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Reasons for Vacating the Land

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REASONS FOR VACATING THE LAND

According to interview data, the mild droughts began very early. The first was in 1908 and 1909 followed by a low rainfall period of 1910 and 1911. These mild droughts were followed by another dry period in 1925 and 1926 and later by the dust bowl period of the mid-1930's. To experience even a mild drought was sufficient to weed out the land speculators who had little interest in farming the land. There were also a number of people who intended to farm, but arrived with insufficient funds to purchase the necessary equipment to produce enough surplus to ride through a period of harsh conditions. Bank loans for equipment would frequently place the farmer into a debt ceiling that would be impossible for him to recover from. These debts, compounded by crop failures and by bank failures in Des Moines (1912) and Clayton (1921) that instigated immediate repayment of outstanding loans, were sufficient to force the farmer off of the land. The abandoned property would be foreclosed by the lending company in order to partially recover the debts.

From the beginning the homesteaders experienced great suffering. As many returned immediately to the humid lands from whence they came, they blamed their misfortunes on the climate and its' attendant rigors such as leaf blight or grasshopper plagues. Vance Johnson so ably describes this return flow of settlers in the book Heavens Tableland as viewed through the eyes of an old cowboy:

"Farmers are allus goin' out there in times like these, and coming back when it gets dry... Y'know, you kin tell by the remains of their camps which way they're goin'. Goin' west, they leave cracker boxes and cans about; comin' east, all they leave is rabbit hair and field lark feathers." 1

The chronology of stressful events in the northeast which would

have presented hardships to the homesteader included:

1904: Severe summer rains inundate fields and flood the canyonlands
1908-1909: general drought
1910-1911: low rainfall period
1912: bank failure in Des Moines
1913: three-day blizzard ("worst in history")
1918: severe blizzard ("worst in memory")
1918-1919: flu epidemic
1921: bank failure in Clayton
1925-1926: dry years
1929: nationwide depression- foreclosures by banks and insurance companies
1930: spring blizzard following calving
1934: drought and early dust storms
1934: government purchase and slaughter of starving stock
1935: black sunday duster
1936-1937: low rainfall years
1937: secondary recession on the crop market

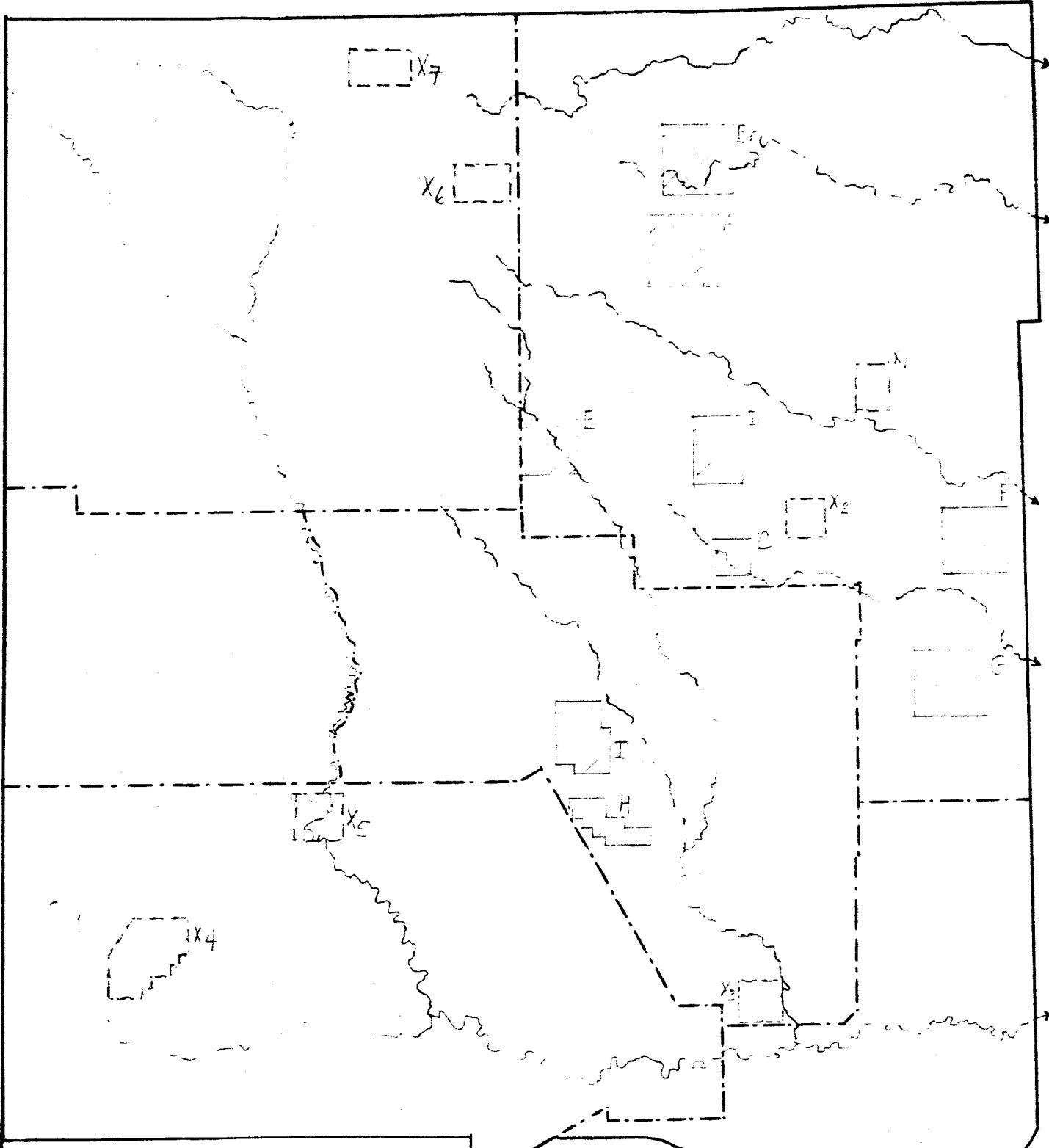
Title Changes as a Reflection of Land Vacation

One method of ascertaining the effect of economic and climatic stress on the dryland farmers would be the review of land titles from sample locations throughout the northeastern area. Title changes following the patent date, is one method of determining if the former owner had vacated the land. A chronological record of land titles for a section of land provides information about the patent date and consolidation or subdivision of the quarter, half, or full section at any time following the patent. The information includes the owner's names, the date of the transaction, and the type of transaction. Data is also available about bank foreclosure on the land, ^{and on detail such as a} probate inventory of the owner's holdings ^{in preparation for the probate sale} ~~following the death of the owner and the sale~~ of the property and goods for the recovery of debts.

