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A GREAT PLAINS FARMER DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Daniel Feickert

This paper will tell the story of Joseph Daniel Lacher a Great Plains farmer during the Great Depression years of 1933-1942.¹ Lacher worked tirelessly on his small farm near Ipswich, South Dakota, to provide for his family and prolong his way of life during arguably the most difficult economic era in United States history. From drought to dust, Lacher faced many of the challenges that most people commonly associate with the Dust Bowl, but he also faced personal and regional challenges that make his story unique and genuinely human. Lacher wrote down details of these trying times in a series of personal journals that he started in 1933 and kept until eight years before his death in 1991. For the purposes of this paper, Lacher's journals from 1933-1942 will be used to tell the story of a humble man and his struggle to overcome the environmental and economic challenges faced by millions of Americans during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl on the Great Plains.

Many historians have examined the lives of farmers on the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. Paula M. Nelson looked at the perils faced by farmers in western South Dakota in her book *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*² and her writing is used in this paper to compare Lacher's struggles in South Dakota to other areas of the state. *Rooted in Dust*³ by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg studied the effects of the great drought on southwestern Kansas while *Dust Bowl*⁴ by Donald Worster gave insight into life on the southern plains during the 1930s. Both of these works allowed the author of this paper the ability to step back and view the effects the Dust Bowl had on other areas of the Great Plains. Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time*⁵ contained journal entries from a man named Don Hartwell that have a significant resemblance to those of Joseph Lacher and are examined closely in this paper. Robert McElvaine looked at the economic trials of the day in his book *The Great Depression*⁶ allowing for a broader interpretation of the conditions faced by the Lacher family. In *Hard Times*⁷, Studs Terkel

¹ The writer of this paper is the great-grandson of Joseph Daniel Lacher. Much of the information presented was passed down through oral family history to its current representation in this paper. Interviews with family members and examinations of Joseph Daniel Lacher's journals preserved by his family were crucial in this research process.

² Paula M. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996).

³ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

⁴ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company, 2006).

⁶ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1984).

⁷ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, (New York: The New Press, 1986).

conducted priceless interviews with survivors of the Dust Bowl that were used in conjunction with Lacher's descriptions to paint a picture of everyday life on the Great Plains during the 1930s. Finally, R. Douglas Hurt's *The Great Plains During World War II*⁸ aided in writing the concluding portion of this paper as the United States put the trials of the Great Depression behind it and prosperity returned to Joseph Lacher and his family in the early 1940s. These books, along with published articles and original newspaper sources, complete the cornucopia of materials necessary to complete this project. This paper will be a further contribution to the literature on the Great Depression and Dust Bowl as a case study that can be applied to Great Plains farmers and the hardships they faced during this time period.

Joseph Daniel Lacher was born to Daniel and Philomena Lacher on September 15, 1893, in Odessa, Russia.⁹ He was the oldest son of a German-Russian immigrant family that came to Edmunds County, South Dakota, in October of 1893. Making the treacherous journey across the Atlantic at the ripe age of one month, Lacher arrived in the United States via Halifax, Nova Scotia, aboard the S.S. Stubbenhuk.¹⁰ Lacher grew up on his father's farm and later attended the South Dakota School of Agriculture in Brookings, South Dakota, graduating in March of 1913. Lacher eventually overtook the property and farming operations from his father in 1914 where he lived and worked throughout the majority of his life.

Lacher wrote the journals that will be used in this paper at his small family farm northeast of the town of Ipswich, South Dakota. Lacher's surviving children remembered watching their father write in these journals at the dinner table in their small farmhouse each night while they were supposed to be in bed.¹¹ With tobacco pipe in hand and smoke filling the room, Joseph Lacher documented his daily affairs including weather, farm work completed that day, and happenings in the community. He retired to a house in Ipswich in 1958, and left the farm in the hands of his son Daniel Michael Lacher. Joseph Lacher lived to be 98 years old and died on December 20, 1991.¹² Lacher left behind a great legacy and his life helped shape and change the lives of his children and the community of Ipswich. While the entire collection of daily journals is accessible to his family members, this story focuses on the Great Depression-era journals exploring Lacher's life on his small farm in South Dakota during this troubling time period.

Joseph Lacher's journals focus more on his personal life and the lives of his family than the public at large. From time to time he mentioned happenings in the community, but for the most part he used the journals as a way to record business transactions, keep crop records, and

⁸ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

⁹ Steve Morgan, "Lacher Family Genealogy- Revised Family History," July, 2005, 36.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Daniel M. Lacher, Theresa Morgan, and Viola Gillick, interviewed by Daniel Feickert, Documenting the life of Joseph D. Lacher, October 21, 2014.

¹² Steve Morgan, "Lacher Family Genealogy," 36 (see note 9).

log weather patterns for his personal use. Lacher started his 1933 journal with the crop prices for the previous year, mentioning the price of wheat at \$0.28 per bushel, corn at only \$0.04 per bushel, and oats at \$0.08 per bushel.¹³ All three of these crops were staples for Lacher who mentioned growing these along with barley, forage sorghum, milo, sudan grass, flax, and rye in fields surrounding his farm. These prices were substantially lower than the prices farmers received just over a decade earlier when World War I drew to a close and the slogan “Wheat Will Win the War!” filled the air.¹⁴ *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own* by Paula M. Nelson discusses this sharp price drop. Nelson noted, “Wheat, the wartime staple because of its ease of storage and wide range of uses, dropped from a high price of \$2.65 in May 1920...Oats fell from a high of \$0.94 a bushel in June 1920...and Beef cattle prices plummeted from \$10.70 a hundredweight in July 1919.”¹⁵ Lacher also raised a multitude of livestock from cattle and horses to pigs, sheep, turkeys, and chickens. The importance of livestock to a small Great Plains farmer was emphasized by a newspaper article from July 5, 1932, in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. The paper claimed, “There is yet more chance to keep the farm on the right side of the ledger with cattle, hogs, horses and poultry than with any field crops a farmer could produce.”¹⁶

It was mentioned early on in the journals that horses were used on the Lacher farm for the majority of the work and were relied upon when either weather conditions or other circumstances proved too much for Lacher’s tractor, a W.C. Allis Chalmers purchased new in 1937 for \$1,023.80, paying \$800 cash with the rest of the sum paid by a trade-in for his old tractor.¹⁷ Viola Gillick, the oldest surviving child of Joseph, commented on when her father purchased this tractor for their farm. She recalled, “I’ll never forget when Dad got the first Allis Chalmers tractor and I didn’t have to harness the horses...then I could drive the tractor. That was just awesome.”¹⁸ This simple purchase changed life for the Lacher family and helped them through the tough years to come. Overall, Lacher ran a very well-rounded farming operation spreading his investments over a wide range of crops and livestock which greatly increased his chances for success.

