Separation and Sorrow: A Farm Woman's Life, 1935–1941

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Between 1936 and her death in 1955, Martha Schmidt Friesen kept a daily diary, recording the events in her life as a farm woman living near Kendall, Kansas.[1] In her diary, she recorded the day-to-day workings of the farm, the activities of her family, and her own activities as she and her husband, George, attempted to keep their family enterprise afloat. Martha Friesen's diary is particularly rich for the years from 1936 to 1941, when southwestern Kansas was gripped not only by the Great Depression but also by the Dust Bowl. These were hard times for Martha Friesen; children and neighbors left and the farm faltered, largely because of stresses imposed by the drought and the economic depression. A recurring theme in her diary is loneliness and isolation. Martha Friesen's writings illustrate the impact of farm family dissolution upon those mothers left behind and suggest that studies of rural community dissolution should begin with the household and the family, where those losses were most immediately experienced.

Martha Elizabeth Schmidt was born in McPherson County, Kansas, on February 17, 1884. On September 1, 1904, she married George Friesen. Although Martha was an Evangelical, she married into the Mennonite community of McPherson County. After the birth and subsequent death of their first child in 1905, the couple moved to Lamont township, Hamilton County, Kansas, in April of 1906. They migrated west with several other families from McPherson County's Mennonite community. Mem-

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1. I would like to thank Thelma Warner and Verna Gragg of Syracuse, Kansas, for their generous sharing of this diary, and their permission to conduct research using these writings. I would also like to thank Lorrie Mizuno, my student assistant, for her hours of excellent work aiding me in this project. All names used in the discussion of this diary are pseudonyms, at the request of the diary's owners.

bers of the "Menno Community," as they called their settlement, began leaving the area within four years, bound for the city of Hutchinson and rural Stanton County, in Kansas, as well as the San Luis Valley, in Colorado.[2] Martha and George remained, however, and at the time of her death in 1955, they were the last remnants of that earlier migration from McPherson County. On their farm in Hamilton County, Martha bore and raised three children, Sally, William, and Margaret.[3]

In 1936, when her diary began, Martha Schmidt Friesen was 52, and the mother of adult children.[4] She and George managed the family farm, while their married daughter, Sally, lived on a neighboring farm with her husband and two children. Her second daughter, Margaret, was often working away from home, and her son, Will, found what temporary employment he could in surrounding communities and farther afield. Martha and George operated a fairly substantial farm. In 1935 the agricultural census noted that their land amounted to 1200 acres, with 100 acres in wheat, 80 in broom corn, 25 in sweet sorghums, 15 in sudan grass, and 400 fallow. They sold $75 worth of milk and $350 worth of poultry, and made 100 pounds of butter. They owned 144 hens, 1 horse, 4 milk cows, 9 other cattle, and an unspecified number of swine. They owned one tractor and one combine. Theirs was a large farm for the community; of the 91 farm households in the township, only 15 ran larger operations.[5]

Martha Friesen's work kept her largely in the home, while George's work encompassed the fields. Her notes on the work routine of the farm showed that George's time was largely devoted to tending crops, maintaining machinery, running errands in town, and caring for the hogs. Martha devoted her time to churning, ironing, cooking and baking, washing, sewing, and preserving food. She also ventured into the barnyard and beyond to care for her large flock of chickens, draw water, and chop and gather wood. The couple shared a few other chores, such as milking, tending calves, and watering trees.[6] Martha's entry for November 15, 1937, provides a good example of her daily work routine:

2. F. L. Vandergrift, "New Mennonite Settlement in Kansas," *The Earth* 7/10 (October 1910):8–9.

3. Obituary, *Syracuse Journal,* August 18, 1955, 4.

4. When I say that the diary "began" in 1936, I mean that the preserved portion of the diary dates to that year. It is unclear what year Martha began keeping a diary. Her oldest daughter believes that Martha began keeping a record of the weather somewhat earlier, and that by the mid-1930s it had evolved into a full-fledged diary, recording the family's activities as well as temperatures and other such information.

5. State of Kansas, Statistical Rolls, Agricultural Census, Hamilton County, Lamont Township, 1935. Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

6. Manuscript diaries, 1936–1941. By permission of Thelma Warner and Verna Gragg, Syracuse, Kansas.

> Mo patches the Mr. Blue & white stripes. Cuts out her speckeled Apron & sews part of it. She churns after supper. Patches Overalls for her Mr. And patches & darns socks for herself & her companion.