Title information was compiled from the patent date until 1985 on 30 sections of land (109 patented parcels) around the Amistad community; on 36 sections of land (108 patents) around Sedan; 25 sections (84 patents) around Gladstone; 24 sections (74 patents) around Pennington;

32 sections (128 patents) in the Prosperous Valley-Star area north of Grenville; on 9 sections (51 patents) of the Miera Plaza area; 19 sections (63 patents) in Lower Mosquero; and on 28 sections (116 patents) in the Gould-Black Lake community. Altogether, land title data was collected on 733 parcels from 203 sections of land in eight different geographic locations. It had originally been proposed to sample a total of fifteen areas (see map). However, time constraints and the cooperative use of title company records² limited our work to Union and Harding counties and to communities east of the Canadian River.

The patent records clearly reflect the transition from public to private ownership during the decade of 1910 to 1920 at all locations with the exception of Miera Plaza and Lower Mosquero. Records from these two Hispanic valley settlement areas were collected to compare with the Anglo settlement data from locations on the plains. The patents from Miera Plaza do support the expected: that Hispanic land patents were awarded in the 1880's and 1890's. Records from Lower Mosquero provide a curious study in that most of the patents in the canyon were awarded after the land was patented on the nearby grassland prairies. This may reflect the late movement^{into the canyon} of Hispanic squatters from the Bell Ranch area and from the areas that were being homesteaded by Anglos. It was amazing that this canyon of perennial water, land which was preferred by Hispanic settlers forty to fifty years earlier, was still unpatented by 1920. It is unfortunate that title records from Garcia Plaza and Canon Largo were not included in this study as they would have added much to the understanding of the Hispanic settlement chronology.



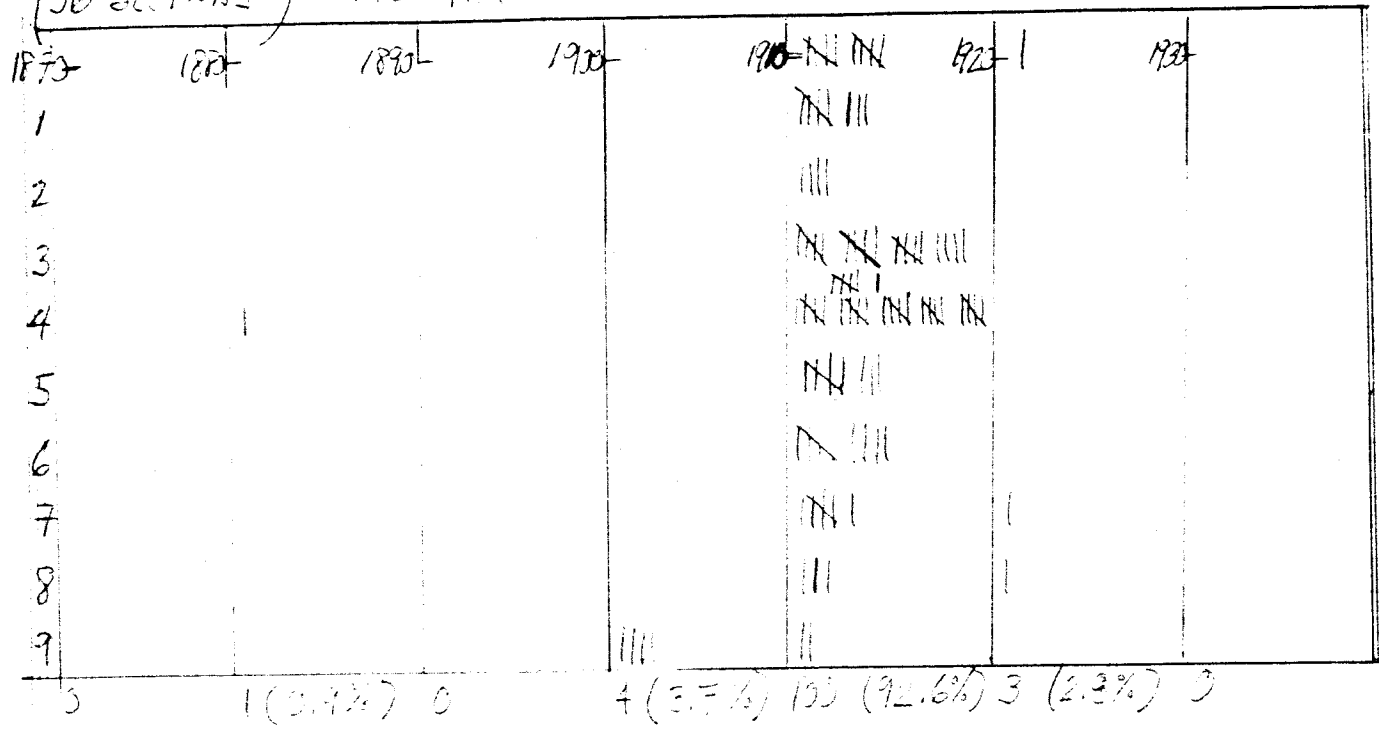
105°W

NORTHEASTERN NEW MEXICO
LAND RECORD AREAS

- AREAS COVERED BY SURVEY
- AREAS OMITTED DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS

