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The Great Depression Two Kansas Diaries

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THE GREAT DEPRESSION

TWO KANSAS DIARIES

C. ROBERT HAYWOOD

During the decade of the 1930s the nation plunged from prosperity and great expectations into a sharp decline that adversely affected a greater percentage of people than any economic crisis before or since. During the Great Depression 25 percent of the nation's work force became unemployed. No state was unaffected, and both cities and farms suffered, although each section of the economy displayed a different set of problems. For most urban dwellers the extent and depth of the crisis was measured by employment. Studs

Terkel found the clearest, most succinct definition of the Depression when a once unemployed laborer said: "The Depression ended in 1936, the day I got a job."¹ For farmers in western Kansas the Depression began in 1933 with thirty dust days and ended in 1939 when the rains came. The "hard times" were a staggering ordeal, both emotionally and economically, for millions of people, but some found the 1930s to be a time of opportunity while the Depression rolled over others without leaving a mark. Just how drastic the change could be and how disparate the impact of the Great Depression could be is illustrated in diaries kept by two Kansas women between 1935 and 1939.

At the onset of the Depression, the two women seemed similar. They had received comparable, if not identical, educations in similar rural settings—small country towns. Both came from the British Protestant tradition, although one was Presbyterian and the other Methodist. They were of the same white, middle-class generation. Their "values base" and prior status were much the same, but the details of their lives were to determine how they reacted to the troubled times.

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THE WRITERS

Lucy Mabel Holmes was born to John and Frances M. Holmes in Baldwin, a small, rural town in down-state Illinois, on 10 June 1878. John Holmes was a construction contractor and carpenter. In 1890 the family moved to Topeka and Mabel (who used her middle name) lived there for the rest of her life. In 1935, when she began writing in her diary, she was fifty-seven years old, unmarried, and living with her sister, Elma, two years her senior, who was also unmarried. Elma had taught in Lafayette Elementary School when she first came to Topeka but was teaching at Randolph School in 1935. Mabel had served as secretary of the American Railway Express Company and as a stenographer for the Alliance Co-operative Investment Company before moving to a similar position at the Kansas State Horticultural Department. Her work schedule was quite flexible, and she frequently mentioned that she spent only the morning or afternoon at the office and took off time for long and short vacations.²

Elsie May Long was born 31 October 1892, in Holton, Kansas, the second daughter of Alfonso Houston and Mary Jane Long. She attended public school in Holton. In 1909 or 1910, the family moved to a Ford County farm where her father worked for Charley E. Haywood as an informal foreman or manager. Elsie attended the Fowler Friends Academy for one year, then taught in a one-room country school for two years. On her twenty-second birthday (31 October 1914) she married Clarence O. Haywood, the son of her father's employer. They began their married life on a wheat farm twelve miles north of Fowler, Kansas, and about twenty-five miles southwest of Dodge City. Two sons were born to the couple, Harold in 1915 and Bobby in 1921.

In 1927 the family moved to Fowler, where Clarence built a new home. The following year they sold the Fowler residence, leased their land, and moved to the booming city of Wichita, where Clarence remodeled an attractive house for the family and became a full-

time carpenter.³ Both moves were initiated by Elsie and supported Herbert Quick's theme that post-WWI rural-to-urban migration was "largely a woman movement," but in this case not for the purpose of enjoying reduced labor load through mechanized housekeeping but to secure access to better schools.⁴

The construction industry was among the first to be devastated by the Great Depression. Clarence went a year without regular employment, exhausting what reserves the family had accumulated. With their funds depleted and no prospect of employment, they rented the home in Wichita and moved back to the farm in 1933—just in time to experience the full force of double disasters: the Depression and the Dust Bowl. The next two years were the most difficult of their lives as they attempted to reestablish a farm with no capital while suffering the loss of a comfortable suburban lifestyle. When Elsie began writing her diary, she was forty-three years old.

THE DIARIES

The diaries were of a standard design: 5½ x 4 inches that provided for a five-year record. Elsie's daily entries averaged twenty-four words and Mabel's thirty-six. Space prevented their being either a "Dear Diary" that could serve as a friend, a confidant to share and record feelings of joy or sorrow, or a journal of artistic expression or personal observations of life. The diaries are not literary jewels. There was room only to be a record, a very limited record, no more than a sketchy account of each day's activities. It would be a stretch to say the diaries carried a "wealth of revealing or historical materials," as many editors of diaries claim. The diaries' value today is in the repetition of daily details that reveal the nature of personal events. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich commented in *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard*, "it is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness that the real power of this book [diary] lies."⁵

Both women most consistently recorded the everyday routines of homemaking and their

many social contacts. Elsie added accounts of her own, and the family's, productive contributions to "making a living." In spite of Mabel's being employed she so rarely mentions her job that the reader would be hard pressed to know what it was. Her pervasive domestic orientation was even more clearly defined than was Elsie's. Mabel kept a fuller social record in part because she had greater opportunities to socialize but mainly because of personal interest. Funerals, illnesses, marriages, and births were notable events to be remembered and were generously scattered through both records. State, national, and world events were only occasionally mentioned—more frequently by Mabel than by Elsie.

Mabel's coverage of such events, although terse, reflects a perceptive mind and fairly wide interest, especially in the gathering war clouds in Europe. On 28 September 1939, she wrote: "War has been diverted by Pres. Roosevelt's many messages." Two days later she added: "The great war that we thot was on us was averted by the 4 Reps at Munich, by Hitler getting all he wanted without fighting." She continued to follow European events: "Hitler broadcast his 2 hr speech in ans. to Roosevelt, later commented on by Keltenborn" [H. V. Kaltenborn]; "Hit. [Hitler] turned down Roosevelt's appeal to keep out of war, leaving a disappointed nation" (4-38-39), "Pres. Roosevelt signed the Neutrality Act last night" (5-2-39). She also recorded local, state, and national political developments: "Justice [Hugo] Black is the big subject of the day being in the Klan" (9-29-39); "Are the Republicans mad this morn' The State House is a good place to stay away from. Kans. also got a Democratic Gov. Walter Huxman of Hutchinson" (4-17-37) and "Pendergast machine in K. Cy. [Kansas City] is sinking fast" (4-17-37).