She also recorded that she collected 20 eggs, and cooked three meals.

> Pancakes Bacon & Eggs for breakfast Dinner Gravy Steak Cabbage & Applesauce for desert. And make the dinner complete with Raisin bread. Supper fresh fried Spuds left over Steak and Apricots for desert.[7]

Hers was a busy routine, dictated by the changing rhythms of farm life throughout the year.

Interestingly, her usual activities during the Dust Bowl years did not include gardening.[8] There is no mention of that activity in the diary, but abundant evidence that the family purchased large amounts of produce rather than grow their own. In June of 1935 at the height of the summer the family's grocery purchases included tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, peas, peaches, strawberries, string beans, potatoes, cantaloupe, cabbage, and bananas.[9] That the family purchased its fruit and vegetables, rather than growing them, reflected two realities. First, they were living in a semi-arid, Great Plains environment, where gardening without irrigation of some sort was often difficult even in good years. Additionally, the family was situated in the center of the Dust Bowl, where adverse conditions often destroyed even the best-tended gardens. The combination of dust, high winds, and scorching heat provided less than optimal conditions for family production of fruit and vegetables. In Stanton County, directly to the south of the Friesen farm, the agricultural extension agent estimated that the drought and dust storms reduced the output of vegetables on county farms to 10 percent of the normal yield in 1935.[10] It is perhaps unsurprising that Martha Friesen directed her productive efforts toward other chores.

The dirt and high winds plaguing southwestern Kansas during the 1930s handicapped Martha Friesen's homemaking efforts as well. These

7. Martha Friesen referred to herself in the early portions of the diary as "Mo," and often referred to George as "Po." She generally wrote about her daily activities in the third person. Friesen, Nov. 15, 1937.

8. In her article, "Sidelines and Moral Capital: Women on Nebraska Farms in the 1930s," Deborah Fink noted the importance of women's gardening efforts to the survival of hard-pressed family farms. (In Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1988], 60–61.)

9. Friesen family, manuscript farm accounts for 1935. By permission of Thelma Warner and Verna Gragg, Syracuse, Kansas.

10. Stanton County Agricultural Extension, Kansas Annual Report, 1935, p. 136.

conditions significantly increased her housekeeping burdens. A day's chores could be easily undone by a few minutes or a few hours of dust. The spring of 1937 subjected area families to dirt storm after dirt storm, and Martha Friesen's family was no exception. On March 19, she wrote: "to-day we're drying the remains of our clothes in the house & some of them ought to be washed over & will have to be." Barely two weeks later, she lamented that the dust had "blowed hard after midnight when we got up this morning house was all sifted full of dust. Couldn't see that Mo had it all cleaned up yesterday."[11] These conditions often forced Martha and her family break the Sabbath in order to catch up on chores, much to her regret. As she commented, "[p]eople work when ever the dust don't blow. Even if they break the Sabath [sic]."[12] This constant round of cleaning and dust storms was emotionally, as well as physically, taxing. During that terrible spring of 1937, Martha complained of the unending toil involved in keeping her home minimally clean.

> Mo has seen a Blue Monday all day long so far. She feels like a Black Thunder Cloud looks. First thing after breakfast she cleans dust then she gets bluer and bluer cries & cries & cries some more Then when this Terific Dust Storms [sic] aproaches [sic]. She thinks things are as worse as they can get.[13]

Homemaking, even under normal conditions, involved great expenditures of time and energy; the abnormal conditions of the 1930s forced Martha Friesen to work well beyond levels she considered reasonable.

Dust and drought complicated Martha Friesen's work in other ways as well. She often milked and cared for the family cows, tasks that took on new dimensions as conditions worsened. The Friesen's pasture land was evidently decimated by the drought, and the cows wandered in search of forage. When it came time to milk the cows, Martha had to find the animals, and then milk them in the fields. Tending to a cow in a draw full of blown dirt was a horrendous task. "She walked till the draw east of here and milked the red Cow. She sunk down in the blow piles 1 foot deep in the draw, while milking the Cow." It was an unexpected treat to find one of the cows actually near the house, where Martha could do the milking "on a stool, instead of sitting on her shins."[14] Not surprisingly, Martha commented favorably on those days when no dust blew. In the spring of 1938 she wrote: "well one feels like singing this song now for

11. Friesen, March 19, 1937 and April 3, 1937.
12. Friesen, May 2, 1937.
13. Friesen, May 10, 1937.
14. Friesen, November 24, 1937.

several days. What the farmers are getting now is a farm relief since dust has not blowed for 4 days . . . It looks very cheerfull one can rejoice. One has a new lease on life."[15] Dustless days provided a welcome respite from the complications of life in southwestern Kansas.