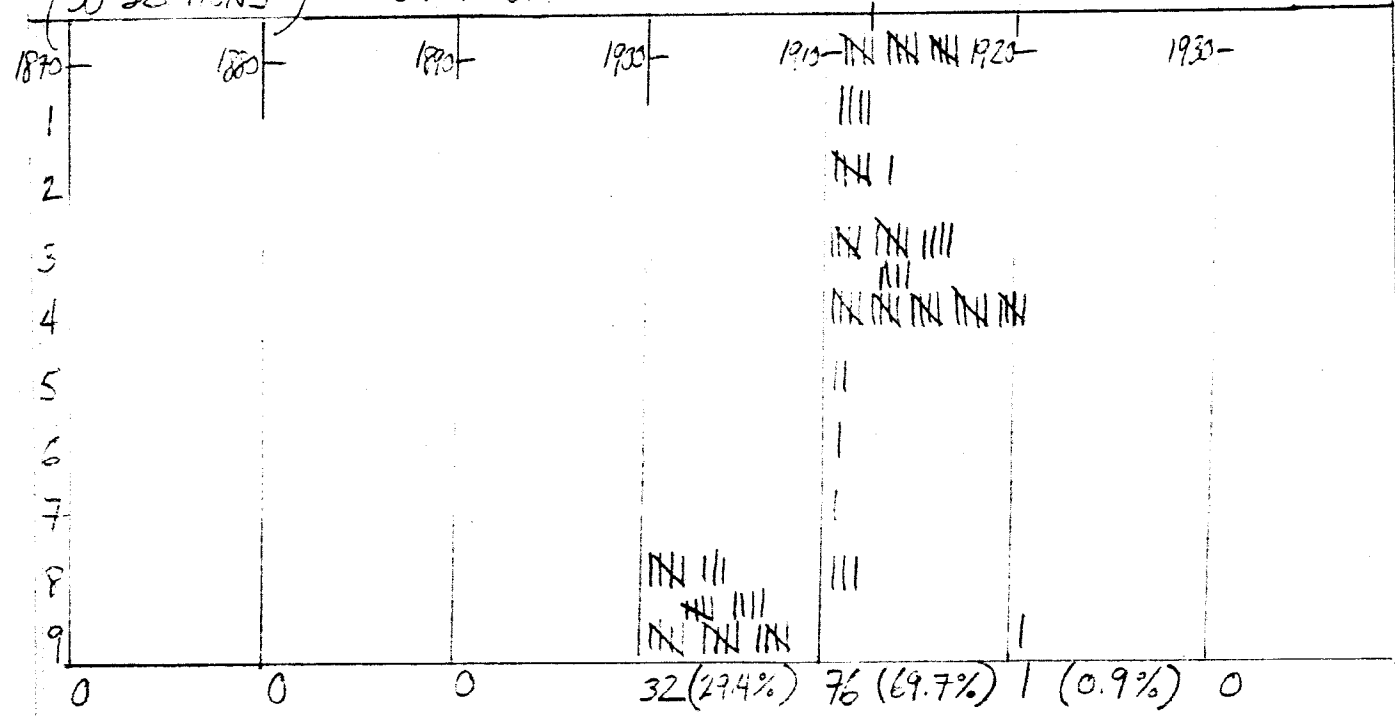
- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| A - PROTERO | E - EVIL | X4 - TRINIDAD |
| B - STAS | H - LOWER MESA | X5 - SANCHEZ |
| C - MISKA PLEZA | J - GOLD/BLACK LAKE | X6 - QUINCY |
| D - PENNINGTON | X1 - OTTO | X7 - JEROME |
| E - CARLSTONE | X2 - SACCHA | |
| F - SULLIVAN | X3 - PLEASANT VALLEY | |

SEDAN COMMUNITY PATENTS: DATES RECORDED (36 SECTIONS) 138 Patents



Source: *Economic Bulletin* 1944-1945

AMISTAD COMMUNITY PATENTS: DATES RECORDED (30 SECTIONS) 139 Patents



GLADSTONE COMMUNITY PATENTS ; DATES AWARDED
(25 SECTIONS) 84 Patents

UNION COUNTY

	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
	6 (7.1%)	2 (2.4%)	3 (3.6%)	7 (9.5%)	24 (46.4%)	2 (2.6%)	2 (2.4%)

16 | 1910
1910-1915

PENNINGTON COMMUNITY PATENTS: DATES AWARDED
(24 SECTIONS) 74 Patents

UNION COUNTY

	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930
1							
2					1		
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
	0	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.4%)	13 (17.6%)	53 (71.6%)	6 (8.1%)	0

400 (1910-1915) 16 (1910-1915)

PROSPEROUS VALLEY / STAR COMMUNITIES PATENTS: DATES AWARDED
 (32 SECTIONS) 128 Patents

1870-	1880-	1890-	1900-	1910-	1920-	1930-
1		I				
2				I	≠	
3	I			II	I	
4			≠	≠≠≠≠	≠	II
5			II	≠≠≠≠	≠	
6	II			≠≠≠≠	≠≠≠≠	
7			I	≠=		
8				≠≠≠		
9	I			≠		
0	13 (10.2%)	6 (4.7%)	18 (14.1%)	76 (59.4%)	15 (11.7%)	0

MIRA PLAZA COMMUNITY PATENTS: DATES AWARDED
 (9 SECTIONS) 51 Patents

1870-	1880-	1890-	1900-	1910-	1920-	1930+
1	I		I			
2			I		I	
3				I		
4	I	II	≠ II		I	
5	I	II	I	I		I
6			I		I	
7		II	I			
8	I	I	I			I
9			I			
0	8 (15.7%)	18 (35.3%)	14 (27.4%)	4 (7.8%)	5 (9.8%)	2 (3.9%)

LOWER MESSURERS PATENTS: DATES AWARDED
(19 SECTIONS) 63 Patents

HARDING
COUNTY

	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	TH	1930
1							II	I
2			I	I	I		II I	I
3					I		III	I
4	I				IIII		I	
5				II			II	
6					IIII		I	II
7				III	II			
8			I	III				III
9	I	I	I		III		III	
	2 (3.3%)	2 (3.3%)	3 (4.8%)	9 (14.3%)	16 (25.4%)	23 (36.5%)	8 (12.7%)	

GOULD-BLACK LAKE COMMUNITY PATENTS: DATES AWARDED
(28 SECTIONS) 116 Patents

HARDING
COUNTY

	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	TH	1930
1				I	II			
2					III		II	
3				III	II I		III	
4				II	II II II I		III	
5				III	II II		III	I
6				III	II II		II	I
7				III	II II II			
8			I	II I	I		I	
9			I	II	II II			I
	0	1 (0.8%)	3 (2.5%)	25 (21.5%)	65 (56.0%)	19 (16.4%)	3 (2.5%)	

See Patent List from Sigsbee 1971

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Only one Anglo settlement area deviates significantly from the norm pictured on the graph. The Prosperous Valley- Star communities between Grebville and the Dry Cimarron Valley show that over 10 per cent of the land was patented before 1890. Of the twenty patents before 1891, eighteen show indirect title change at the year of the patent and the transfer to Stephen Dorsey and the Palo Blanco Cattle Company. This area was simply being homesteaded by paid employees of the cattle company as a method of expanding the land holdings and a way of acquiring water and grazing land. If the depression of the 1880's had not set in, much more of the area would have been listed under the name of a commercial livestock company. Instead, by 1920, most of the land under cattle corporation ownership had been purchased by successful farmer-homesteader families.

