164).

Riney-Kehrberg’s analysis of the Kansas Dust Bowl during the Great Depression is an excellent model for those of us who want to incorporate the “soft” methods of oral history into the “hard” statistical framework often attributed to social history. Her compelling narrative style reinforces data featured from the Kansas State Agricultural Census and supplements the numerous other primary and secondary sources she has selected. I have only two small criticisms: I would have liked to hear the children’s voices with perhaps some emphasis on the impact of the Dust Bowl on their lives then and later as adults. I also would have appreciated more thorough discussion on the cultural life that helped unite communities. My research on rural Saskatchewan indicates that during the Depression years cultural activities flourished as folks eagerly sought entertainment and activities where they could socialize and commiserate with friends and neighbors.

I highly recommend *Rooted in Dust* to those with either a popular or scholarly interest in western social or economic history. The analysis is thorough and direct; the arguments clear and concise. And, it truly is a good story.

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