Elsie's comments were briefer than Mabel's and were scattered casually among other notations. "AAA [American Agricultural Administration, an essential source of cash payments for farm programs] declared unconstitutional today" (1-19-36). "Mr. and Mrs.

Long and Lyman were up and ate watermelon—we listened to Roosevelt speak over the radio at 9 o'clock" (9-6-35). Both women noted the deaths of notables including Will Rogers, Wylie Post, and Bruno Hauptmann, who only got a matter-of-fact "Executed today" from Elsie. The diaries did not reveal that either woman seemed committed to any political party. Each attended functions of both parties—Elsie attended a Republican Rally and a Democratic Rally in the same week.

FINANCES

Financial matters, which might seem to be of paramount importance during a national depression, were neither systematically nor fully included. Judy Lensink's observation that "Diaries are not . . . direct records of real life" is borne out in the two women's recording of money matters.⁶ Prices of goods bought and sold, monies earned, mortgages, and tax assessments were sometimes included, but the general state of their own and family finances can only be inferred by "reading between the lines."

Mabel's economic base on the surface might appear as threatened as Elsie's. Both Mabel and her sister had jobs, but Mabel's was an erratic one with relatively low pay and modest status. Sister Elma's occupation as an elementary school teacher was only slightly more secure and remunerative. Mabel's major income, like her social status and her Victorian home, were inherited. Her diary carries a number of references to stocks and investments, but no overall assessment. The notation that she had received "Int ch for \$52.92" (10-4-38) might seem small but not when wages were low and jobs, eagerly sought by men with families, paid as little as one dollar a day. The precarious state of the stock market was a concern for her and would suggest that she must have had substantial investments. In 1935 she wrote: "The indications are that W. A. L. Thompson and the Austin Securities are both gone and everyone has lost their money" (9-17-35), but by 1936 she reported receiving two percent

MARCH 14

Temperature is 82°, sweating as in summer 1935. A beautiful morning. Have the lines full of bedding & am going to wash windows. Have no fire in the house. Max came back staid all night. Netta Allison spent the eve.

1936. Very cloudy morn. Will be a busy day. Going to the Library at Memorial Bldg. for data getting papers ready for the Daughters of the American Colonists. The D.A.C. meet this P.M. and the Argonauts tonight. ^{Mrs. Stapley & Bernice} Palmer on prog.

1937. Temp 23°. Snowing again. We have 3. inches of snow. Attended church services. Subscriptions for the Budget was taken. Flora Nelson and Edna Brown called in the P.M. to get Elmas.

1938 Temp 44 & 50°. Cloudy & chilly. Went with Blanche Gifford to Eskridge, ate a good dinner at the Cafe. called on Ziza Martin. In the eve embroidered & played Chinese checkers.

1939 Another nice morning. Temp 56°. The flu has been (& still is) raging all winter. Few homes where it hasn't been. Found batteries dead this morn. Red let me have his car to take Elma to school. Ray cranked mine & I hurried down to get mine charged.

FIG. 1. Mabel Holmes diary, 1935-39. Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