Climatic Conditions

There are three major climatic factors controlling the dryland farmers: precipitation, evaporation, and temperature. The semi-aridity of the high plains contributes to the moisture-deficient winds in the area, and these winds in turn increases the evaporation effect on plants and soil. Only occasionally do the moisture-bearing winds, from the Gulf of Mexico in the summer and from the Pacific Northwest in the winter, reach the high grasslands of the eastern plains of New Mexico. In order for precipitation to occur there must be either a collision between air masses, or a location of broken topography which forces low air masses to alter their flows into an upward direction. These conditions lead to variability and unpredictability in the amount and kind of precipitation.

3

"Rain may be spasmodic and of cloudburst or of gentle drizzle proportions. It may also be in the form of chinook winds or blizzard-like blasts and may take the shape of hail or of dry, searing drought where the rainfall never touches the surface of the earth. ... (an) early growing season may be followed by late frost or by leaf rust or an early Fall frost may be followed by a long Indian summer... ." 4

Evaporation is extremelly high in the northeastern area of New Mexico. Parts of the llano have ^{annual} pan and free-standing evaporation levels of over 60 inches of moisture, which is more than three times the amount of annual rainfall. This high evaporation level leads to the elimination of soil moisture through the top soil layers and reduces the compaction and cementation of soil particles. This exposes uncove~~red~~ soils to the strong winds that serve as transporters of the fine silt and sand. Drought and excessive evaporation were major factors of the 1930's and 1950's dust bowl conditions in northeastern New Mexico.

The temperature is more variable and extreme in the high plains than it is in most other areas of the United States. Warm air currents from the Gulf of Mexico and the humid Mississippi Basin influence the high temperatures and high humidity ranges of the summer while the cold continental air mass from Canada dominates the frigid conditions of the winter. Whereas the summer growing season may be complicated by a lack of moisture when the temperature and evaporation ^{levels} are high, the winters are complicated by the warm chinook winds, which sweep from the Pacific and across the Rocky Mountains, descending onto the plains and causing a brief but rapid rise in temperatures. This causes an immediate surface thaw that generates a muck condition of the soils and the roads of the area, making ^{most} ~~each~~ of the rural farm roads impassable.

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The semi-arid region is difficult to adjust to. If it would remain either dry or humid humans could plan for it and adjust to it. The semi-arid landscape deceives the settler, especially the farmer, into believing that its' rich mantle of gamma grasses are the result of predictable climatic conditions. In the high llano it is sometimes desert and sometimes humid and sometimes a mixture of the two in different parts of the same season. The farmer and the rancher could have adjusted to these trends too, but only if the trends and patterns could have been clearly understood.

The Drought of 1910

The farmers of the northeast filed their claims between 1905 and 1910, with many of them receiving patents on their land between 1910 and 1920. Most of them should have felt the impact of the low rainfall during the reported severe drought and poor moisture conditions between 1908 and 1911. Three interviewees from Sedan, New Home, and Cuates referred to this period as one that forced many who filed to give up the ghost and trace their steps back home. Other pioneers related the problems of rainfall that occurred soon after their arrival, generally reporting that the teens (1910 to 1920) were harsh and the twenties (1920 to 1930) were excellent. ^{^A} check of the weather stations which were operating at this time ⁵ (Bell Ranch, Logan, Levy, Cimarron, Albert, Folsom, Nara Visa, and ~~R~~rementina) did not produce data which supported that there was an extended period of low rainfall during the first half of the decade of 1910 to 1920. Nor do these widely dispersed stations indicate that there were any strong geographical variations. A review of

Key

--- Bell Ranch: San Miguel Co.

— Clayton: Union Co.

*** Tule: Union Co.

Station

(4,550' - 35° 32' N / 109° 36' W)

(5,054' - 36° 25' N / 103° 36' W)