Weather patterns are another major topic of discussion in Lacher’s journals. On a hot May afternoon in 1934 Lacher wrote, “Hot and windy 106°. The forgoing I will never forget. At present time people of this generation have no incidence of what it is like during severe drought

¹³ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1933, introduction.

¹⁴ Pare Lorentz, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, (1936).

¹⁵ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 5 (see note 2).

¹⁶ Paul Potter, “Live Stock Farm Most Likely to Return Profits: Corn Belt Farmers Tell How they Do It,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jul. 5, 1932.

¹⁷Diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1937, July 21.

¹⁸ Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

conditions.”¹⁹ Entries like this are very common with Lacher documenting through first person accounts the terrible drought conditions he faced as his crops withered and died in the ground right in front of his eyes. Lacher wrote of the years when he lost all crops retroactively and noted in 1934, “In my life time: total crop failure 1911, 1926, 1934, 1935 partial, 1936 total corn and hay crop failed.”²⁰ These dry, dusty conditions also created monstrous dust storms that Lacher included throughout his writings. Lacher mentioned a substantial storm from 1934. “A most terrific dust storm,” Lacher noted, “not fit for man or beast to be out.”²¹ Not only did farmers on the plains of South Dakota face tough years of drought and dust, but across the Great Plains changes began to take place. In *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas*, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg wrote, “Undoubtedly, Kansans had seen dirt storms before...but within recorded history, residents of Kansas had never experienced such severe storms over such an extended period of time.”²²

Farmers throughout the Midwest and across the Great Plains encountered problems similar to those experienced by Joseph Lacher. For this reason, Lacher’s journals can be used as a case study to discuss what other farmers faced during this time in American history. A direct comparison should be made between Lacher’s journals and a similar journal mentioned in Timothy Egan’s *The Worst Hard Time*. Egan included journal entries in his book from a farmer located near Red Cloud, Nebraska, named Don Hartwell.²³ In 1936, Hartwell described putting up Russian thistles for feed, which Lacher discusses in journal entries for 1933, 1934, and 1936. Hartwell also discussed the tremendous heat in the summer of 1936. Lacher wrote on July 5, 1936, “Blazing sun, the hottest day for 50 years, 115 degrees in the shade. Too hot to do anything outdoors.”²⁴ The two men even wrote of listening to the New York Yankees play in the World Series on their radios, Hartwell in 1936 and Lacher in 1941.²⁵ Once again, the similarities between the journals of Lacher and Hartwell showed that these men, separated by nearly 420 miles, faced very similar conditions and even discussed related things making Lacher’s writings a valuable resource for describing Great Plains farmers during the Great Depression.

Lacher’s journals give readers great insight into Midwest farm life during the 1930s. One important aspect of the Dust Bowl, however, is not discussed at length by Lacher. Multiple sources on the Great Depression or Dust Bowl report on the great multitudes of people that fled

¹⁹ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1934, May 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, introduction.

²¹ *Ibid.*, April 21.

²² Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted In Dust*, 24 (see note 3).

²³ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 243 (see note 5).

²⁴ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1936, July 5.

²⁵ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1941, October 5.

the areas affected by the drought and economic downturn. Lacher does not. While John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* painted a picture of what it looked like for a family to leave behind the drought and dust of the Great Plains for higher aspirations in the West, Lacher does not contribute to that conversation much. He does not mention his neighbors packing up or leaving town nor does he hint at ever wishing to leave South Dakota himself. The 1936 U.S. Resettlement Administration documentary film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* noted that 50,000 people per month left the Great Plains during the summer of 1936, which many considered to be the climax of the Great Depression.²⁶ Robert S. McElvaine also discussed the difficult decision many farm families had to make when deciding whether or not to leave behind the decades of hard work started by their parents' generation to try and find a better life for their families. In his book *The Great Depression*, McElvaine wrote that many Great Plains farmers wished to hold true to their self-made values that had allowed them to succeed prior to the Great Depression, but in the end the trying times proved too much for most.²⁷ This group of farmers was only one generation removed from the "pioneering generation" of settlers, and many were forced to leave their homes and way of life behind.

Paula M. Nelson wrote, "The pioneer generation's vision of a thickly populated plains, with all the proper appointments, blew away with the storms of the Depression."²⁸ Lacher was one of a determined handful of farmers who were able to weather the dust storms and survive the Great Depression, keeping their families and the legacy left before them by the previous generation alive. Daniel M. Lacher, the only surviving son of Joseph Lacher, commented on his grandparents' pioneering generation. He said, "They ate well, they butchered hogs, they would throw nothing away, they ate the fat and the leg and all that. They raised a lot of dairy stuff, they made their own butter and everything...they were pretty self-sufficient in those days, they only got to town maybe once every two or three weeks."²⁹ The self-reliance that the pioneering generation developed carried on into the Great Depression era. Many of these people refused to take the help offered to them by various government programs because it went against their beliefs. They had always been able to make it on their own.

While Lacher's journals do not explicitly discuss the 1930s migration of people leaving the Great Plains, his writing still contains very pertinent information about challenges faced by all farmers living in the region. Similarities between Lacher's journals and those of Don Hartwell from Red Cloud, Nebraska, show that he wrote about things that farmers across the region struggled with and discussed. The description of his agricultural practices and the records he kept of crop and livestock prices help us understand the situation that many farmers faced during this time period.

²⁶ Lorentz, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (see note 14).

²⁷ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 20 (see note 6).

²⁸ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 205 (see note 2).

²⁹ Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

1933's journal started with a grim note scribbled by Joseph Lacher onto the first page of his journal, added at a later date. The note stated, "Total crop failures, no seed return. No hay, Russian thistles for feed. I know you will not believe [I] had no alfalfa."³⁰ The year that followed was not an easy one for Lacher; however, some bright spots appeared on a few of the aged, tinted pages of his journal. On January 24, Lacher mentioned being selected as the director of the Ipswich Livestock Shipping Association for a term of three years.³¹ This organization helped farmers and ranchers in the area ship their livestock to various areas of South Dakota using rail cars, and it was quite successful for the small community it served. In a January 1927 newspaper article from the *Aberdeen Daily News*, the Ipswich Livestock Shipping Association showed an increase of 72 carloads of livestock shipped through the organization from 1925-1926.³² This number represented an increase of almost 65% with much of the growth coming from the shipment of double-deck cars of hogs and sheep.³³

Lacher was a very involved member of the Ipswich community and served in various functions. Along with being a co-director of the Ipswich Livestock Shipping Association, he was also involved with the local farmer's cooperative. Lacher served as a member of the board of directors for the Ipswich Cooperative Association, which ran the Craven grain elevator located five miles east of Ipswich. The Ipswich Cooperative Association incorporated on March 14, 1930, and Lacher was mentioned as being one of five founders of the cooperative valued at \$10,000 in capital stock.³⁴ Lacher's involvement with the Craven elevator dated prior to the company's formation, and he had served on the board of directors for the elevator since 1923. An article from the *Aberdeen Daily News* discussed how the Craven elevator remained prosperous and successful while many other giants in the industry "suffered more or less loss, some failing completely because of the tumultuous markets and manipulation of grain prices."³⁵ Lacher's steady resolve and knowledge of the farming community he lived in had a positive influence on the businesses and organizations he was involved with.

