



South Dakota
Department of Agriculture
Division of Resource Conservation & Forestry

Temper the Winds

By
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My question is this: Must man reinvent the wheel every time he turns around? Do we learn from our mistakes, or must we go through another Dirty Thirties before we learn to protect and nurture our land?

In the early 1800's, European settlers started to venture into the Dakotas. Early explorers first saw the prairie as a sea of tall grass that reached the stirrups of a mounted equestrian. This vast land of grass supported herds of buffalo too large to count. It teemed with wildlife like prairie wolves and grizzly bears. Lewis and Clark wrote in their journals that bears were a hazard to travel on the Missouri River. They also saw herds of elk and deer.

By the mid-1800's settlers started to plow under the native grasses to grow wheat and other agricultural crops. These settlers came from areas where land had to be claimed from virgin forest to create cropland. On the prairie, plowing the sod was all they needed before planting their crops.

As the Homestead Act of 1862 began, more settlers moved to the Dakotas. Each new settler turned virgin prairie under for crops without regard to the consequences. Some of the newcomers were farsighted enough to plant trees, but most didn't. The U.S. Congress believed tree planting on the plains was so important that it passed the Timber Culture Act of 1873. This act allowed settlers to claim 160 acres if they planted 40 acres of the 160 acres to trees. Some eastern South Dakota tree claims survived, but most didn't due to lack of care or soil suitability problems.

Settlers farmed most of the land in eastern South Dakota, by the late 1920s. However, disaster was just around the corner. With the dry years of 1929 and 1930, the fragile land started blowing, and at times turned the sky black with dust.



Credit: D.L. Kernodle. Library of Congress



These furious storms buried buildings, fences, cars, or anything in its path under tons of once productive topsoil. Erosion stripped of grass from never plowed areas, causing more topsoil to blow. Crops could not grow and farmers lost their land. Many settlers moved to other areas of the county to make a living.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Prairie States Forestry Project in 1934. This project resulted in the planting of 210 million trees in six states between 1935 and 1942 using mainly local labor. With a changing economy from the start of World War II and a break in the drought and the prairie started recovering its productivity. People could again make a living farming the land. People started to move back and towns started to prosper. Who is to say that planting millions of trees didn't play a significant role in the recovery?



Photo: courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service

Girls hand hoeing young trees in 1939