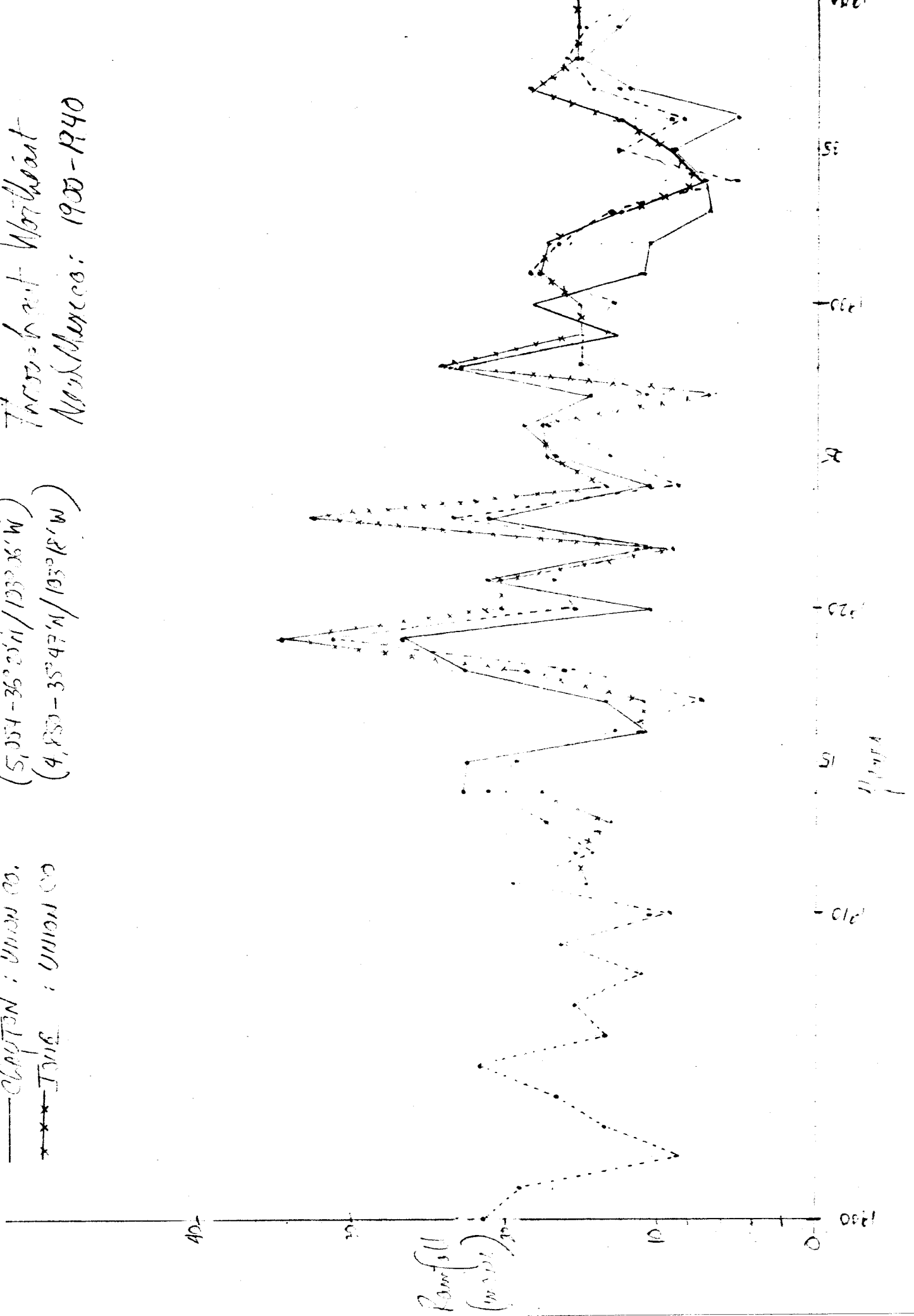
(4,850' - 35° 47' N / 103° 18' W)

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Annual Rainfall Totals

Township Northwest

New Mexico: 1900-1940



date	Ranch	Clayton	Tracy	Sedona	Lozen	Loza	Solano	Abbott
1930	21.37							
31	18.49			49.00'	38.51'	62.52'	57.50	53.40
32	8.71			35°14'N	35°22'N	36°35'N	35°12'N	35°17'N
33	13.87			103°12'W	103°25'W	104°41'W	104°07'W	104°10'W
34	16.34							
35	21.99							
36	13.49							
37	15.75							
38	11.20				12.82			
39	16.09				17.86	18.91		
1910	9.48	13.15			8.29	12.51	9.56	10.51
11	19.34	---	19.55		22.92	22.85	16.68	12.50
12	14.03	---	15.12	17.78	16.65	15.72	14.76	---
13	17.32	---	17.47	16.01	14.41	17.23	18.68	13.90
14	21.13	21.75	17.47	16.89	25.17	20.85	21.88	17.67
15	19.14	21.64	---	19.38	---	19.24	22.71	19.46
16	12.71	11.13	11.31	11.74	---	---	14.47	15.47
17	7.77	13.78	12.12	11.60	---	---	13.82	11.86
18	16.01	22.53	12.44	18.96	---	---	19.14	18.19
19	31.60	29.31	24.52	23.60	---	---	25.86	17.35
1920	15.96	13.45	21.71	12.13	19.34		17.11	14.37
21	16.93	21.73	22.51	17.75	---	---	17.71	17.91
22	11.04	10.75	12.45	10.63	---	15.68	9.66	11.55
23	23.93	21.35	22.52	25.10	28.67	19.75	24.44	19.66
24	8.88	13.81	15.82	12.22	---	13.17	12.32	11.81
25	13.47	16.45	19.41	17.73	15.59	17.37	13.26	19.68
26	17.81	19.31	17.91	14.08	17.50	15.60	12.52	15.70
27	11.12	14.65	7.12	13.55	14.08	---	13.66	13.87
28	15.86	24.26	25.13	16.34	16.57	22.34	19.42	---
29	15.73	13.26	15.56	15.44	16.52	24.26	22.58	21.96
1930	13.69	18.12	15.53	19.39	19.72	22.40	19.97	19.55
31	18.58	11.45	17.92	15.72	17.78	18.65	21.60	13.86
32	16.77	10.98	17.42	15.51	17.14	15.98	---	15.12
33	13.43	7.15	15.32	4.88	8.53	---	12.59	14.14
34	5.65	7.24	3.61	11.53	7.32	11.42	6.97	7.63
35	12.99	9.53	9.24	11.38	11.91	---	16.77	19.29
36	8.97	5.54	12.71	8.43	10.58	9.60	12.12	7.34
37	14.33	12.03	10.53	13.91	18.28	15.78	18.39	13.32
38	16.10	15.48	15.12	15.29	---	17.03	20.70	---
39	15.06	13.13	15.51	12.17	13.63	14.75	15.36	12.85
1940	13.82	10.99	15.33	11.97	10.55	18.07	12.62	14.49

Central Data on Timber

Source:
 Climatological
 Summary
 New Mexico
 Precipitation
 1849-1954
 State of New Mexico
 State Engineer's Office
 Technical Report #6
 1956

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monthly totals for those years did not reveal that there was a poor distribution of rainfall over the growing season. (Temperature data did not indicate the possibility of late Spring or early Fall frost.) The most consistent record of a single year (1910) drought of below 10 inches ~~##~~ of rainfall is at a few locations (Albert, Solano, Nara Visa, Trementina, Bell Ranch) in the southeastern part of the study area. Other places, ~~##~~ including some near the lowest record sites mentioned above, reported adequate rainfall conditions.

Matching data to a ~~memory of events that~~ memory of events that took place seventy-five years ago should not be expected to produce strong correlations. There may have been isolated droughts in the non-reporting portions of the northeast in 1908 and 1909 which may have impacted local communities. Over time a single year could also be construed as a range of years. It must be borne in mind that the interviewees were children or teenagers when this period passed. Drought is such a severe condition to farmers that it would have received a prominent place in the household conversation. Many of the interviewees may be relating more of what they remember hearing than of what they can recall experiencing.