Despite the stresses of the decade, Martha Friesen continued to participate fully in economic life of the family farm. She regularly preserved a large portion of the family's food, canning produce that could be purchased inexpensively during the summer months. Between August and November of 1937, Martha preserved nearly 20 gallons of peaches, almost 18 gallons of tomatoes, 28 jars of jams and jellies, a gallon of peach butter, 16 jars of dill and bread and butter pickles, and 49 cans of assorted fruits.[16] She also regularly processed pork and rendered lard from the family swine.

Perhaps most importantly, Martha was responsible for a major money-making venture, the poultry flock. Records kept by daughter Margaret, studying for business school, attest to the fruitfulness of Martha's efforts. In 1935 her sales of eggs brought in $221.85, while her sales of chickens to neighbors and a local restaurant provided an additional $42.15. After paying the cost of chicken feed, Martha's work in the barnyard produced a profit of $181.91, enough to make a significant inroad into the family's grocery bill, which totaled $264.28 that year. By contrast, George's sales of wheat in 1935 brought in only $134.00.[17] Martha Friesen's income was certainly an important source of family security, since crop failures during the late 1930s sometimes plagued as many as 1000 acres of the family farm.[18]

In many ways Martha Friesen was the typical midwestern farm woman of her day; she was hard working and God-fearing, as well as an economic and emotional pillar for her family. In a very important way, however, her life deviated from the scholarly, as well as the popular, image of the midwestern farming woman. Recent literature has placed women like Martha in the center of networks of women, both kin and neighbors,

15. Friesen, February 17, 1938.

16. Friesen, August 1937–November 1937.

17. These numbers are calculated from the family farm accounts. Martha Friesen did not keep track of her own profits. For a detailed account of the importance of egg money to midwestern farm women during the 1930s, see Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). See also Dorothy Schwieder and Deborah Fink, "Plains Women: Rural Life in the 1930s," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1988):79–88. Martha Friesen's experiences deviated significantly from those of the women discussed in *Open Country* because she was unable to stretch her egg money to cover the cost of her grocery purchases. This is probably attributable to the necessity of purchasing, rather than growing, vegetables and fruit at the height of the Dust Bowl. Friesen family, farm accounts, 1935.

18. State of Kansas, Agricultural Census, Hamilton County, Lamont Township, 1935–1941.

who shared the burdens of farm work. Their lives have been interpreted largely through the expectation and belief that most farm women belonged to a community of women working toward similar goals.[19] For Martha Friesen, however, dealing with the conditions of the 1930s meant accepting periodic losses of the kin networks that had made both her working life and emotional world rewarding and complete.

Martha Friesen's primary social and working contacts were with her children. As a young wife, she had travelled away from McPherson County, and her own mother, brothers, and sisters. Those neighbors who had travelled with the Friesens from McPherson County were in the process, even as early as 1910, of moving on to other locations. Martha Friesen's diary reveals that in 1936, her primary social contacts, as well as her primary working contacts, were with her adult daughters, Sally and Margaret, and her husband, George.

In 1936 and 1937, Martha's adult children often visited or lived in the Friesen home, which was the center of Martha's working and social life. Margaret moved in and out of her parents' home as jobs came and went. While she was home, she often baked, sewed, and ironed with her mother, and performed other essential housekeeping tasks. On March 25, 1937, for example, Martha was feeling unwell. It was, however, the day after a dust storm, and there was much work to be done. Martha commented that she "cleaned up dust some in the fore-noon. Margaret did most all of it. . . . I was only a shadow most all fore-noon & most of the after-noon that's why I couldn't get all our Bedrooms cleared up."[20] Another of Martha's helpers was her oldest daughter, Sally, who lived nearby. It was not uncommon for Martha to comment that "Sally & kids wher here all day."[21] Sally came to visit with her mother and sister and to share in the family's work. Sally helped her mother with her chores, but Martha also aided Sally in her pursuits. As Martha wrote, "Sally & kidies stayed here all day, & sewed Patsy [her granddaughter] a dress & sewed up her quilt."[22] Even Will, whose work usually did not intersect with Martha's, could be a significant help. "Will got the Cows Milked them & fed the Calf. while Mo cleaned dust o how I did apricate that for

19. See Mary Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women, the Rural Community, and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900 to 1940," in Haney and Knowles, *Women and Farming,* 339–355; Fink, *Open County, Iowa;* John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly* 33/5 (Winter 1981):535–57; and Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 97, 173.