While Lacher's duties as an active member of the Ipswich community served him well in the early 1930s, his crop yields did not meet his expectations in 1933. Substantial rains in the month of May had Lacher's hopes high for his grain crops. All that changed in early June, however, as hot, dry weather began to choke and destroy his crops. On June 3 Lacher wrote, "Hot and dry- crops are suffering," and again on June 5, "Hot and dry, crops at the verge of

³⁰ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1933, introduction.

³¹ *Ibid.*, January 24.

³² "Ipswich Livestock Shipping Has Gain," *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, SD), Jan. 20, 1927.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "Recent Incorporations," *Deadwood Pioneer-Times* (Deadwood, SD), Mar. 15, 1930.

³⁵ "Craven Elevator Prospers," *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, SD), Jun. 17, 1923.

destruction,” and finally on June 16, “Crops are a total failure.”³⁶ Readers saw the gradual increase in severity of Lacher’s situation due to a lack of moisture and the increased temperatures until eventually all hope was lost. Less than two weeks earlier the outlook for the year was brightened, but 1930s farming practices lacked the genetically modified drought resistant varieties of crops present today. Two weeks could either make or break an entire year’s worth of work. Daniel M. Lacher discussed how farming practices have changed from the 1930s to today. He said, “If they ever wondered why we never got a crop, well you plowed the land, and drug it and by the time you got done that land was so damn dry it wouldn’t grow.”³⁷ Due to the extremely dry, hot conditions in June, 1933, Lacher only harvested 35 bushels of wheat.³⁸

To add insult to injury, the trying weather conditions did not only affect Lacher’s grain crops. The once promising hay fields that Lacher relied upon to feed and house his livestock through the long, cold South Dakota winters also failed. He had no alfalfa to cut for hay. Other Great Plains farmers faced similar circumstances during this time, and many, including Lacher, resorted to cutting Russian thistles for hay to help their herds survive.³⁹ Emil Loriks, a farmer from Arlington, South Dakota, who served on the state senate from 1927-1934, talked about feeding Russian thistles in Studs Terkel’s book *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. Loriks said, “These thistles, thorny, hateful things, were stacked, during the drought of ’33, and fed to our livestock.”⁴⁰ The thistles were no more than a weed with limited nutritional value and had a terrible side effect that gave cattle awful diarrhea making them very difficult to handle.⁴¹ Viola Gillick commented on the messy business that accompanied feeding thistles to the cattle on their farm. She said, “When we had those droughts and it was so dry, they would feed thistles to the cows. They would get diarrhea so bad that it would run down their tails and you would sit there and then whoof, out it would come.”⁴²

In a final act of torment, 1933 did not end quietly. On November 12, Lacher wrote, “A terrific wind storm, all fences blown down, severe property damage, my hay rack blown off the wagon and smashed beyond repair. The most terrific wind and dust storm since Jan. 6, 1905.”⁴³ On top of the other difficulties Joseph Lacher faced throughout the year, he now had to deal with the rebuilding of fences and his hay rack due to the forces of Mother Nature. After the dust

³⁶ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1933, June 3, 5, 16.

³⁷ Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

³⁸ Lacher, 1933, August 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, September 6.

⁴⁰ Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, 228 (see note 7).

⁴¹ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 120 (see note 2).

⁴² Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

⁴³ Lacher, 1933, November 12.

settled, 1933 ended with an almost nonexistent grain crop, Russian thistles for livestock feed, and significant wind damage to Lacher's farm. As a true farmer of the Great Depression, Lacher was faced with the difficult choice at the end of 1933 to succumb to the pressures placed on him by his environment or to get up, dust himself off, and prepare for another year on the farm.

For Joseph Lacher, 1934 would pick up where 1933 left off. More wind and dust. On April 21, Lacher wrote, "A most terrific dust storm, not fit for man or beast to be out."⁴⁴ In an entry for May 9, Lacher described a dust storm so terrible that it stalled the engine of his car outside of the small town of Roscoe, South Dakota, and forced him to have it towed to town.⁴⁵ Lacher talks of the dust again only a few weeks later when on May 30 he wrote, "Severe dust storm- had to have lights on [in the] house."⁴⁶ Many years later, Lacher reflected on his writings about the dust storms in 1934 and added, "The forgoing I will never forget. At present time people of this generation have no incidence of what it is like during severe drought conditions."⁴⁷

Images of large, black, billowing clouds of dust filling the horizon will forever be associated with the 1930s, and Lacher's written memories exemplify firsthand how these dust storms were truly more than most people today could even imagine. Historians wrote about these terrible dust storms which filled the sky with choking, blinding particles and made everyday life very difficult. Paula M. Nelson called 1934 "the year of great dust storms," and Lacher's description of the terrible storms that hit northern South Dakota fully support her description.⁴⁸ Ruth Loriks, a farm wife from Arlington, South Dakota, also discussed these terrible dust storms in an interview with Studs Terkel. Loriks noted, "One day at noon we had one of our worst dust storms. I never want to see one again! The air was so filled. We could just see it float in, and we had good, heavy storm windows."⁴⁹ Most farmers of the Great Plains were ready for the small dust storms that had always accompanied droughts, but none were truly prepared for the frequency or magnitude of the storms during the Dust Bowl. In his book *Dust Bowl: Southern Plains in the 1930s*, Donald Worster discussed the storms that raged across the country. He described them as, "dust storms of such violence that they made the drought only a secondary problem- storms of such destructive force that they left the region reeling in confusion and fear."⁵⁰ The dust storms faced by farmers of the Great Plains changed the way people viewed their surroundings in the 1930s. In November, Lacher wrote, "Pulling out [equipment] with

⁴⁴ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1934, April 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, May 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, May 30.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 147 (see note 2).

⁴⁹ Terkel, *Hard Times*, 230 (see note 7).