The 1910 dry period, which was 30 to 50 per cent below ⁴⁰normal rainfall, experienced very dry months of May and June. This one-year condition could have been sufficient to promote widespread crop failure and the vacation of certain areas of the northeast. It would have inspired those to leave who were merely speculating on the land and had no intent on permanence. The speculators frequently did not invest heavily in developing the homestead or the house site and would not view the abandonment of the claim as a

severe loss. There were many who were not speculators who had staked their life savings on the move to the Southwest, on the purchase of proper equipment, on the construction of a house, and on the drilling of a water system. Many of these were also heavily indebted to commercial enterprises and financial institutions for credit and loans made against a potential crop. They too would have been severely affected by a poor crop period, and, if employment was unavailable locally to provide some cash inflow, they would have been pressured into vacating the property.

A few families did find seasonal employment (towns or crop picking) during a single season drought which did not affect the entire region. Some would also apply to the U S Land Office for a temporary leave (of up to one year) from their homesteads during a period of adverse weather conditions. They would then be free to move to places where relatives resided which were not in a drought condition and return the following year with hopes that the rainfall would return to normal. In most cases the leaves applied for were granted unless the applicant was being contested for debt payment. In these cases the land title or property would be held by a trustee until the homesteader returned and would demonstrate the ability to recover some of his indebtedness. ⁶ As the 1910 drought occurred prior to the patenting of most of the land, the title records sampled for this survey do not reflect the reported widespread vacation of the land during this period. With the exception of a very few communities, titles and title transfers to the land on the llano begin to demonstrate changes during the decade of 1910 to 1920, and not before.

Rainfall Variations from 1915 to 1940

Data does reflect that following periods of low rainfall the weather oscillates to extremes of high rainfall. Both extremes can devastate a dry-land farmer's crop: one by not providing replacement ground moisture lost through evapotranspiration, and the other by creating excessive runoff and erosion or by ponding on the rolling or flat field surfaces. The period from 1910 to 1915 was characterized by average or above average rainfall. 1916 and 1917 were particularly bad rainfall years followed by an extreme peak of rainfall in 1919. In that year nearly thirty-five inches of rain fell in the Rosebud-Ione area, over ~~###~~ twice the average of 15.5 inches. The oversupply of water was not extremely beneficial to the farmers, particularly when over seven inches of the thirty-five came in September, the month when grain is expected to be in a drying phase for harvest.

A three-year drought cycle, that varied throughout the northeast, began in 1920 and generally bottomed-out by 1922. 1923 was a repeat gusher year with a broad area of the plains receiving over twenty-five inches of rainfall, again with much of the heavy rain occurring during the harvest month of October. Following this year of excessive moisture there was a return to a fairly steady pattern (with local variations) of normal rainfall until 1932.

From 1932 until 1936 rainfall was from 20 to 50 per cent below local norms and the monthly pattern was very unpredictable. Often during this period there would be early Spring rain (March and April) followed by a totally lack of moisture in May and June. ~~#####~~
~~#####~~ The rainfall may have been significantly below normal

in most areas, but if it had come at the time when it would have been beneficial to the planting cycle, a crop may have been salvagable and the soil may have been better stabilized. Instead the climate worked against the farmer, and that factor, along with unwise planting and cropping practices, contributed significantly to the dust storm activity of the northeast. As the wind carried the vital organic top soil away from the plowed fields, it signaled the close of an era of small dry-land farming in New Mexico. As the precipitation rebounded to ~~the~~ high levels in the early 1940's, there were but a few people who were willing to risk the return to quarter-section or half-section farms. The farmers who did survive the "duster days" were able to acquire defaulter land at a premium price. The consolidated lands of the 1940's reflected the transition of the farmer to a rancher-farmer with sufficient holdings to diversify his economy and to prepare for the possible return to the dry-days of the thirties.

The clearly defined drought of 1917, complicated by the blizzard and flu epidemic of the winter of 1918-1919, should have stimulated a large number of land title transfers in 1918 and 1919. Likewise, the severe drought of 1927 should show an increased turnover of land in 1927 and 1928, and the long dry period of the 1930's should be followed by a large number of title changes as well as evidence of the reported consolidation that occurred just before the 1940's. Nearly everyone was in unanimous agreement that the farmers crawled out of the northeast in the 1930's.

A review was made of the 128 patented land parcels in the Prosperous Valley and Star communities to determine if title transfers showed a

D-18

relationship to periods of stress. The data did reveal a large turnover of 45 properties in 1918 and 1919 which should be reflective of the drought and the blizzard and of the flu, all of which was complicated by a severe post war agricultural depression. Throughout the 1920's there were nearly a dozen foreclosures on the land but with no clear cluster immediately following the 1927 drought. The foreclosures varied between local banks, life insurance companies, and the county treasurer. Land title turnovers in 1927 and 1928 only number 18, but this is not necessarily an insignificant amount. One should bear in mind that by the late 1920's there had been a ~~great~~ great deal of consolidation of the land and the number of individual holdings had been sharply reduced. In the dust bowl era from 1933 to 1936 there wasn't a significant number of or pattern to the turnover cases. Most of the land sales did not occur until the onset and return to a humid period at the end of the decade. It appears the sale of land may have been associated with the returned interest in purchasing of the land and the ability of some of the farmers to pay for it following a few years of bumper crops. More so than the loss of the land during the drought period.

A small but significant development in the Prosperous Valley area was the acquisition of seven parcels of land by the Federal Land Bank between 1933 and 1946. This program was created to remove overtaxed land from economic production and to restore a natural grass mantle over it. Grazing wasn't even permitted for many years on the land held in reserve by the Federal Land Bank. This program was especially active throughout the northeast during the 1930's and 1940's, acquiring land that had been stripped by the wind of its' topsoil.

D-19

Flu Epidemic of 1918

All of the interviewees recalled the flu epidemic of the winter of 1918-1919. Several speculated on its' spread and reputed high death rate as a result of the county's refusal to close the schools. It was even reported that whole families were "laid-up" with the flu that year as a result of the farmers' reluctance to stay away from church on Sunday. Regardless of the cause of the contagion, it is apparent that the area east of the Canadian River was especially hard hit by the flu epidemic. It is the only major health problem that was experienced by the homesteaders.

