

Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929–1945. By Michael Johnston Grant. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xi + 232 pp. Photographs, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 0-803-27105-0.

Reviewed by Richard S. Kirkendall

This book tells an important story, a tale of farmers under pressure. The pressures on poor farmers subsisting on the American Great Plains came from the natural environment, the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the agricultural revolution. The environment contributed insects and drought; the depression added falling commodity prices. The New Deal tried to save these farmers, but the agricultural revolution, which offered tractors and other new technologies, overwhelmed them, becoming a major contributing factor behind their exodus from the land.

The book's strong research base features manuscripts from major research centers and the relevant scholarship. Michael Grant admires and frequently draws from Anthony Badger's *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (1989), whose thesis is that New Deal programs were basically "holding operations." But Grant's main secondary source is Sidney Baldwin's broad national study, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (1968), which he supplements by showing how things worked out on the ground in one region.

Grant explores only one part of the Great Plains. He does not focus on all the farmers who lived there, nor does he cover the New Deal's entire farm program. He writes of farmers on the "borderline between poverty and economic security" (p. 3) in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. These farmers operated small farms, which they usually rented, and they owned less machinery and produced fewer crops than their more prosperous neighbors. Hit hard by economic and environmental forces, they "lacked the income, tractor power, and additional credit to dig themselves out of debt" (p. 98). Rural Rehabilitation, the small program the author examines, served them for a time.

In writing of the establishment of this New Deal program, Grant is clear about some matters but not about others. He does not explain why the New Deal's main farm program, Agricultural Adjustment, did not meet the needs of borderline farmers, but he

does point out some of the reasons that the relief programs were inadequate for the situation its clients found themselves in. “What farmers needed,” he says, “was help that enabled them to stay *on* the farm, where they could provide for themselves, use their skills and resources, and ready themselves for the hoped-for recovery” (p. 84). It is not obvious that anyone recognized this need. In summarizing the issue, he states, “Through the interplay of conservative and liberal notions of state and society, the financial constraints of government, and the hard realities of the thirties, the rural rehabilitation program was born” (p. 96). What is clear is that the Resettlement Administration was established in 1935, two years after the New Dealers came to power; it was headed by a bold reformer, Rexford Guy Tugwell, and it offered a program “to bolster and reform the farming and domestic practices of borderline farmers on their current farms” (p. 87). After Tugwell departed, Rural Rehabilitation was transferred in 1937 to another new agency, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which launched a complex attack on rural poverty.

In two essential chapters, Grant explores the working of Rural Rehabilitation in his four designated states and two counties. Although the agency did not help all needy farm people in the area, it gave thousands of loans and grants, supplied technical assistance for reforming practices on the farm and in the home, worked out debt-adjustment agreements between its clients and their creditors, and tried to improve the terms of their leases. The agency pressured its clients to move out of commercial grain and hog farming, to emphasize subsistence crops, and to obtain cash by selling livestock and livestock products. Armed with only a small budget, it did not encourage farmers to imitate their more substantial neighbors by expanding and mechanizing their farms. As Grant explains, “The goal . . . was not advancement or keeping up with the rising scale of agriculture. Rather, it was simply to allow the farm family to pay their work and living costs, reduce their debts and maintain a viable standard of living until prosperity returned” (p. 112). In other words, the immediate aim was to hold people on the land, and for several years the program accomplished that goal.

During World War II, Congress destroyed the program. Grant calls attention to what may have been a basic factor: “This was an era of labor-starved farms with higher productivity. Yet there were also many smaller, less productive farms that

‘underemployed’ both the labor of its farmers and the resources of the land” (p. 181). It is not obvious, however, just how important this factor was in the death of the program. Was the need of some farmers for more labor and land the greatest force working against the survival of the program? The author blames the American Farm Bureau Federation for persuading Congress to do the deed. Early on, he comments, “The Farm Bureau, which represented more prosperous farmers, helped destroy rural rehabilitation during World War II because its members wanted the land and labor of smaller farmers” (pp. 8–9). However, in a chapter on the downfall of the Farm Security Administration, he maintains that “the Bureau opposed the rural rehabilitation program primarily because the farm organization feared that a separate power base of county FSA offices in partnership with the Farmers Union would emerge in rural America” (p. 193). It is unclear whether economic or political considerations were the main factor in the demise of the program. To add to the puzzle, in that same chapter, Grant offers a complex explanation of the program’s troubles but also shows that when the war brought higher farm prices, farmers large enough to benefit substantially from them began to acquire farms previously operated by the program’s clients. What seems clear and important is that at the same time that farmers on the borderline lost help from Rural Rehabilitation, mounting pressures from new farm technologies, and from new job opportunities in cities, pushed and pulled these people away from farms.

Densely packed with details, this book is a slow read, but it makes an important contribution by revealing the significance of the death of one New Deal program for farmers who participated in the agricultural revolution by leaving agriculture. The first claim made by Michael Grant for his book is that “it helps explain the most important global migration trend of the twentieth century: the movement of rural folk into towns and cities” (p. 9). It is a bold claim, but a valid one. “The demise of the rural rehabilitation program foretold the fate of rural America,” he concludes. “Rather than embracing a countryside populated with smaller and medium-scale farm operations, Americans espoused large-scale farms that only upper-income families could afford to purchase and run profitably” (p. 202). In his conclusion, the author expresses doubts about the wisdom of this choice.

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