

# Lessons from 'Worst Hard Time'

**W**ORST Hard Time," a book by Timothy Egan, describes what may have been the greatest run-up and crash in U.S. agriculture's history. The decades preceding the Great Depression and the dust storms sound like recent years. Great technological advances. Skyrocketing grain prices. A go-go economy.

Consider these excerpts:

## OUR SAY

"In 1910, the price of wheat stood at 80 cents a bushel, good enough for anyone who had outwitted a few dry years to make enough money to get through another year and even put

something away.

"Five years later, with world grain supplies pinched by the Great War, the price had more than doubled. Farmers increased production by 50%. When the Turkish navy blocked the Dardanelles, they did a favor for dryland wheat farmers that no one could have imagined. Europe had relied on Russia for export grain. With Russian shipments

blocked, the United States stepped in and issued a proclamation to the Plains: Plant more wheat to win the war.

"[A homesteader] first hoped to make just enough from his half section to feed his family. But within a few years of arriving, he was part of the great frenzy to turn over ground and get out as much wheat as possible to sell abroad. If he could produce 15 bushels an acre on his half section, that meant 4,800 bushels at harvest. It cost him about 35 cents per bushel to grow. At a selling price of \$2 a bushel, his profit was nearly \$8,000 a year.

"In 1917, this was a fortune. A factory worker on the Ford assembly line made only \$5 a day, about one-eighth the take-home pay of a prosperous wheat farmer. The self-described wheat queen of Kansas, Ida Watkin, told everyone she had a profit of \$75,000 on her 2,000 acres of bony soil in 1926 — bigger than the salary of any baseball player other than Babe Ruth, more money than the president of the United States made ...

"Railroad men and pamphleteers had promised that the simple act of tearing up prairie sod would cause atmospheric disturbances, enough to vary weather pattern. Now that the prairie sod was fully torn up — by God, here was the rain ...

"It was a game of chance called 'trying to hit a crop.' One suitcase farmer broke 32,000 acres in southeast Kansas in 1921. Four years later he plowed twice that amount. The banks seldom said no. Borrow \$5,000 and payments were less than \$35 a month. Any man with a John Deere and a half section could cover that nut. If it was hubris, or 'tempting fate,' as some of the church ladies said, well the U.S. government did not see it that way. The government had already issued its official view of the rapid churning of ancient prairie sod. 'The soil is the one indestructible, immutable asset that the nation possesses,' the federal Bureau of Soil proclaimed as the grasslands were transformed. 'It is the one resource that cannot be exhausted, that cannot be used up.'

What are the lessons here? I see several. Beware of good times. Bankers, politicians and writers can be wrong. And everything — yes, everything — can change.



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