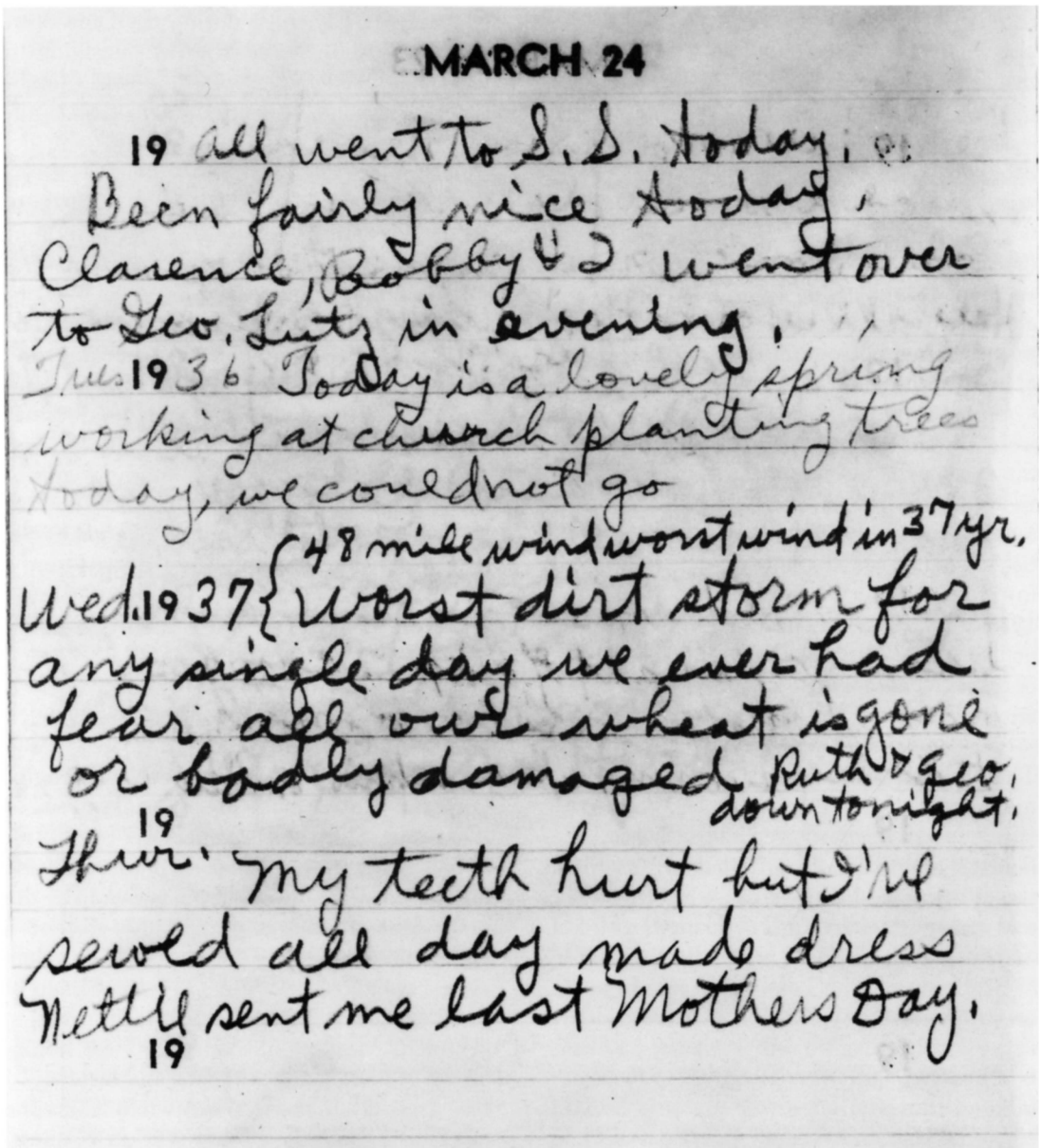


FIG. 2. Elsie Long Haywood diary, 1935-39. Courtesy of author.

interest on "Their Austin Securities" (7-11-36) and again the next year mentioned receiving "a small payment on Austin" (2-1-37). A year later she gloomily reported that "Stock took a terrible tumble. Everything looks discouraging" (3-4-38).

Mabel's brief notations indicated she viewed national and international events largely in terms of their effect on investments. On occasion she noted that labor strikes were disruptive to the economy and complained that President Roosevelt was doing nothing to curb

the "sit Down strike situation" (3-28-37). She also blamed Roosevelt for the "Stock Market . . . going down on acct. [of] lowering the price of Gold" (1-14-37). Big business was also involved—"Big Steel strike is spreading causing Stocks to tumble" (5-14-35)—but labor to her mind was the major culprit: "Pres. Roosevelt & Lewis, strike organizer, on verge of a rift" (7-8-37). She predicted with some discouragement that the country's foreign policy was also having adverse effects: "Stocks have almost reached bottom on acct. of War Scare" (10-14-37).

Apparently her fears about her securities were unfounded, although she recorded a minor casualty when she sold stock that resulted in "Taking a loss of \$63.00" (2-23-37). The extent of the sisters' holdings and their various losses can only be suggested by their comfortable lifestyle. When Elma was informed in 1937 that one of her insurance policies had paid out, she reinvested the \$3000 with the company. There was no need to use the money for current living expenses.

Elsie's situation was far more precarious. There were no investments to worry about, not even the house in Wichita, which the family lost to its mortgage-holder. Wheat, the family's main cash crop, failed to provide a steady income. Drought caused poor yields, and wheat prices declined to 35 cents a bushel at times and, as Elsie wrote in July 1936, "wheat only making 3 or 4 bu. here at home & on west quarter" (7-2-36). The same discouraging results plagued other western Kansas families. A neighboring Meade County farmer boasted that at the end of the year he had cleared a total of 10 cents, but "at least, had not gone into debt."⁷ For Elsie taxes on the land and interest payments on the mortgage only added to the burden that farming created. The only substantial returns from farming were government checks issued for compliance with federal conservation programs. In 1938, Elsie noted, "our allotment check was \$429.11" (1-5-38). Wheat production and returns usually associated with farming, such as livestock, never made a dent

in mortgage payments during the Dust Bowl years. The family was in effect engaging in what has been described as "a sort of subsistence agriculture grafted on to cash farming."⁸

To replace the lost farm income, all members of the family were obliged to contribute to the precarious "scratching out a living." Elsie's husband worked as a carpenter, assessor, and, most frequently, as surveyor of farmland allotments required to verify compliance with federal AAA programs. At the same time he continued to farm 800 acres of wheatland and to raise livestock. The older son, besides helping with farm work, occasionally worked as a farmhand for neighbors and hunted rabbits to be shipped to mink farms. The two brothers were responsible for the larger of the two garden patches that were irrigated from a reservoir constructed in 1936 and fed by a windmill. Elsie's "kitchen garden" was small only in comparison. In 1935 she recorded planting 300 sweet potato plants (6-6-35). When her older son brought his first paycheck home, Elsie wrote in her diary: "Harold came home this evening. he has been working at Long's in the hay made \$15 he was so proud of it. Told me \$15 was a lot of money" (6-15-35).

Elsie also made cash contributions to the family income, primarily from eggs sold by the crate. Even when eggs brought only 18 cents a dozen, a crate of thirty dozen would buy a sack of groceries (6-29-35). In 1934 the women of Ford County Farm Bureau organized a "Farmer's Market" in Dodge City for home-grown or homemade products, and Elsie sold a few dressed chickens there when Clarence needed to go to the county seat on business. She also set turkey eggs on a shared basis (6-13-35).⁹

Local social customs dictated that certain tasks, especially cash-generating jobs, ought not to be assumed by a woman. The Depression altered that taboo when farm women could not separate their activities into traditional categories. John Mack Faragher found that in frontier rural families of the previous century "domestic division of labor, roles and

routine were set by family patterns, production decisions determined by a calculus of family need."¹⁰ No woman could totally ignore local mores, but when Elsie drove to town to perform the acceptable feminine role of shopping and sold her crate of eggs, she was taking over the masculine duty of "bread winner" without breaking acceptable labor patterns.

