

# Surviving the Dirty Thirties

## Recipe for Hard Times

**C**ombine major drought, high summer temperatures, too much land under cultivation, and strong prairie winds. Throw in rock-bottom wheat prices and the Great Depression, and you have the recipe for the Dirty Thirties.

In the 1930s, winds whipped Kansas topsoil into sun-darkening clouds. Wheat crops withered. Not everyone suffered equally—many farms pulled in marginal harvests and stayed afloat—but times were lean all around.

President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs helped local communities weather these hard times. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) hired local men for a range of construction projects, including many bridges in Barton County (seven of them crafted from native limestone) and a number of municipal buildings, like the auditorium in Great Bend and the high school in St. John. The WPA funded regional artists as well—a legacy that endures in the 1938 "Wheat Center" mural in the Hoisington post office.



**WPA Bridge Keystone**

Ted Lee Eubanks



Shelterbelt/Kansas State Historical Society

### Tree-planting Tradition

During the 1930s, farmers received federal funds to plant and maintain shelterbelts to reduce soil erosion. However, planting trees was nothing new to Kansas farmers. In 1865, Kansas became the first state to create a tree bounty, offering 50 cents an acre for every five acres of trees planted.



Stone fence/Ted Lee Eubanks

### Motion and Change

Though local limestone had largely fallen out of construction use by the 1920s as easier-to-use materials became available, the Great Depression sparked a resurgence. Local WPA bridge projects combined native limestone with meticulous workmanship, marrying function and enduring beauty.



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