Most of the people who wrote about or spoke about the epidemic called it a "killer flu". They reiterated how everyone in the community lost a loved one, but were hard pressed to provide information about a death in their own families. The main exceptions to this were the interviews with Hispanic families from Garcia Plaza and Cerrito Blanco. I surveyed a large number of community cemeteries (Amistad, Señan, Otto, Pennington, Mosquero, Mills, Abbott, and Grenville) to determine from headstone information if there had been an unusual death rate during the winter of 1918-1919. This procedure had been very effective in Quay County in 1980 in profiling the impact of a smallpox epidemic in 1916. The death rate in these cemeteries of the northeast for that winter did not vary significantly from other years, nor was there any evidence of a target population of the flu (by age or sex). It is not clear if the well-remembered flu epidemic was as severe as it has been reported. More research is required to significantly substantiate it.

The Dust Bowl

No one from the northeast has forgotten or not been informed about the dust bowl of the 1930's. The perception of this hazard remains strong in the minds of the dry-land farmers and most of them predict a return of the long-term drought conditions. Tales of the conditions have been passed along to generations of descendants with each generation adding a slight twist to the tales of submission or survival. The dust bowl period did not begin with impressive aerial displays of top soil. It began with a three-year plunge in rainfall from 1932 to 1934, followed by another three-year oscillation of below normal rainfall conditions before returning in 1937 to a moisture level that was suited to the cropping of the area. There are not many crops that can grow in a rainfall zone with an annual total of less than ten inches. Those that are drought-tolerant (millets, wheat) do not produce an abundant harvest at the end of a period of low rainfall...particularly if the distribution does not suit the growing season. Sedan for example, with nearly five inches of rainfall in 1933, received its' heaviest rainfall (28% of the total) in August, thus providing soil moisture at the inappropriate time of the year.⁷ Lawson Long from Cuates said that "in 1934 we didn't get enough moisture to sprout weeds...we didn't even try to farm".⁸

A major farmer contribution to the dust bowl was not the cultivation of millets, broom corn, wheat, or other cereal and fodder crops. These were harvested by cutting the heads and leaving the roots and stubble in the field until the next plowing. The main cash crop of the homesteaders was beans...commonly called frijoles, Mexican beans, or pintos in the northeastern communities. Hispanics in the canyons were growing pintos as a main subsistence crop prior

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to the arrival of the Anglo farmers. When it was found that it could be grown on the floodplain or on the llano without irrigation, and that it would produce a crop in periods of below normal rainfall, the tableland farmers began to plow up part of their homestead for beans. By 1910 pinto beans became a major field crop in areas of the northeast, surpassing wheat as a dry-farming cash product. The pinto beans also favored the sandy soils which were not very suited to the other crops. Therefore they did well in places like Sedan and New Home, Gladstone-Farley-Mills region, and Prosperous Valley rather than in the clayey soil areas of Amistad, Black Lake, and Tuloso. This created what can be considered as specialization zones or micro-areas that specialized in bean production.

Beans are harvested by hand, usually by the children who would walk along the bean rows yanking out the plants and piling them in a convenient location for threshing. This process of pulling the plants was especially detrimental to any semblance of cementation or binding that may have occurred in the soils (particularly the sandy soils). Bean fields would be exposed for a long time to the elements of heat and wind, and, without any stubble or roots to bind the surface together ^{the soil} ~~they~~ would be ~~at the~~ free to flow with the whims of nature.

Pinto beans received universal agreement from interviewees as the culprit of top soil destruction in northeastern New Mexico. By 1930 all but two of the forty farmers interviewed were involved in pinto bean cropping. Along with cream from the dairy cattle, beans were the main cash flow guarantees and many local farm loans were made upon the acreage a farmer had in beans. The boom in dried pinto beans came with the advent of World War I, when the federal government purchased the crop for shipment to soldiers in

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training camps and in Europe. Prior to the war the pinto bean market reached as high as \$40.00 per ton (2¢ per lb.). Prices during the war ranged from \$400.00 to \$500.00 per ton (20¢ to 25¢ per lb.) and levelled off in the decade of the 1920's to approximately \$200.00 to \$250.00 per ton. This price inflation not only encouraged farmers who were hard pressed with debts to plow up additional land for bean planting, but to also continue re-farming the same plots without permitting a fallow period that is necessary for long-term crop rotation. Overproduction also contributed to the collapse of the soil structure and some of the fields had become wasteland even prior to the prolonged drought period. Even as the drought period approached in 1932, the farmers continued to plow and plant pinto beans, even when there was insufficient moisture to make them sprout. The farmers who were interviewed indicated that they knew in the 30's that it was wrong to continue planting pintos. But they would also state, "what choice did we have?"

As though the drought didn't provide sufficient stress on the dry-land farmer, the financial collapse of the depression complicated his life. The bank failures of 1929 caused a number of farmers to lose their savings, but more importantly it eliminated the loans that were necessary for survival through the poor harvest years. The bank failures also lead to a surge in foreclosures on debts and reduced practically ^{all} of the consumer purchasing power throughout the country. There was little market for agricultural products and prices were severely depressed. The normal way a farmer could compensate for lower prices was to increase the size of the harvest. As this financial crises occurred at the beginning of a climatic crisis which prohibited any farming expansion. The depression was so severe and

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lasted for so many years that it would have been unlikely that the farmer would have had a continuing market for his crops and been able to make debt payments even with good rainfall and with good harvests.

One of the most depressing and frustrating periods for dry farmers must have been between 1931 and 1935 as the rainfall declined, withered crops would have to be plowed back into the soil, and the winds would no longer be viewed as agents of the moisture-bearing clouds but to be cursed for the volume of precious top soil it was carrying away.

Most of the dust bowl era respondents reflect on the period with memories of the giant dusters that would occasionally roll in from the northeast (from Kansas and Oklahoma). They would relate tales of exactly where they were when the reddish-black silt clouds would roll in. The rolling effect of these wind storms, described by the vertical downdraft on the face of the dust cloud and the vacuum-cleaner effect immediately following the passage of the initial downdraft. The big dust clouds, with special names such as "Black Sunday", may not have been as frequent in the northeast as they were exciting and frightening to the pioneer children.