Her largest contribution, an indirect money-generating role, was the almost never-ending job of canning—"putting up" food for the winter. In 1935 she recorded canning 45 quarts from the 210 pepper and tomato plants she had planted in the spring. She also canned plums, peaches, pears, and 71 quarts of cherries from the orchard of 100 trees irrigated from the reservoir plus "a side of pork" and "a few crocks of porkchops." The next summer she noted canning 115 quarts of fruit. There was a warming sense of pride and contribution in seeing the colorfully lined shelves of quart and two-quart jars and the crocks stored in the underground cave that also served as a milk-house. With fresh vegetables, potatoes, milk, cream, butter, and cracked wheat as a breakfast cereal, the farm reached a near self-sufficiency for food. Only salt, sugar, flour, and Karo syrup were considered essential enough to purchase. A son remembered that in the first stringent year back on the farm, when Elsie thought a bottle of ketchup, costing 10 cents, would add to the meals, she discussed with her husband whether to spend the dime. Food stuffs other than the essentials were considered frivolous luxury. Soap was made at the time of butchering hogs and fuel for heating came from drought-killed trees cut on shares.

THE WAY THEY LIVED

For Elsie, the most profound impact of the Depression was the adjustment to a nineteenth-century lifestyle at a time when farming had advanced to the twentieth-century state-of-the-art gasoline-powered machinery. Fortunately, Kansas was hardly a generation

away from the frontier, and Elsie and her husband retained the skills to turn back. Having lived through the good times and having experienced the more primitive horse and buggy homesteading discomforts, they had remained guardedly optimistic. Like many of their contemporaries, all they needed to survive was a narrow margin of profit. The edge came for Elsie, as for many other western Kansas farm women, from non-wheat sources. George Friesen of Hamilton County explained his family was able to survive "because of an adequate combination of the husband's and wife's [and children's] efforts plus a generous dollop of federal aid." An acquaintance of the Haywoods, Otto Feldman, wrote to Senator Arthur Capper that "if it wasn't for milk cows and [my wife's chickens] I would have give up."¹¹ Elsie's hedge against poverty and failure, along with that dollop of federal farm aid, was hard work by the family to manage the irrigation of the orchard and gardens and the income from milk and eggs. In terms of personal labor, Elsie was half a century behind Mabel. About the only labor-saving devices she had were a gasoline-powered washing machine and, of course, a car for transportation.

What the family experienced was sometimes called "reversing the 20s." Whereas the 1920s created new wealth and a higher standard of living, from comparative riches to rags was a familiar story of the 1930s. For Elsie the early phase of the Depression brought a curious kind of "living poor." Cash flow was down to a trickle, but there was no danger of hunger or exposure to the elements. The basic necessities were there—food, shelter, clothing. What was lost was not only a comfortable lifestyle and status but also a sense of being in control.

The thousands of other American women like Elsie became more aware of class distinctions as the Depression deepened. Neither diarist comments specifically on her own status; both subtly acknowledged the presence of class. In the United States the two most important factors in determining class are wealth and occupation. When these symbols can be quickly lost, as was true of the 1930s, the

awareness of class becomes more pronounced. As the crisis lingered on, distinctions were hard to ignore. While there may be no legal standing or clearly defined boundaries in a theoretically egalitarian society, sociological studies have repeatedly demonstrated that all members of a community are aware of their own and others' status. In troubled times, the two major factors may be muted, as they were in the South after the Civil War when some old aristocratic families lived in genteel poverty without sacrificing their inherited social status, but such conditions are rare and usually temporary.¹²

The Depression apparently did not alter Mabel's standing in the community, in part because her long-time residence had fixed her place and in part because her relative level of wealth remained constant. Mabel and her sister, Elma, seemed to belong to that special class of single women working in low status jobs who were accepted because they were perceived as just "needing something to do" and were not forced into their position because of economic necessity. Still, she and her sister went to considerable trouble to maintain their social station by participating in prestigious clubs and seeking membership in the patriotic and relatively exclusive Daughters of American Colonists and Daughters of the American Revolution. Mabel was also active in the local semi-exclusive Argonauts Club and Women's Club. These groups acquainted Mabel with the elite, even if she did not quite equal their status. Her personal circle of friends were on the same level as she, just one rung below the controlling figures. Her understanding of social hierarchy was shown in her use of any title of distinction, even those of academic rank: "Went to Prof. Hollingsworths," "Invited to dinner at Judge Heuins," and "Dr. Karl Menningers & Pendelton Millers entertained."

Much of her socializing was with a group of ten to twelve individuals, married couples and single women of like status. The house Mabel lived in (the single most important material symbol of wealth and status), al-

though not classifiable as a mansion, was large enough, properly Victorian enough, and located securely enough in a recognized upper-income neighborhood to indicate established respectability. The Depression had no negative impact on her standing within the community.