20. Friesen, March 25, 1937.

21. Friesen, November 2, 1936.

22. Friesen, January 25, 1937.

once after doing all that before getting Breakfast."[23] Martha's writings in 1936 and early 1937 provide a picture of the traditional kin-centered community of farming women, working and socializing together while watching the children.

The circumstances of the 1930s conspired to disrupt the kin networks of area women. The residents of Hamilton County numbered 3328 in 1930; by 1940 their ranks had diminished to 2645, a 21 percent decrease in the total number of residents. The farm population dwindled even more rapidly, falling by 31 percent.[24] What was happening throughout Hamilton County was happening on an even larger scale in Lamont township, as permanent residents, such as the older Friesens, watched family, friends, and neighbors join this stream of outward migration. In 1930, 269 people lived in Lamont township. Five years later, the population had actually risen to 295. Most of the decade's depopulation came in the period between 1936 and 1940. In 1940 only 159 people made their home in Lamont township.[25] Even Martha and George Friesen, rooted though they were, contemplated a move in 1937. On the morning of May 19, 1937, George stormed into the house and told Martha, "pack your Suit Case lets go, and get clear out of the Country. Moving along some where the River isn't far enough." However, they settled for a visit to Oregon, and resisted the urge to relocate. They owned land and could not easily move. Depopulation throughout the Dust Bowl was somewhat selective, affecting the young adults and children of stricken counties more severely than their older residents. This same phenomenon affected the Friesen family, and deeply troubled Martha.

While the Friesen children periodically left the family farm and local community in 1936 and early 1937, by mid-1937 they began to move farther from their home and their mother. Will continued his migrations to find work, leaving in early 1937 to work for the Civilian Conservation Corps.[26] Before the year was over, he was bound for the West Coast, traveling as far as California and Oregon. There he worked as a migrant

23. Friesen, June 26, 1937.

24. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population,* v. III, pt. 1, and *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population,* v. II, pt. 3.

25. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture,* vs. 27, 30, 32 (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1931, 1936, 1941).

26. The Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program, provided jobs for unemployed young men. Their parents had to be recipients of federal relief money. Program participants planted forests, created fire roads, and worked on other conservation projects. In southwestern Kansas, they often constructed state lakes and other water projects. The young men were paid a small salary, and the CCC sent approximately $25 per month to the men's families for their support. Paul Conkin, *The New Deal* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1975), 45.

farm laborer, in logging camps, and in sawmills. Margaret, who had largely worked within a close radius of the family farm, went to work in Hutchinson, many hours away by car. Perhaps the most disruptive event occurred when Sally, her husband, and their two children moved to Oregon. They had been trying to make a living farming, but the economy and the environment destroyed their hopes of establishing a successful farm in Hamilton County. As Sally later wrote, they "couldn't get away fast enough" from the dust and hard times in southwestern Kansas.[27]

Will, Sally, and Margaret's moves represented a significant challenge in Martha Friesen's life. Although she never complained about this issue specifically in her diary, her work no doubt became more onerous. She lost her daughters' company as she moved through her daily chores, and no other woman, neighbor or kin, replaced them. Martha occasionally travelled to a neighboring farm to quilt with other women, but these events were few and far between. Her only companion at work was the radio, which was frequently disrupted by the static electricity generated by dust storms. This lack of help around the house had especially serious consequences because of Martha's poor health. She often complained of feeling "tuff," which could encompass any number of ills. Rheumatism often left her "cripled up" after a day of washing.[28] She experienced a roaring in her ears and dizziness on a regular basis, and suffered from pain caused by bad teeth. A local dentist removed all of her teeth in September of 1938, but that measure failed to resolve completely her dental problems. Her dentures never fit properly, and she spent a good deal of time nursing a sore mouth and gums.[29] Without her daughters to spell her at her daily work, she suffered through her routine as best she could.

She also suffered emotionally from the forced separation from her children. Their centrality to her thoughts and concerns was easily visible as she recorded each day's events. She wrote letters to each of her children three or four times a week, and faithfully noted the letters she had received. With the receipt of each letter, she noted the name and location of the sender, as if by naming and placing each child, she could keep track of him or her and keep that child safe. An unattributed poem, tucked into the pages of 1937 diary, captured her concerns about her absent children.