They can remember breathing through wet rags, hanging damp bed sheets over windows and outside doors, lighting lamps at mid-day while the sun is screened-out, dashing for the old dugout or the storm cellar, or just the act of attempting to conduct a normal activity in a lingering haze of silt. The dusters would only last for an hour or so, a lot of them had a shorter passage period than many of the lengths of time it requires to recant some of the current folk tales that have been generated from the experience. Many of the dust

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bowl respondents also remember the unexciting parts of the dust bowl period. They tell stories of walking with their dads and uncles over the wind-swept wasteland, across the fences^s which were now mounds of sand and silt, and through the dried out pastures which were colored only with indigestible thistle as fodder. Several interviewees became very emotional when they recalled their parents anger and defeat to both the natural elements and to the creditors.¹²

The recall of the dust era expands beyond the family to the visits by families who were abandoning their farms to return to the area of their roots, or to be relocated on some government agricultural relief scheme. As the farmers left, the schools, stores, churches, post offices, and elements of a homestead community left with them. Nothing was the same following the desertification of the llano. Although the rainfall was well above normal during the 1940's, there was not a return to the dependence on a few crops. As Christine Brans of Amistad said, "after the dust bowl^w many of us went to cattle and sheep. The sheep had better market (demand) than cattle, the wool would cover all of your expenses and the lambs would be clear profit."¹³ The farmer-homesteaders began the transition to farmer-rancher (or to rancher-farmer), with most making the complete change to rancher by the end of the second drought and dust era of the mid-1950's.

Dust Bowl Relief Efforts

There were two elements of the 1930's dust bowl period which had a memorable effect on the settlers. One was the federal cash purchase and slaughter of the farmer's starving livestock and the other was the make-work program which was designed to provide a minimal income flow to farm families.

After several years of drought there was no forage available on the plains and all cash reserves were depleted which could in normal times be used to purchase imported fodder. Farmers could only watch as stock began to starve. Attempts were made to burn thorns from cactus and cut young thistle, and several would haul broadleaf branches from trees along the forested land breaks. As the drought continued, they were all aware that these were only band-aid approaches to a more severe problem.

The federal government initiated several relief efforts for the farmers that were aimed at encouraging the family to stay on the farm. As the homestead farmer was usually a proud and independent person, he did not respond well to government programs that provided handouts. The usual method or approach to which he responded were cash payments for his goods or services. Stock that was in poor or marginal condition and would not have much value even if the rain-fall and grasses returned, were purchased by the government at very low prices (from \$8.00 to \$12.00 for a mature ^{in 1934 and 1935} beef cow). If the stock was judged too unhealthy for shipment to places back east, they were herded into a corner of the field and shot, their carcasses left in a pile to rot and bleach in the sun. Farmers and their neighbors would be allowed to butcher some of the beasts and families would can some of the meat. The farmer was usually allow-

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ed to keep a few dairy cattle, a team of horses, and a few strong calves. The monies received were usually sufficient to pay taxes (and backtaxes), make payment on other debts, and to purchase food for his family and remaining livestock for the remainder of that year. The cash amount was usually insufficient to carry the farmer over several years.

The federal Works program (WPA) was another method of keeping the farmer on the land. The man would leave the homestead, stay in a camp for a period of time, and for daily labor wages of about \$1.50 per day, he would be a laborer on some public improvement project in the local area. Some of the farmers were fortunate enough to lease their teams and wagons to the government for a fee and receive the care and maintenance of their stock and equipment at government expense. The WPA provided a great deal of resources and energy into constructing public buildings (schools, libraries, community centers), fixing roads and building new ones, or working on dams and drainage projects. There were a number of small community contracted through WPA such as the program of grinding soapweeds into livestock fodder in the community of Cuates.

The government also provided some relocation schemes for the farmer, usually at a newly opened federal irrigation project. Some shifted to the Conchas irrigation scheme in Quay County while others moved far away from the plains into the Rio Grande Valley to the Bosque Farms project near Los Lunas. Some, who were able to sell their land either privately or to have it put into the Federal Land Bank, used the cash to buy into the private irrigation schemes in Colfax County (Maxwell, Springer, Miami, Antelope Valley, and Colmor irrigation projects).

There were government handouts such as soup kitchens at community centers, free portions of grain and feedcake, and some-time groceries were made available. Food preparation and distribution centers were established (and employed local women) at nearly all of the high school buildings in Union County. However, as with all relief programs of the federal government, no one would receive aid unless they could prove they qualify for it. One interviewee summed up the attitude of the farmer to the handout program. "We damned near died out there in the shack during the drought, but none of our neighbors would ever know how bad off we were. If our neighbors weren't going to be informed, then why in the hell should we tell a bunch of strangers in town?"

1 Vance Johnson, Heavens Tableland (New York: Farrer and Strauss, 1947), pp. 45-48.

2 Much of this information was made available for this report as a result of the gracious cooperation of Sally Trigg, Carrie Archuleta, and Floyd Cordova of the Harding County Abstract and Title Company. Mr. Lee Van Pelt provided us with office space and free use of his books in the Union Title and Loan Company in Clayton.

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3 Kraenzel,, Great Plains, p. 13.

4 Kraenzel, Great Plains, p. 14.

5 Climatological Summary of New Mexico, Precipitation 1849-1954, from the State Engineer Office, Tech Report #6, 1956.

6 Interview with Mrs. Lucille Isaacs Roberts, daughter of a pioneer merchant family of Clayton, Oct. 24, 1985.

7 Climatological Summary of New Mexico, p. 395.

8 Interview with Lawson Long from Cuates on November 6, 1985

9 Interview with Albert Bada of Gladstone, Dec. 4, 1985.

10 Interview with Christine Brams of Amistad, Oct. 22, 1985.

11 Interview with Lawson Long, Nov. 6, 1985.

12 Experiences related by Vannie Reed of Mt. Dora (Nov. 6, 1985), Helen Crosby Beckner of Pennington (Nov. 23, 1985), and Albert Bada of Gladstone (Dec. 4, 1985).

13 Interview with Christine Brams, Oct. 22, 1985.

14 From discussion of the depression and the dust bowl with Mr. Pete Shields of Hayden and Amistad, Oct. 22, 1985.