In Wichita, Elsie's family had lived in a blue-collar neighborhood befitting her husband's occupation as a carpenter. After returning to Ford County and enduring two years of penurious readjustment, Elsie reestablished her status as a farm woman, an ambiguous standing somewhere between laborer and entrepreneur that neither farmers nor the rest of society had quite determined. She lived in a typical, western Kansas farm community, in a fairly typical farm house, on a 700-acre wheat farm, about the average size for that section of the state. Neighboring families had income both higher and lower, and some lived in more modern houses while other houses were not as nice. By 1938 Elsie's family's income and lifestyle were similar to those of her associates. Cultural definitions in rural class systems did not depend strictly on financial standing. As Marilyn Holt reported, "A person's or family's local standing often was based more on cooperation with neighbors, church attendance, or interest in education than on financial assets. It was quite possible for someone to be considered among the 'better class of farmers' without being among the wealthiest or largest landholders."¹³

Elsie's diary shows she met the cultural standards, but the differences were not totally ignored. Fifty years after the Great Depression, people sometimes glibly said, "We were poor but did not know it. Everyone was in the same boat." This is nostalgia speaking—at the time even children were aware of material advantages and disadvantages. Elsie's recognition of one neighbor's more elite status shows in her references to Lillian Long as Mrs. Long while other neighbors rated first name reference only. Mrs. Long was the wife of a nephew and manager of Senator Chester I. Long's "Sunshine Ranch." Since Elsie and Mrs. Long

belonged to two of the same clubs, the families socialized some.

SOCIAL LIFE

Both diaries gave more of their limited space to social contacts than to any other single activity. For Elsie the availability of a car, when a gallon of gasoline cost less than a dozen eggs, gave her the freedom to participate in a wide assortment of group and individual contacts. Farm husbands may have gained the most in labor-saving devices from the mechanization of farms, but the farm wives enjoyed the gift of freedom from the restriction of the homestead.¹⁴ The isolated and home-bound wife was only an unpleasant memory of a previous generation.

Both Mabel and Elsie joined purely social organizations as well as church and "uplift clubs."¹⁵ For both women, attending Sunday church service and Sunday School was an unquestioned responsibility, but neither one achieved or seemed to strive for a perfect attendance record. Both noted with an unstated but obvious twinge of conscience when they did not attend. They also shared an interest in other church-related activities, devoting considerable time to Missionary Society work, with Mabel commenting on the inspiration the visiting speakers brought to the meetings. Elsie was also active in the institutionally sponsored Ladies Aid Society, which had been established by the central Methodist authorities.

The Victorian indoctrination Elsie and Mabel had received as mainstream Americans assured that their values accorded with what D. H. Meyer has labeled the "American Civil Religion," which embraced the fundamental tenets of all major sects.¹⁶ Elsie supported with considerable zeal the Methodists' special interest in Prohibition. Mabel shared temperance convictions and attended the meetings. She wrote: "Heard a good sermon at the Union ch. in A.M. at night attended Union Service at Xian ch. A rousing Temp. address by Judge Boyle . . . of Columbus, Ohio head of Anti Saloon League of Ky" (7-21-35). Elsie reflected

her position in one entry: "Leone [her sister-in-law] & I went to Meade this afternoon to have our hair washed & set. Went to dance at Dodge Country Club [guests of Will Long] several of the men had plenty to drink, 1st time in my life I was ever in a crowd where drinking was" (1-19-35). This was not strictly true, but at the barn dances she had attended early on, men did not flaunt their "sinning," but kept the bottle outside, away from the dance floor.

Most of Elsie's visits and parties were with a small circle of eight or nine families who lived within a five-mile radius. Their interactions followed patterns established before World War I with the addition of bridge parties. Couples "dropped-in" for watermelon from the irrigated patch or to share a hand-turned freezer of ice cream. The family's croquet court, laid out with a surveyor's precision and graded to the level of a pool table, was excuse enough for neighbors to meet. In this turning back to Victorian times, the Depression played a significant role in reviving cheap, homegrown entertainment. Occasionally, especially in winter, Elsie recorded that visitors listened to the radio, for instance, when Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke or to follow the Bruno Hauptmann trial. She noted in her diary, "Hauptman was electrocuted today" (4-3-36). A battery-powered radio was a symbol of a positive step toward recovery, not just a source of entertainment. Since the TVA's electrification program had not reached Ford County, the useless plug-in model gathering dust in the bunkhouse had been an unpleasant reminder of the lost home and dream in Wichita.

Clubs, visitation, church functions, and parties were so frequent that Elsie wrote in her diary after a particularly busy week, "going to a party tonight at Walker Gardners to[o] much society for us old folks, I'm afraid" (2-28-35). This, however, was written more as a boast than as a serious complaint. During May 1936, Elsie mentions attending ten meetings or parties, visiting or being visited by neighbors eight times, and going to one movie. Besides the contacts with people in the farming circle, she

went on business or shopping trips to Dodge City four times and Fowler eleven times.

One of the exploded myths of rural life is that farm-burdened women experienced serious loneliness. Elsie did note once in her diary, "I've been home alone all day," but later added that four people "came over" in the evening (6-9-37). Few days passed when her only contacts were with the immediate family. Although she had been surrounded by people in Wichita, she did not belong to as many clubs there, and she was less involved with church activities. Social contacts increased when the Depression forced her back to rural life.

Movies, on the other hand, were greatly restricted. Wichita was rich in theaters and a family ritual had been Saturday night at the movies. On the farm the distance to the closest theater and the price of admission curbed Elsie's attendance. Even in April 1938, when the worst of the skimping on money was over, she wrote in her diary, "Ruth and I went to Dodge to see Snow-white today I like the show a lot but felt like I shouldn't have spent the 30¢ to go" (4-1-38). But she did go. Just a month earlier she had written that she "rode along with Clarence" when he went to Dodge on surveying business and went to see "Shirley Temple, in Little Colonel, 1st show I've been to this year." She mentioned Shirley Temple shows five times and the child actress apparently was a favorite of hers, as she was for most Depression-era people. Although Elsie did see other films, including *Green Pastures* and Will Rogers in *Steamboat Round the Bend*, at a time when the nation was attending more movies than ever before, the hard times caused her to miss all but a few of the excellent movies produced in 1938 and 1939. She was able to read some of the popular books, such as *Gone with the Wind* and *White Bird Flying* and she also participated in community programs—writing and acting in plays and skits and giving readings. There were diminishing literary and passive entertainment opportunities on the farm, a condition directly resulting from the Great Depression.