⁵⁰ Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 12 (see note 4).

tractor from under the dirt covered up by the dust storm[s] during the past spring,”⁵¹ and again, “[Hired man] scooping dirt in front of barn door.”⁵²

With dust swirling, the drought of 1934 set in during the hot summer months, and Lacher faced another failing hay crop that forced him to cut Russian thistles for feed for a second consecutive year.⁵³ Farmers were perplexed as they watched their livestock starve in bare pastures, and President Roosevelt asked Congress for \$525 million in drought relief of which \$275 million went toward a cattle buying program.⁵⁴ President Roosevelt noticed the dire need for government assistance in these early years of the Great Depression, and through government programs he offered to help many farmers survive throughout the rest of the decade. On August 9 Lacher wrote, “Sold 16-head of cattle to government, drought relief program.”⁵⁵ Only 13 days later, Lacher again noted, “Sold 28 head [of] cattle net \$504.25.”⁵⁶ With little choice left and the government reaching out its hand to farmers, Lacher chose to sell off 44 head of cattle because he could not support them with his insufficient hay crops during the past two growing seasons. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg wrote, “The buying program was a great boon to many farmers... [it] offered beleaguered ranchers and farmers the opportunity to avoid a total loss.”⁵⁷ Lacher was not the only farmer in the area that was forced to sell off his livestock. Being the director of the Ipswich Livestock Shipping Association, he was directly involved in many of the cattle shipments that took place in the area. He wrote, “Relief cattle shipped from Craven 540 [head].”⁵⁸ Not only did Lacher ship out his own cattle but he watched as many local farmers also shipped their livestock away out of desperation. The dusty, dirty year came to a close with Lacher reporting a complete crop failure, no hay for the second consecutive year, and 44 cattle sold to the government with the hope of a better year to follow.

1935 arrived with cold temperatures and snow storms that blasted the Great Plains of South Dakota and made farming very difficult. Lacher faced temperatures on January 23 as low as 24 degrees below zero which he called the “coldest day all winter.”⁵⁹ In early March, Lacher wrote, “Blizzard, snow drifted 12 feet high in places and colder weather prevails.”⁶⁰ The

⁵¹ Lacher, 1934, November 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, November 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, July 25.

⁵⁴ Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 39 (see note 4).

⁵⁵ Lacher, 1934, August 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, August 22.

⁵⁷ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted In Dust*, 94 (see note 3).

⁵⁸ Lacher, 1934, August 31.

⁵⁹ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1935, Jan. 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Mar. 5.

treacherous weather coupled with the terrible hay crops from the previous two years left Lacher in a perilous position, and he hauled in his last loads of straw and Russian thistles for feed on March 29.⁶¹ With little hay to feed his livestock and two previous years of hard times in his memory, Lacher turned to his neighbor and long time friend Andrew L. Braun for help. On April 8, Lacher hauled up one last load of straw from Braun's field and mentioned, "This is all the feed I have which all told makes a good big load. What will be the consequences later I do not know as the [livestock] cleaned out the barns."⁶² With the source of feed for his livestock up in the air, Lacher remained hopeful for a plentiful crop and invested in a new "42 inch press drill" valued at \$75.⁶³ The new drill and beneficial rains in mid-June had Lacher's hopes high. He wrote, "Everything looks very favorable at this time for a good crop as well as feed."⁶⁴

As with most stories of agriculture in South Dakota during the dirty thirties, Lacher's hopes were soon replaced by disappointment as his wheat crops showed signs of rust and high temperatures in July all but destroyed his harvest for the year. On July 19, Lacher noted, "Very hot and dry day hard on [the] grain which is badly rusted,"⁶⁵ and at a later date he added, "Wheat due to blight and rust [was] not worth harvesting so [I] just quit, [wheat] never filled, only long straw."⁶⁶ At the end of 1935, Lacher summarized his crop yields and wrote, "Small grain feed crop [was] good except wheat so bad [it was] not worth harvesting. [Crop] would not pay expenses, had to hire help so [I] just did not harvest some fields. Corn and cane fair to good crops."⁶⁷ While his wheat crop struggled, Lacher fared quite well with his other grain and hay crops which he described as "excellent" and "needed [during] those years [when] we had no alfalfa."⁶⁸

To harvest his improved hay crop for the year, Lacher mentioned that his wife Magdalena helped with the duties of mowing hay.⁶⁹ Women played a major role in farm life on these small, family-run establishments during the 1930s. In an interview conducted on October 21, 2014, Viola Gillick remembered, "I'll never forget how hard our mother worked... [she] would have to shock grain, us kids were little so she would sit us inside the cart...she would shock three or four

⁶¹ Ibid., Mar. 29.

⁶² Ibid., Apr. 8.

⁶³ Ibid., Mar. 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Jun. 18.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Jul. 19.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Jul. 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Dec. 31.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Dec. 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Aug. 14.

rows and then come back and move the cart ahead and sit awhile, and then she would go shock again.”⁷⁰ Paula M. Nelson added, “Women helped with haying, bound and shocked grain, and plowed and disced fields... Women should help, the feeling was, but not be run ragged with outdoor work.”⁷¹ The Joseph D. Lacher farm was no different, and his wife and two of his eldest daughters, Beatrice and Viola, pulled their own weight when it came to working around the farmstead. Viola noted, “I worked hard on that farm,” and Theresa Morgan, the youngest Lacher child, added, “Mom and Dad had five girls before they had boys, so those oldest girls, they *were* the boys.”⁷² Each member of the family pulled their own weight when it came to chores as well. Daniel Lacher, the only remaining son of Joseph Lacher at the time, commented, “We always had to milk 12-15 cows before we would go to school in the morning, we would milk the cows, feed the calves, feed the chickens and then we would have breakfast and go to school.”⁷³ Families across the Great Plains relied on their children to help with the daily activities associated with keeping up a farm, and the Lacher children helped like all the rest.

With the help of his family, Lacher had a much better year in 1935. The cold temperatures and lack of livestock feed early in the year were balanced by sufficient rains producing a harvestable small grain crop. Improved native grasslands were cut for hay and stored for the upcoming year. Lacher concluded, “This ends the old year. The Lord only knows who will be able to see the new year pass by. In God is our only hope. This life is only a shadow of the hereafter.”⁷⁴ During the most challenging years of his life, Lacher sought peace in God knowing that no other could help the millions of struggling farmers across the region.

Joseph Lacher and his family turned the calendar to 1936 coming off of three consecutive, tough years on the farm. With total crop failures in 1933-34, and a partial failure in 1935, the family needed a better year. Little did they know, they were about to face the toughest year of the Great Depression head on. Paula Nelson described how “the drought would wear on for five more difficult years, although it was never again as pervasive or intense as it was in 1936.”⁷⁵ Her statement showed that farmers across the Great Plains faced their most trying times during this climactic year of the Dust Bowl. In 1936, Lacher’s fate would ultimately lie in the sky above his head and soil beneath his feet. Weather patterns dominated life early in the year when Lacher mentioned some extremely cold conditions. On February 20 Lacher noted, “The first day it commences to moderate[.] For 8 weeks consecutive [it was] always below zero, the

⁷⁰ Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

⁷¹ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 56 (see note 2).