I think ofttimes as the night draws nigh,
Of an old house on the hill,

27. Questionnaire response, Sally Friesen to Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Fall 1988.
28. Friesen, May 14, 1937.
29. Friesen, September–November, 1938.

Of a yard all wide, and blossom-starred
Where the children played at will.
And when the night at last came down,
Hushing the merry din;
Mother would look all around and ask,
"Are all the children in?"
'Tis many and many a year since then,
And the old house on the hill
No longer echoes with childish feet,
And the yard is still, so still.
But I see it all as the shadows creep,
And though many years have been
Since then I can hear our mother ask,
"Are all the children in?"

Naming and placing her children, whether they were in Hutchinson, Kansas, Duff, Nebraska, or Dexter, Oregon, seems to have reassured Martha her that they were indeed "in," and safe.

Despite these comforting rituals, the absence of Sally, Margaret, and Will tortured Martha. Their periodic departures were occasions for mourning. The box of Post Toasties sitting on the dining room table reminded Martha of Will's departure for Duff, Nebraska. "And another very lonely day to content with since the vacancy of Will Our Toastie eater we certenly miss him. All the emptyness is staring Mo in the face ever where she goes. . . . Mo cant keep from sobing."[30] When Martha and George took Margaret back to Hutchinson after a visit home, she experienced the same emotions. "Ma had a lump in her throat that she couldnt swallow eyes where full of mist that she couldnt see the way ahead. It took her all that day to come out of such state of mind."[31] Sally's departure for Oregon was particularly trying: "They packed all fore-noon and at 2 P.M. They where bound for Oregon. And now the junkie Basement and Hydron the little [children's] Battle field where they allways fought their battles, look so very lonesome."[32] She and George were still feeling their loss two months later when Martha wrote, ". . . the lonesome couple enduring the Dust Bowl rolled in the Hay at 9:30."[33] The Friesen home was too quiet without the reassuring sights and sounds of children and grandchildren.

30. Friesen, July 16, 1937.
31. Friesen, January 2, 1939.
32. Friesen, September 7, 1937.
33. Friesen, November 9, 1937. Martha generally used the term "rolled in the hay" for going to bed at night.

Martha's work schedule magnified her loneliness, because her duties as homemaker allowed her less mobility than George's work in the fields. Her chores tied her to home and hearth, while her husband's work often took him into Syracuse or Kendall. Days spent at home alone were often "very blue & cloudy."[34] As the decade passed, it became more and more unlikely that her loneliness would be cured by unexpected visits from neighbors. During the particularly dirty summer of 1937, Martha recorded George's observations about the depopulation of their community.

> We two where reading and disguessing this Dust bowl. And how things would be, when we pulled ourselves up, by the Roots, and planted them on some different place. George told all about Oren Joureys Machinery, was all by its only self all blowed full of Dust. And he says that's, the way ours il be when we're gone. And such mornfull look as he had on his face.[35]

The older Friesens were not just alone in their own home, but increasingly alone in their township as well. The sadness George felt may well have been increased by his religious convictions. As a Mennonite, he expected to live within a tight grouping of those of his faith. The loss of friends and neighbors meant a loosening of religious bonds as well.

The remainder of the Great Depression was filled with the comings and goings of the Friesen family. An important cause of Martha's loneliness and depression was removed in April of 1939, when Sally and her family came back to Kansas to stay. George Friesen had located a new farm for them, and they made the long journey back, despite Sally's misgivings. As she later commented, "[w]hen we came back to Kansas, oh, it was terrible. I never dreaded anything so bad in all my life. But [my husband] wanted to come back. . . . I wanted him to have what he wanted. So I just didn't say anything, and we came back."[36] Sally and her family visited the Friesen farm on a regular basis, and the Friesens made them regular gifts of milk and eggs. Margaret and Will, however, remained elsewhere, and Martha was still often alone in the house. As she wrote one August day, "this was a lonesome and quiet day. only Wayne called and just talked a minute or two."[37] The farmhouse was the center of Martha Friesen's world, and despite the periodic presence of one daughter and her grandchildren, that world seemed a little empty.