In Elsie's diary the Farm Bureau Club followed church-related attendance in frequency of mention. Beyond the neighborhood club meetings, Elsie attended Farm Bureau sponsored day-long sessions and statewide conferences that met in Dodge City, Wichita, and Manhattan. All the Farm Bureau meetings mixed education with recreation. Home demonstration extension work that had been successful in the 1920s increased. Educational efforts covered a wide range of activities, from teaching such skills as making mattresses, cheese, and kerosene lamps from old bottles to such serious matters as health, conservation, and urban- and middle-class domestic standards. Farm meetings under the auspices of the AAA informed men and women in western Kansas of available farm programs and allowed them to report their circumstances to government officials.

The only other organization that Elsie attended with any regularity was the Rebecca Lodge, the distaff branch of the Masons. Since bridge was the most popular social game of the day, Elsie's family, a natural foursome, frequently played in the evening, and neighbors alternated giving "Bridge Parties," complete with decorations, favors, prizes for the winners, and booby prizes for the losers. Skill in playing the game, winning and losing were not as important as the conversation and association with friends who did not need to be impressed with clever cardsmanship.

If Elsie's social life seemed full, when compared to Mabel's "social whirl," it appears only moderately active. In May 1936, Elsie had recorded nineteen social events and fifteen trips to town, but Mabel attended nine party-type occasions, five concerts or lectures, two movies, and received or visited ("called on") friends seventeen times. She belonged to a number of strictly social clubs, including a Bridge Club, Motor Club, and Supper Club. Visitations frequently were more than talk and gossip sessions, usually including playing one of the popular games of the day: Chinese Checkers, Monopoly, Bingo, anagrams, or dominoes. Although Mabel reported not feeling well

during the last two weeks of one month, there was only one day that she recorded no social contacts. She did not report reading as many books as Elsie—in fact, she did not have time to do so—but she did read *The House of Seven Gables* after visiting Hawthorne's country on one of her vacations. Mabel also attended more movies than did Elsie, and included a broader variety of films: *Gorgeous Hussy*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Iron Duke* with George Arliss, *Naughty Marietta*, Fanny Hurst's *Four Daughters* (which she judged to be a "good clean show" [2-23-35]), and at least one Shirley Temple film, *Little Colonel*, that Elsie also saw.

One major difference in the use of leisure time was Mabel's and her sister's vacations. Each year they made a long summer trip of two or three weeks in their new car, stopping to visit relatives and old friends and sightseeing at such attractions as Boone Tavern, Mammoth Cave, Lexington and Concord, Boston, Chimney Rock, and—the highlight of a Canadian trip—the home of the Dionne Quintuplets in Callander (8-4-39).

WEATHER

Although family and economic circumstances brought substantially different responses from the two women to the Depression, the greatest difference came in coping with the weather—weather, in this case, being the second of the disasters to strike the state in the 1930s. The drought that created the dust storms and earned for Western Kansas the title of "Dust Bowl" and the decade of the 1930s the label of "The Dirty Thirties" required decidedly different responses to climatic changes. The diary entries on 14 and 15 April 1935, illustrate dramatically the difference 300 miles could make in the lives of the people of Kansas. For western Kansas, this was "Black Sunday," when the dust clouds rolled in and completely blacked out the sun, leaving the land in an impenetrable darkness and eerie stillness that caused some to believe that it heralded the end of the world.¹⁷ For eastern Kansans the fourteenth was not memorable,

being only a windy day that disrupted hanging out the laundry; the next day the weather was calm enough to varnish woodwork.

MABEL

April 14, 1935 Went to S.S. & church. A beautiful warm morning. At 3 another bad dust storm & got colder. Went to the Hospital for G Dick in morn & took her back at 5. Mrs. Nussbaum & Max came at 5.30. April 15. Real cold. Car wouldn't start. Mr. Van Wolf is here varnishing woodwork & floors. got car fixed . . . Cost 35¢. Ate at Kochis.

ELSIE

April 14th. Windy & dirty we did not go to S.S. C. & I went to Mary Belle's funeral in Fowler Caught in a terrible storm coming home. This is the worst storm so far, dirt cloud rolled up without any warning to speak of & when it hit you were in total darkness, many thought the end of the world had come, I feared a tornado.

April 15. Nice today I've cleaned house all morning took scoop [scoop shovel] after scoop of dirt from each room. wash this afternoon but could not put the cloths out to dry.

The dust from the storms drifted to the east beyond the state's border and occasionally touched Mabel. She wrote on 16 March 1935: "A terrible wind & dust storm, could not hang out the clothes." Later she noted she had to hang clothes inside the bathroom to dry. On the same day Elsie wrote: "Worst storm this spring Terrible today. We all went to Bob's operetta this evening. dirt was terrible in the auditorium risky driving home but we finally got here. took us almost an hour [for a normal fifteen minute drive]." The next days brought little relief. March 17 she wrote: "Bob has the 3-day measles. To[o] windy & dirty to try to clean the house today. Oh I feel like I can't stand this dirt. Why oh Why?" The wind and dirt did not abate and four days later she recorded that school had closed because of the

dirt blowing. To Elsie there seemed to be no "end of the misery."