⁷² Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Lacher, 1935, Dec. 31.

⁷⁵ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 163 (see note 2).

coldest spell in history of such long duration.”⁷⁶ During this monumental cold spell, Lacher recorded temperatures of minus 30 degrees seven separate times, and this type of weather made completing simple tasks on the farm almost impossible. Lacher recalled, “Hauled one load of hay, cleaned barn. Cold almost unbearable, too severe to be outdoors.”⁷⁷ Tasks that were simple during most of the year became very difficult when the weather did not cooperate.

Machinery also acted up once the temperature dropped to these bone-chilling levels, and Lacher’s Ford truck stalled one frozen, minus 35 degree night. He was heading to pick up coal to heat the farmhouse and once the truck died, he was left with a very cold walk home.⁷⁸ As the cold gave way to moderate Spring-time temperatures, one of the hottest, driest summers on record was right around the corner for Lacher and his crops. Throughout July, Lacher recalled the unbearable heat he faced during the summer of 1936. Lacher wrote, “Blazing sun, the hottest day for 50 years, 115 degrees in the shade. Too hot to do anything outdoors.”⁷⁹ On July 9 he added, “Extremely hot, 115 degrees in the shade, [the heat] kills everything,” and again on July 11, “Hot, oh my dry. The most severe drought, no rain since May 22.”⁸⁰ Don Hartwell, a farmer near Red Cloud, Nebraska, called July, 1936, the “worst month (so far) of the worst year ever known.”⁸¹ Temperatures across the Great Plains reached unimagined levels in the summer of 1936, and August in Oklahoma went down in history as the hottest month of the century for the state.⁸² Texas received rainfall that came in sporadic bursts, filled the ditches, and barely soaked the land. Weather consistently above 100 degrees and no rain for nearly two months completely wiped out Lacher’s crops for 1936 leaving him with another “total crop failure.” He commented, “Commenced harvesting wheat...[we] will not get our seed back due to drought.”⁸³

But heat and drought were not the only conditions working against Lacher in the summer of 1936. Grasshoppers moved into the regions struck by the drought of the 1930s and Lacher made specific mention of them in 1936 and 1938. He wrote, “Very hot and dry the grasshoppers and beetles are taking what the drought has not destroyed as [of] yet.”⁸⁴ These little, destructive bugs would move into an area of farmland and eat everything in sight until the land looked like

⁷⁶ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1936, Feb. 20.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Feb. 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb. 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Jul. 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Jul. 9, 11.

⁸¹ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 247 (see note 5).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 258.

⁸³ Lacher, 1936, Jul. 14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Jul. 8.

the surface of the moon, and then they moved along to the next farm in search of more organic material to devour. The 1930s infestation of grasshoppers in South Dakota was mentioned by Ruth Loriks in her interview with Studs Terkel. Ruth recalled, "One time we were driving up to Aberdeen. It was during the grasshopper days in 1933. The sun was shining brightly when we left home. When we were about half way, it just turned dark. It was the grasshoppers that covered the sun."⁸⁵ Timothy Egan further described these swarms of grasshoppers and wrote, "The grasshoppers were not selective. The insect clouds moved from county to county, looking for any living thing, leaving not a flower or leaf or a sprig of grass left standing."⁸⁶ Grasshoppers were another enemy to farmers on the Great Plains, and they returned year after year destroying crops and frustrating people across the country.

As grasshoppers moved in and the hopes for a plentiful crop diminished, President Roosevelt embarked on a train trip across the states of the Great Plains in hopes of seeing firsthand the effects these terrible conditions were having on the country. Arriving at Bismarck, North Dakota, on Thursday, August 27, 1936, President Roosevelt traveled by train across South Dakota and campaigned for reelection to a second term in office. His trip concluded in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he attended the funeral of Secretary of War George H. Dern the following week.⁸⁷ Roosevelt stopped in Aberdeen, South Dakota, on August 28 and gave a short speech in hopes of gauging how the people of South Dakota were handling the Depression. Joseph Lacher made the 28 mile drive from Ipswich to Aberdeen to attend President Roosevelt's speech. He wrote, "To Aberdeen, saw President Roosevelt," and mentioned no further details about the trip or his reaction to the President's remarks.⁸⁸

Roosevelt's speech is best summarized with his closing words. He said, "I have come out here to learn more about the conditions [of the drought] at first hand and I shall take back to Washington with me the picture of a whole lot of people with courage, with their chins up, who are telling me that they are going to see it through. And I am going to help."⁸⁹ While President Roosevelt expected to see a beaten-down, defeated group of farmers at the base of his podium, he instead found a smiling, waving crowd that rolled with the punches Mother Nature had thrown at them the past three years.⁹⁰ 1936 once again challenged the way Joseph Lacher operated his farm. The worst drought year of the 1930s accompanied by some of the hottest

⁸⁵ Terkel, *Hard Times*, 229 (see note 7).

⁸⁶ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 284 (see note 5).

⁸⁷ Bethene Wookey Larson, "Franklin D Roosevelt's Visit to Sidney During the Drouth of 1936," *Nebraska History* 65 (1984): 2.

⁸⁸ Lacher, 1936, Aug. 28.

⁸⁹ Philip A. Grant Jr., "Presidential Politics in South Dakota, 1936," *South Dakota State Historical Society Press* 22, no. 3 (1992): 267-268

⁹⁰ Willard Edwards, "Relief Pledge is Renewed by President: Promised Dakotas Cash Through Winter," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 30, 1936.

temperatures on record cost Lacher yet another crop. President Roosevelt's trip through the state boosted morale for further help from Washington to get the Dakotas through the tough times yet to come. Farmers like Lacher knew they would have to keep their heads high and noses to the grindstone if they wanted to keep their families and farms afloat during the middle years of the Great Depression.

Following the worst drought year of the Great Depression, it seemed like Joseph Lacher was due for a better year. Losing the majority of his grain and hay crops three of the previous four years, 1937 was bound to treat Lacher and his family better. The year started with some of the worst weather Lacher had ever seen that rivaled even the terrible early months of 1936. Lacher recalled, "This is a severe winter [that] appears to be worse than [the] last."⁹¹ The Lacher family did not attend mass in Ipswich from January 9 through February 21, a significant piece of evidence that pointed to the severity of the weather.⁹² Joseph Lacher and his family were devout Roman-Catholics that brought their religion with them on their immigration from Russia in 1893. Lacher routinely mentioned religious events in his life, and he also noted when his family attended mass or participated in baptisms, first confessions, or first communions. The fact that the Lacher family did not attend mass for over one month revealed the poor traveling conditions of the roads which were impassable to the point where the family did not try to leave for Holy Cross Catholic Church in Ipswich.