The pressures of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression began to ease in 1940. There was enough moisture to break nearly 10 years of drought,

34. Friesen, November 10, 1936.
35. Friesen, July 20, 1937.
36. Interview with Sally Friesen, Syracuse, Kansas, June 9, 1989; Friesen, April 2, 1939.
37. Friesen, August 10, 1939.

and farming families began to earn a living again. Individuals and families who had migrated to the West Coast began to return home to Kansas. William Friesen, however, remained in Oregon, working in a logging camp. He would never come home. On May 21, 1941, he died of injuries sustained in a saw mill accident. His leg was broken, gangrene set in, and he died of a blood clot.[38] The day she learned of Will's accident, Martha wrote in her diary: "This was the awfuliest [sic] day of all times when . . . Sally told us about our poor boy got his leg broke later they called & said grangerreen had set in. I couldn't stand to think about it."[39] What she felt the day of his death remained unrecorded. Her diary stopped for nearly six months. It was the tragic culmination of six years of periodic separations from her children, and an event from which she would not recover easily. Over the next four years, Martha mourned Will's death in her diary writings. On May 17, 1945, the anniversary of Will's accident, she wrote "Well this is the most cruchial day of my life it brings those trgdic [tragic] memories back in my life when I suffered so deeply over the one that got hurt my eyes are wide with tears just to think of that cruchial moment."[40] Her grief was quite intense for the four years immediately following Will's death, often disrupting her daily routine.

The economic troubles of the 1930s had driven Martha Friesen's children away from their farm home, and for one of those children, an early death had resulted. The economic pressures and resulting migrations of the Great Depression caused the fabric of family life to fray around the edges and eventually to tear. Although Margaret later married and made a permanent home in the county, and Sally's family remained nearby, irreparable damage had already been done to the family unit. Martha remained deeply depressed for nearly four years after Will's death, and perhaps as a result of that depression, George withdrew from his wife; their relationship began to disintegrate. It is ironic that the years from 1936 to mid-1941, with all of their trials, stresses, and separations from children and grandchildren, seem to have been the happiest period in the last 20 years of Martha Schmidt Friesen's life.

Martha Friesen's commentary on her life raises interesting questions about the impact of rural depopulation on the community left behind. Historians have discovered a good deal about the impact of rural depopulation on communities as a whole. They first lost their tax base, then their schools, and often their identity as young people moved away, in

38. Obituary, *Syracuse Journal,* May 30, 1941, p. 1.

39. Friesen, May 17, 1941.

40. Friesen, May 17, 1945. Systematic study of nineteenth-century diaries has indicated that mourning over such a period of time was not at all unusual, and that the marking of such anniversaries was common to grieving diarists. See Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth Century Diarists and Twentieth Century Grief Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 16–31.

response to both push factors within the farming community and pull factors from the urban world beyond. Small farms disappeared into larger farming units as families relinquished their holdings, and small towns became ghost towns as their populations and businesses moved on to the next bigger town down the road. Hundreds of rural communities have ceased to exist, and hundreds more will disappear in the coming decades.[41]

What historians have not thoroughly explored is the impact of community disruptions upon the individuals left behind, and particularly on farm women, such as Martha Friesen.[42] During the 1930s, Martha faced greater challenges as a farm homemaker from weather conditions and worsening health, and she faced these challenges without the consistent support of family and community, which would have made her burdens easier to bear. She had fewer contacts in the larger community than her husband, and fewer opportunities to escape the confines of her home for a day in town. Her place in the family's economy often restricted her movements.

Martha Friesen's response to this isolation is evident in her diary; she often wrote about the loneliness, depression, and tears that accompanied days spent alone. Surely what she experienced was far more common than we know. Hundreds of women throughout the Dust Bowl, and other farming regions of the country, watched their children move away during the 1930s. They experienced their communities' depopulation in an immediate sense, as it affected their homes and families. This experience may also shed light on the continuing depopulation of rural communities throughout the United States. Memories of their mothers' and grandmothers' loneliness and isolation may very well have pushed younger generations of would-be farm women to try their luck elsewhere, to bypass the heartache their foremothers experienced. By undertaking the difficult task of examining individual farm women's experiences with community depopulation, historians may be able to learn a great deal about the motivations of generations of younger women who have chosen to leave the family farm.

41. See for example, Richard Bremer, *Agricultural Change in an Urban Age: The Loup River Country of Nebraska, 1910–1970* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 151–79.

42. Admittedly, writing the history of women such as Martha Friesen is extremely difficult. Very few left the diaries and letters that would allow historians to reconstruct their daily lives and their responses to the depopulation of their communities, and many diaries that were written have not been saved. Nevertheless, by combining what resources are available with oral histories, historians should be able to begin to write the story of those Americans who were "left behind" by the continuing dissolution of farm families and farm communities. For an apt discussion of the difficulty of finding diary sources for "ordinary" women, see Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880–1910* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), preface.