Her diary began after Kansas had gone through three dust years and the frequency and fury of the storms seemed to be constantly increasing. The storms began in 1932 when residents of Ford County suffered twenty-eight dirt days in April and March. In the last year of the storms there were only sixteen dirt days. The Ford County Extension Agent had recorded 724 dirt days during the seven years, equal to two years spent living in dust. Figures for rain followed the same pattern. Between 1930 and 1940 western Kansas averaged only 15.25 inches per year. By 1935, southwestern Kansas had recorded a deficit of 16 inches of moisture—nearly a year's moisture lost in a three year period. Economic losses were devastating. Elliott West observed: "This one climatic factor—the annual rate of precipitation—shaped the lives of pioneers more than any other."¹⁸ In the 1930s the drought again created the greatest difference between Mabel's experience and lifestyle and Elsie's.¹⁹

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Almost as destructive as the economic losses were the psychological and physical impacts on people's health and emotional stability. Elsie frequently mentioned dust-related illnesses and depression. Some people even believed the dust caused the measles epidemics that struck in 1934 and 1935. Elsie noted that the youngest son not only had the three-day measles, but frequently had nose bleeds, sore throats, and flu-like respiratory bouts (3-15-35). The four small hospitals in Meade County reported that 52 percent of their admissions were respiratory cases caused by the dust. Other members of Elsie's family had illnesses they attributed to the dust, but none came down with the "Dust Pneumonia" that Woody Guthrie sang about. (Even Mabel reported that Elma developed "dust infection" from cleaning the house in relatively untouched eastern Kansas.) The most serious calamity, certainly the most embarrassing, was when the plas-

tered ceiling fell while Elsie was entertaining a club meeting in her home. Papers in the area carried dozens of accounts of silt filled attics collapsing through the ceilings beneath them.

Living in the dust day after day led to dark moods of depression identified as "Dust Blues." A housewife who could not keep ahead of the infiltrating dust felt that she was not fulfilling her obligations as a wife to maintain acceptable standards of neatness, cleanliness, and household order. She felt a sense of losing control. The "man of the house" could at least fight directly with the enemy by listing the fields, tilling deep furrows in an attempt to control the dirt from drifting across the surface of cultivated land.

Elsie reached a serious low in the early spring of 1935. On 17 March she wrote: "Did not go to S[unday] S[chool] today. I'm so discouraged today, have cleaned dirt about all day & the wind is blowing so bad it won't do any good only for a few minutes. Clarence is right my *pretended* religion is about gone." The feeling passed but came back as she repeatedly recorded the "worst dirt storm," "worst ever" (or "in 37 years"), "terrible storm," "lamp on all day," "gloomy," "blackest day." She was not alone in her feelings. "Dust Blues" seemed at times to affect the whole community. A local minister, A. B. Madison, wrote in the *Fowler News* that people in the vicinity had "given up trying to be civilized. We are merely trying to exist. . . . Oh, ain't this a mess."²⁰

Elsie, however, was remarkably resilient. In the midst of the dirt, when a person arose in the morning and could see the white imprint of her head on a pillow otherwise black with a coat of dust, she wrote: "Windy & bad today have cleaned house I worked hard all day, what good does it do. Mrs. Long, Bertha & Vivian neighbors were here today we practiced a song" (4-5-35). Life went on and so did the pleasures of friendship. On the day the Reverend Mr. Madison was broadcasting his depression and wrote off civilized society, Elsie, back in control, noted in her diary: "Real nice today, I have done a lot of baking cookies, pies &

bread also dressed a chicken. C. [Clarence] is listing" (4-25-35).

Elsie's and Mabel's reactions to the Great Depression were never more divergent than during the dust storms. Distress, helplessness, and depression were feelings only Elsie recorded. The diary in those miserable days did become a confidant, the close friend who could share this low point in life. Her husband's strength was supportive and also somewhat challenging. His remark about her "pretended religion" and his continued, although unsuccessful, efforts to stop the drifting dust indicated that he still had faith in the land. Elsie was not quite that certain. Her closest friend, Ruth Flair, shared her plight, but she and the other neighboring women kept a very British stiff-upper-lip attitude that did not encourage serious complaining or special sympathy. The diary in those dark days did become a handy refuge and a source of solace. Mabel did not need the solace of that kind of diary. Her life had not been disrupted.

TASKS AND CHORES

Even without Elsie's dust-cleaning burdens, Mabel's household duties were not as onerous as they were for the farm wife. Still, there were pies to bake, floors to clean, and meals to prepare. A typical entry for Mabel read:

No school today. Had several callers cleaned the house. Got ready for club tonight. Had cube steak Millie Fay & Vere Hunting substituted for the McClement girls (2-22-35).

At the onset of the Depression gender roles were fairly firmly set for middle-class women. Defying established mores was difficult in the 1930s, but the imperative of "Depression calculus" was to make easier WWII acceptance of Rosie the Riveter and present day understanding of gender roles. There were, in Mabel's single-sex household, tasks considered "man's work" that she had to either hire or barter for with friendship, culinary gifts, or

neighborly good will. Occasionally she had to ask a male neighbor to crank her car, not because she could not but because the community would disapprove if she did. Only one of Elsie's woman neighbors did field work, and her husband was tagged with the nickname "Socks," meaning he wore the "socks" but not the "pants" in the family. Elsie's typical entry was pervasively domestically oriented:

I did a big ironing today 15 shirts [the older son mailed his laundry home from college] numerous other things More showers. Baked bread & made cinemon rolls. read in the afternoon (11-4-36).

Elsie sometimes subordinated her domestic duties to those of a farm producer but understood that this was a limited and temporary condition. She appeared to herself always a full-time homemaker and a half-time producer—never mind the mathematics of the formula.²¹ Mabel, who was employed away from the home, would have agreed that homemaking was central, providing the category included social responsibilities. Hard times apparently had only limited effect upon her work, household duties, and self-image.