The tough weather, however, brought with it snow that melted leaving Lacher's soil ready to accept his crops in the spring of 1937. On April 27, Lacher noted, "There is an abundance of moisture [which] prospects very favorable for a crop."⁹³ This showed the improved condition of his soil from the harsh drought of the summer of 1936. As the growing season began, Lacher received moisture in June that helped propel his crops to the best he had seen since 1932. Lacher "estimated over one inch of precipitation [which is] wonderful for June, considered the drought month."⁹⁴ A dry spell in July slowed his crops enough to keep Lacher from having a very prosperous year, but in the end 1937 was considered a turnaround year for Joseph Lacher and his family. Lacher wrote, "1937 grain + hay harvest best since 1932, average or better,"⁹⁵ which showed the much improved condition of his crops from the previous four years.

In March of 1937, Joseph Lacher mentioned the Soil Conservation Program for the first time and wrote that he attended a "one day training school" in Ipswich to help farmers learn about the program.⁹⁶ The Soil Conservation Program, implemented by the Roosevelt

⁹¹ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1937, Feb. 17.

⁹² Ibid., Feb. 21.

⁹³ Ibid., Apr. 27.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Jun. 12.

⁹⁵ Ibid., notes pages.

⁹⁶ Ibid., Mar. 1.

administration, “made payments to farmers to encourage them and assist them in carrying out conservation practices such as improving soil fertility, minimizing erosion, and conserving resources...farmers maintained the funding (fifty to seventy-five cents an acre) [from the program].”⁹⁷ Lacher enrolled in this program at a sign up day at the Craven elevator on March 23 and received his conservation check from the government on March 27 of \$467.30.⁹⁸ This funding, accompanied by a much improved crop, helped Lacher and his family recover from a lack of farm production from the previous four years. Lacher spoke limitedly about government assistance programs for farmers and only mentioned the cattle buying program in 1934 and the Soil Conservation Program in 1937 and 1939. The existence of these programs, however, showed a desire by the Roosevelt administration to help the struggling farmers as he promised in his speech in Aberdeen on August 28, 1936.⁹⁹

The trials of 1937 were not in the past, however, as Lacher received some very troubling information regarding the health of his mother, Philomena, in September. Lacher’s father, Daniel, passed away in May of 1933 at the age of 66 and left Philomena to be taken care of by Joseph Lacher’s sisters Maggie and Richardis who lived in Aberdeen at the time. Lacher wrote of his mother’s condition, “Ma is reported to have a severe attack of heart trouble, [this is] a serious case.”¹⁰⁰ On September 27, less than a week after his mother’s heart attack, Lacher received a postcard from his sister Richardis begging him to come visit his mother before it is was too late writing, “Ma’s condition is not so good. Dr. gave her a hypo, it was the last straw. At first she rested easier, after an hour or so. She became worse. She sits up right in bed most of the time the only way she can breathe. Get your work done in a hurry. She can’t last much longer.”¹⁰¹ Richardis’ prediction proved correct as Philomena Lacher passed away on October 2, 1937, at 2:30 am at the age of 69.¹⁰² Joseph Lacher handled the death of his mother in a very stoic manner and commented that she was a “respectful and loving mother” and that many people attended her funeral in Aberdeen a few days after her passing.¹⁰³ As 1937 came to an end, Lacher concluded a much needed recovery year for his family farm. With a much better crop and respectful sum paid by the Soil Conservation Program, things looked brighter for the future.

1938 built on the recovery year of 1937. Crop yields slightly decreased from the previous year, but Joseph Lacher started fresh and purchased sheep for the first time and uncovered fences

⁹⁷ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted In Dust*, 122 (see note 3).

⁹⁸ Lacher, 1937, Mar. 27.

⁹⁹ Philip A. Grant Jr., “Presidential Politics in South Dakota, 1936,” 268 (see note 84).

¹⁰⁰ Lacher, 1937, Sep. 21.

¹⁰¹ Richardis Lacher, postcard to Joseph D. Lacher, Sep. 27, 1937.

¹⁰² Lacher, 1937, Oct. 2.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Oct. 5.

that had been buried in the dirt of the past four years. Lacher already had quite a diverse array of livestock on his farm, but on January 5, 1938, he added 100 sheep to his establishment.¹⁰⁴ Lacher wrote, "Taking care of 100 sheep, 14 horses, 10 hogs, and 44 head [of] cattle- plenty of choring to do."¹⁰⁵ This increase in livestock to feed would have been absolutely unheard of only a few years earlier when Lacher sold 44 head of cattle under a government program so he could feed the small herd he had left. Things came full circle for Lacher who cut and stacked Russian thistles to feed his livestock through the winter less than two years before. Lacher now wrote, "Clearing thistle ground for corn."¹⁰⁶ Lacher rebuilt in 1938 and mentioned repairing "old fences after being covered over for 4 years with sand."¹⁰⁷

As Lacher dug himself out of the worst years of the Dust Bowl, success on the farm was still something that many Great Plains farmers had to work for every day. Lacher's crops for 1938 were challenged once again by grasshoppers and drought. Grasshoppers were a familiar foe to Lacher and his family as they remembered the destruction they caused in 1936, but this time they were prepared. He wrote, "Crops are failing rapidly [due to] grasshoppers and drought. Spread 50 bags of grasshopper bait,"¹⁰⁸ a process used throughout the Great Plains to curb the effects the destructive insects had on crops. This method was utilized in western South Dakota where, "Counties would distribute sacks of poison for farmers to spread on their land. The [farmers] and their neighbors mixed it with bran and spread it with the grain seeder."¹⁰⁹ While some farmers reported that the poison did very little to harm the grasshoppers, Lacher's application of the poison succeeded. He noted, "Crops, what is not hurt by drought, will escape grasshoppers."¹¹⁰

While the crops for 1938 may have escaped without damage from grasshoppers, the lack of rain in the crucial growing months took its toll. Lacher wrote, "Barley and oats [is a] fair crop,"¹¹¹ but he also mentioned that his, "Corn crop is gone due to the drought,"¹¹² and that he only harvested his seed back from his wheat. Part of the challenge of losing crops year after year during the Great Depression was that many farmers lost hope that their land would ever produce

¹⁰⁴ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1938, Jan. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Jan. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., May 7.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., May 14.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., Jun. 23.

¹⁰⁹ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 119 (see note 2).

¹¹⁰ Lacher, 1938, Jul. 3.

¹¹¹ Ibid., Jul. 11.

