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Introduction

The 1930s in America—the Dirty Thirties—was a transforming decade, especially in the Great Plains, the one-fifth of the land that makes up its central heartland. There was severe drought and economic depression, the combination causing one of the greatest social disruptions in peacetime for the entire nation. National unemployment approached 50 percent and more, price deflation caused money to become extremely dear, and farmers destroyed livestock rather than lose money trucking animals to auction houses for pennies on the dollar in sales.

The federal partnership with American citizens changed enormously as President Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to meet the new needs of a nation and its farm population faced with the loss of their land, bankruptcy, and even starvation in a dry, desiccated landscape. His New Deal programs initiated reforms in federal social, economic, and conservation policies, many of which remain in place today.

In dramatic moves, New Dealers ended the practice of giving public

lands away or selling them very cheaply—a practice as old as the nation itself—and reversed that to preserving the remaining federal lands and buying back some 11.3 million acres of overgrazed, mismanaged rangeland and farmland across the nation. Out of those land purchases came today's national grasslands, twenty reserves in the Great Plains and the West, totaling almost four million acres.

The national grasslands were the result of an unprecedented social revolution, paying distressed farm families for submarginal land that could no longer support them and attempting to resettle them in subsidized homes in small, new towns; on subsistence homesteads of twenty and forty acres; or in newly created “garden cities.” However, like many New Deal ideas, this reform was hastily planned and executed and tragically underfunded. Originally, seventy-five million submarginal acres were identified for purchase, but bureaucratic shuffling, resistance from conservative members of Congress, and lack of funding cut the program back. The 11.3 million acres eventually purchased came under nine different federal agencies before finally being dispersed to state and federal agencies and Indian reservations. The U.S. Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), received about 3.8 million acres, and on June 20, 1960, they were designated as nineteen national grasslands. A twentieth national grassland was added in California in 1991.

From the very beginning, the national grasslands' concept has been a stepchild within the USDA. They are most often managed along with national forests, which receive more attention, funding, and staff. Although there is excellent royalty income from oil, gas, and coal leases on some national grasslands, plus income from the sale of cattle grazing permits, that money goes into state, county, and federal treasuries and does not contribute to the operating budgets of the grasslands.

There have been continuing debates on correct grasslands management, whether for private grazing, public recreational use, wildlife preservation, or a combination of all these. About every ten to fifteen years, an extensive public process provides new management plans, and this planning has recently been completed for a number of grasslands. There is also a continuing debate over the charge per acre for grazing permits for ranchers, which

are traditionally much lower than fees charged for private lands.

Under a 1960 mandate, the national grasslands are to be managed for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed protection, and wildlife and fish management purposes. They are all open for many public uses, such as hiking and camping, picnics, and “windshield tours” by visitors. They are marked with signs, and roads are open for public usage. Inexpensive but highly detailed maps are available at ranger stations. Best of all, there are no crowds on the national grasslands. Visitors are often alone in a seemingly infinite expanse of grass and sky where the solitude and beauty take time to assimilate.

The grasslands are largely undiscovered treasures of an important national heritage. Their recent history encompasses the exciting days of cattle drives from Texas and pioneer settlement on the plains. Their beauty is subtle but enchanting. The wildlife is extensive with hundreds of species of animals and plants, and there are constantly changing scenes as the seasons progress.

This book is presented in three parts. Part 1, the history of the national grasslands, begins with a look at drought on the Great Plains and in the West, how human intervention affected the land, and the early ideas to correct severe range problems of the 1930s. Next is a short history of land development in America including ideas on proper land use and state experiments on land utilization that foreshadowed the New Deal relief programs. An extensive and detailed history of the social, political, and economic revolution of the New Deal, leading directly to the designation of the national grasslands, is given in chapter 3. In chapter 4, a case study of how one grassland developed gives a detailed look at conditions in the 1930s, the land purchases, and the infrastructures that evolved. Chapter 5 discusses the challenges of restoring and managing the newly bought public lands and creating laws to guide their management as drought and the Depression were ending in the 1940s. Part 2 is a detailed description of terrain, wildlife, flora, public facilities, and important features of each grassland, including Grasslands National Park of Canada. Part 3 provides analysis of grassland issues, delivers conclusions about them, and presents future alternatives.