CONCLUSION

As representatives of middle America, the two women lived and shared with their diaries many common impressions, experiences, and responses: social clubs, church functions, Shirley Temple, the drama of the Lindberg trial, Alf Landon's defeat, the awe-inspiring Dionne Quintuplets, chain letters, and card games—all the fluff of life that did not touch them deeply. The Depression and war clouds did little to disrupt Mabel's calm routine of social life. Elsie's domestic responsibilities focused her attention on the family and the necessity of "making ends meet."

The dust, work, and lost income were such grinding realities to Elsie that, from the evidences of the diary, she appeared to be far less concerned with the prospects of war than

Mabel, even though Elsie had sons who would be of draft age. If she did have such concerns, she did not record them. To Mabel the Depression, as described in her diary, appeared to be little more than a somewhat worrisome but limited inconvenience. She appeared to have little confidence in the federal government's ability to solve domestic and foreign problems. Despite the fact that she worked for the state government and her sister for the municipal government, governments in general seemed less important to her than to the farm wife. The federal government's programs and financial support kept Elsie's farm and family solvent. The United States government became the most positive force in meeting the problems she faced—it and the determination, resilience, and work of the individual members of the family.

As for the deeper messages that the diaries might hold, the writers exposed little of their innermost feelings. The diaries remain basically a recording of daily routines, a piling on of facts. They are often more tantalizing than revealing. What did Elsie confide in her closest friend, Ruth Flair? Did Mabel feel that she lived a full and fulfilling life with her sister? Did she feel that she had achieved the social status she sought? Was Elsie's Christian faith truly shaken by the relentless dust? The paper record does not answer these questions or even hint at why the two women recorded all that unrevealing data that did not speak to their feelings.

In many ways the diarists experienced the Great Depression quite differently. For Elsie the period of 1935 to 1939 was a crisis in which her family had to settle major plans and dreams. In mid-life all her emotional and physical resources were tested. Mabel continued her previous lifestyle with only minor adjustments. She was a remarkably independent woman—something of an adventurer who, with only her sister, drove from one coast to the other, ferreting out traditional and obscure sight-seeing attractions. Apparently she was rarely called upon to demonstrate inner toughness,

although when Topeka's killer tornado swept directly through her home, she sat out the storm alone in her basement.²²

Neither woman appeared to desire to move outside the domestic sphere she had created. Each retained the values established in her youth. Certainly Elsie held no vision in which her role as a farm producer would be central to her life.²³ If Mabel had regrets, they never reached her diary. For all Elsie's and Mabel's differences of circumstance, they held one characteristic in common: they were survivors.

NOTES

1. Studs Terkel, *An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), p. 371.

2. Mabel Holmes Diary, 1935-39, Kansas State Historical Society (hereafter cited in parentheses in text); *Topeka State Journal*, 13 June 1966; *Topeka City Directory, 1907-1938*; 1875 Kansas State Census, Topeka; Argonauts Year Book Files, 1921-1958, Topeka Room, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

3. *Fowler News*, 27 April 1970, 15 October 1971.

4. Elsie Haywood Diary, in possession of author (hereafter cited in parentheses in text); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 4-5. A frequent motivation for families leaving rural settings was to seek better schools in town. See Marilyn Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), p. 148 for a survey in Morgan County, Missouri, where 56 school districts reported one or more families leaving the rural area for that purpose.

5. Laural Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1825* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 9; quoted in Suzanne L. Bunker, "All Will Yet Be Well": *The Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873-1952* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 4.

6. Judy Nolte Lensink, "A Secret to Be Buried": *The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858-1888* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. xiv.

7. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 97-98.

8. Earl H. Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Sublette, Kansas* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), vol. 2: 56-58.

9. For a discussion of rural Nebraska women performing similar tasks to bring in cash for the family budget, see Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 96-130.

10. John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 40; Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 276-78.

11. Ford County Agricultural Extension, *Home Demonstration Agent's Report, Kansas 1930*, p. 21.

12. Joseph A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure: A New Synthesis* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1987), p. 21; Fink, *Agrarian Women* (note 9 above), pp. 67-69.

13. Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & Farm Woman* (note 4 above), p. 7.

14. Virtually all farm women in Ford and Meade Counties drove cars and enjoyed the freedom cars provided. See Jellison, *Entitled to Power* (note 4 above), p. 122.

15. The term "uplift club" refers to any organization that brings congenial individuals together by attaching nonrecreational significance to club activities. Organized meetings are established to formalize (disguise) congenial groupings by adopting charitable or learning tasks to give a sense of selfless purpose. Missionary groups are prime examples. See Richard T. LaPiere, *Collective Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), p. 167.

16. D. H. Meyer, "American Intellectuals and the Victorian Crisis of Faith," in Daniel Walker Howe (ed.), *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), p. 91.

17. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust* (note 7 above), pp. 28, 202, found only one person in 1989 who had experienced the storm who did not remember where she was on that date. My own unscientific survey found none. For a fine study that reached the same conclusion see Katie Weigel, "Where Were You April 1936," Seminar on Southwestern Kansas, in possession of the author.

18. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust* (note 7 above), pp. 23-26; Ford County Agricultural Extension *Annual Report, 1940*, p. 228; Lawrence Svobida, *Empire of Dust* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1940), p. 97; Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 19; *Garden City Telegram* 3 May 1935.

19. Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), p. 6.

20. *Fowler News*, 25 April 1935.

21. Jellison, *Entitled to Power* (note 4 above), pp. xxi.

22. *Topeka State Journal*, 13 June 1996.

23. Deborah Fink found the opposite trend in the Nebraska women she studied; see *Agrarian Women* (note 9 above), p. 96 ff. Glenda Riley observed that "even women who expanded their horizons did so with traditional female values as their guides." *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 197.