¹¹² Ibid., Aug. 6.

anything again. Don Hartwell, a farmer near Red Cloud, Nebraska, wrote, “I have cultivated corn every summer since 1908 but I wonder sometimes if I will ever cultivate any corn on this place again.”¹¹³ Farmers tried to keep hopes high for each year’s harvest but with every crop lost, their hopes sunk lower and lower into the dust of the time period. Paula M. Nelson discussed this phenomenon in western South Dakota. She wrote, “For a farming people, the relationship with nature is fundamental. For west river farm families, the relationship with nature had always been problematic. Lean years were too common, and the struggle for sustenance was often hard.”¹¹⁴ Many families gave up the fight against an “often unyielding soil” and left for the west coast in the great migration that took place during the 1930s.¹¹⁵ Lacher’s determination during the Dust Bowl was mirrored by a dedicated group of farmers across the Great Plains who worked by the sweat of their brows to continue their way of life. Joseph Lacher kept a level head and planted on because he understood that eventually the drought would break and prosperous times would return.

From this scene, Joseph Lacher ran for county commissioner of Edmunds County, South Dakota. Lacher was a very active member of his community and well respected by his peers, but he didn’t seem to care much for the politics associated with running for commissioner. He commented, “Commenced to campaign. Boy I do not like this political job. If I had to consent I would tell them all to go and jump in the deepest river.”¹¹⁶ The results of the election would not favor Lacher. He wrote, “General election. The writer [was] a candidate for county commissioner [with the] results discouraging. Lost [my] own precinct 31-43 votes. Total votes cast in district: [myself] 191 opponent 347. Poor neighbors.”¹¹⁷ While his political ambitions may have come up short, Lacher ended 1938 on a good note and was reelected as the director of the local co-op for a term of three years, which solidified his position as a leader in the farming community and propelled him into the final years of the Great Depression. With grit and determination, Joseph Lacher rebuilt his family farm in 1938 and took a step toward a prosperous future as the toughest years of the Great Depression were now behind him.

If 1938 helped Lacher and his family pull themselves from the dirt of the Dust Bowl, 1939 stood them up, patted them on the back, and gave them a positive outlook on the years to come. Lacher’s outstanding crop for 1939 helped him regain financial balance on his small farm with his best yields since 1932. While things were turning around for Lacher, he still enrolled some of his land in the farm program and received a conservation check of \$330.68 on March 11 from the federal government.¹¹⁸ Farmers across the Great Plains still needed these government

¹¹³ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 246 (see note 5).

¹¹⁴ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 146 (see note 2).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Lacher, 1938, Oct. 17.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 8.

¹¹⁸ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1939, Mar. 11.

Soil Conservation checks to help them make ends meet. A report from a county agent in Southwestern Kansas from 1939 “showed that 98 percent of the farmers were dependent on the Soil Conservation Service” and also credited “government farm programs with saving the rural population from starvation and keeping them on the land.”¹¹⁹ Using his conservation funds, Lacher planted a very successful crop of barley, oats, and wheat that rivaled any crop he had planted in recent memory on his farm. Lacher wrote, “Wonderful field of oats [on] N.W. 16. Estimated yield 40 [bushels] per acre,” which showed his approval of his crop returns for the year. Lacher did not mention the word “drought” when he discussed 1939 even though he made specific mention of dust storms throughout the year that continued into an unusually warm month of December. Other areas of South Dakota faced very similar conditions with dust storms “coming frequently” and many counties reported “more moisture and no grasshopper infestations.”¹²⁰ But as the drought broke in certain areas of the Great Plains and many farmers got their hopes up for a better year, others still found themselves in the midst of a terrible drought.

In Kansas, “farmers lost most of their 1939 wheat crop due to drought, [and] were unable to meet their obligations.”¹²¹ One farmer in the area wrote, “And so ends a year that promised so much and produced little except drought and war.”¹²² In these times of trouble, some farmers turned to community activities to take their minds off of their failing crops. In Ipswich, local community leaders organized the first “Trail Days” celebration in honor of the Yellowstone Trail that passed through Ipswich along Highway 12. On June 19, Lacher wrote, “Ipswich is celebrating trail day[s]. Family and myself spent all day there. Large turnout, estimated attendance [of] over 5,000 people.”¹²³ The small town of Ipswich celebrates “Trail Days” to this day with people from the community taking place in the weekend event filled with bake sales, craft shows, live entertainment, and street dancing. The event was well received in 1939 and people from the surrounding towns traveled to Ipswich to partake in the jubilation and put the woes of the Great Depression behind them. Lacher concluded, “1939 [was] satisfactory in many respects. Grain crops excellent [and] hay normal. Grain total yield: Barley- 1660 bushels, Oats- 1550 bushels, Wheat 1358 bushels.”¹²⁴ With higher crop yields and better conditions, Joseph Lacher had a successful year, and for the first time since the early years of the 1930s, Lacher breathed a sigh of relief as the year drew to a close.

¹¹⁹ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted In Dust*, 106 (see note 3).

¹²⁰ Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*, 170 (see note 2).

¹²¹ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted In Dust*, 95 (see note 3).

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Lacher, 1939, Jun. 19.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, Dec. 31.

Moving from a very productive year in 1939, Joseph Lacher faced increased hardships in 1940 that made his success at the end of the 1930s seem like a thing of the far past. Early in 1940, Lacher and the small community of farmers around Ipswich banded together to help a friend in need. On the morning of February 13, Lacher's neighbor Andrew L. Braun woke up to find his barn burned to the ground.¹²⁵ The fire, started by an unknown origin, didn't kill any livestock but burned all of Braun's harnesses and other equipment he had stored in his barn. Daniel Lacher recalled when he woke up the morning after the blaze consumed Braun's barn. He remembered, "I got up the next morning and Mother said, 'Look out the window to the south,' and I said, 'Oh my God, the barn is gone.'"¹²⁶ Fires were a great fear of many farmers during the drought years of the Dust Bowl. Timothy Egan mentioned, "The combination of wind, heat, lightning, and combustible grass was nature's perfect recipe for fire... Fire was a part of the prairie ecosystem, a way for the land to regenerate itself, clean out excess insect populations, and allow the grass to be renewed."¹²⁷ Luckily for the farmers in Lacher's area, the driest years of the drought had passed and Braun's barn was the only structure destroyed in the blaze. In this time of trouble, Lacher and other neighbors of Braun came together and helped him rebuild his barn the following June. Lacher wrote, "Helping A.L. Braun on new barn he has a lot of volunteers [to] help,"¹²⁸ and again, "Helped drive nails at A.L. Braun's new barn. There were about 20 men working on the new building."¹²⁹ Together, the volunteers helped Andrew L. Braun erect a new, stronger barn than the one he had before.

