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Happyland: a history of the “dirty thirties” in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937

McManus, Curtis R.

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“Dirty Thirties” is the sobriquet commonly applied to the agricultural crisis in the drylands of southern Saskatchewan that coincided with the Great Depression, and it is often assumed that prior to this period healthier, normal conditions prevailed. In *Happyland*, Curtis McManus contends that the “Dirty Thirties,” as we understand the term to mean agricultural devastation, drought, misery, starvation, and land abandonment, actually began much earlier and were connected only peripherally to the Depression itself.

McManus’s study begins in 1908, the year in which the south plains of Saskatchewan were settled. The first of the devastating droughts struck the south plains in 1914, and this set in motion patterns that continued with dulling monotony until 1937. Between 1917 and 1924, in particular, as many as 30,000 people abandoned the south and west plains of the province due to agricultural failure caused mainly by drought but also by faulty farming techniques that stripped and pulverized the soil, making it even more vulnerable; thousands more fled during the “Dirty Thirties” proper.

The book’s title is an ironic reference to Happyland, a rural municipality in the drought-ravaged dryland district. McManus has mined the rarely consulted records of rural municipalities, as well as government documents, ministerial correspondence, local community histories, newspapers, and publications of relevant government departments, to tell this story that has not yet been told—a story of a quarter-century of stubborn persistence, but also of absurdity, despair, social dislocation, moral corrosion, and inconsistent and often inept government policy. And, thanks to McManus’s rare and welcome blend of sound scholarship and living, breathing prose, it is a gripping and evocative story as well.

CURTIS R. McMANUS is a writer and historian. He teaches history at Lakeland College in Lloydminster, Alberta.