The cohesiveness of the farming community in Lacher's area was truly outstanding. These men and women stood side by side through the toughest years of the Great Depression and relied only on their determination to make ends meet on their respective farms. In times of great trouble throughout American history, the citizens of this nation have banded together to help each other survive and emerged from the depths of perilous times to be a better, stronger people through a shared hardship like the Dust Bowl. Joseph Lacher faced his own hardship in June of 1940 when Mother Nature threatened to destroy his crops yet another year. Lacher commented, "[A] hail storm destroyed our crop today. A terrific hail storm [at] 7 p.m. [rendered] all crops a total loss."¹³⁰ From drought, to grasshoppers, to dust, Lacher witnessed his crops destroyed in multiple ways, and he now added hail to that list. Timothy Egan described the strength of a similar hail storm in Kansas. He wrote, "The hail fell fast, pounding hard, the big ice stones bouncing when they hit, though some exploded on impact... [the farmer] looked out: the damage

¹²⁵ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1940, Feb. 13.

¹²⁶ Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

¹²⁷ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 37-38 (see note 5).

¹²⁸ Lacher, 1940, Jun. 10.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Jun. 12.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Jun. 17.

stretched all the way to his eighty acres of wheat as well. Nothing was spared; all the grain lay squashed on the ground...The grain crop was lost- a year's work gone in five minutes."¹³¹

When it came time to harvest his crops, Lacher described his dismal wheat crop as "very light due to hail damage,"¹³² but in a small glimmer of hope he cut his cane as a forage crop and mentioned that it, "Makes a good lot of feed."¹³³ Lacher's hay crop for 1940 was less than desirable and forced him to once again cut Russian thistles for feed. Lacher wrote, "[We] started to stack thistles at 10 a.m. till 5:30 p.m. without a stop [we] finished up. We were sure glad to get through, this was some job to work that junk."¹³⁴ Cutting and stacking the thistles was not Lacher's favorite job on the farm but it was necessary for the preservation of his livestock. While farming during the Great Depression was not always pretty, Lacher survived year after year. Joseph D. Lacher harvested only 309 bushels of wheat in 1940 compared to 1358 the year before, and when he put up Russian thistles for feed and cut his cane as a forage crop, he made it through another year on the farm. Lacher wrote, "Crops were light, feed -inferior. Had to cut thistles for feed. At least not [a] total failure...For some time it looked like [a] total loss."¹³⁵ The key to Lacher's success amidst repeated hardships on his farm was his resilient attitude in the face of failure. Throughout the Great Depression, millions of Americans faced trials like never before, and those who kept a positive attitude and hoped for the best accepted their failures better than others and moved on to another year.

1941 turned the page on the Great Depression for many Americans. As the year began, Joseph Lacher and his family were in a much better position than they were the previous few. While 1940 proved to be a bit of a road bump for Lacher's crops due to a June hail storm, 1941 helped him recover his losses and set him up for prosperous years to come. Lacher changed his strategy when he planted his crops for the year and learned from the mistakes made by farmers throughout the Dust Bowl of over-plowing and planting crops on grasslands that couldn't support large scale agriculture. While he planted his normal variety of corn, oats, barley, and wheat, Lacher also planted a crested wheat-grass/brome-grass/oats mixture that he called a "new crop." This seed type diversified his fields and reversed some of the damage to his land caused by the blowing years of dust in the 1930s. Similar actions were taken by farmers across the Great Plains as the Soil Conservation Service encouraged farmers to practice more sustainable agricultural methods in hopes of preventing another Dust Bowl from ever happening again.

Andy James, a farmer located eight miles north of notoriously dry Dalhart, Texas, went to extreme lengths to reverse the desertification that had occurred on his once level land that was

¹³¹ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 76 (see note 5).

¹³² Lacher, 1940, Jul. 30.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Sep. 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 26.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, notes pages.

covered with 57 sand dunes of varying sizes due to the drought of the Dust Bowl.¹³⁶ Donald Worster wrote:

[James] broke the hardpan surface of the listers with chisels; then he planted a stabilizing crop of kaffir and Sudan grass, those drought-defying immigrants from Africa... On the leeward side of the dunes he disked repeatedly, and along their top edges he dragged an eight-foot pole, trying to loosen the sandy soil so the wind could spread the dunes back over the land. Within three months, more than half the dunes had disappeared... What many feared had become an irreversible man-made desert was greening up.¹³⁷

Efforts like those of Lacher and James who practiced more sustainable agriculture resonated with farmers in the wake of the Dust Bowl. That said, the best way to pull any land out of a dust covered wasteland was rain, and that was exactly what Lacher received in 1941. Lacher wrote, "Over three inches of water fell since yesterday quite a boom to crops."¹³⁸ With sufficient rains, Lacher reported of having his best crop of the past decade and recorded 740 bushels of wheat, 1,400 bushels of barley, and 2,890 bushels of oats harvested respectively.¹³⁹ These increased numbers were even higher than Lacher's great crop in 1939, and as a result he made specific notes of his farm's income for the year. Lacher wrote:

Total for 1941 income:

Cattle	\$739.00	Cream	452.00
Hogs	300.00	Poultry	120.00
Lambs	402.00	Wool	510.00
Old Ewes	104.00	Loan	620.00

Total Income \$3,247.00

Less than five years removed from the peak of the Great Depression, Joseph Lacher's farm had turned around and provided his family with over three thousand dollars of income and over 5,000 bushels of crops in storage. The great diversification of Lacher's farm was seen when he mentioned selling livestock, poultry, cream, and wool along with raising crops to better his chances for a successful year. Theresa Morgan mentioned, "Mother would buy our groceries with the eggs and cream money."¹⁴⁰ Every little activity that took place on the farm impacted the overall wellbeing of the family and helped the Lachers survive the tough years of the Great Depression.

¹³⁶ Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 210 (see note 4).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1941, Jun. 6.

¹³⁹ Ibid., Aug. 21.

¹⁴⁰ Lacher, Morgan, and Gillick interview, October 21, 2014 (see note 11).

While 1941 was successful financially, the Lacher family faced the loss of a family member in October that shook them to their core. Rose Irene Lacher was the eighteen year-old eldest daughter of the Lacher clan. On the night of October 27, 1941, at 10 p.m., Rose used an Aladdin kerosene lamp to set her hair for a 4-H meeting the following day. With the lamp low on kerosene, Rose refilled the lit lamp and the fumes of the container caused the lamp to explode and it burned her severely. Joseph Lacher was awake in the dining room when he heard the explosion and saw Rose run outside. Lacher recalled, "I was in dining [room] ready to retire. I discovered [that] she ran outside [and] went out [to] pick her up and rolled her on [the] ground to put out [her] burning clothes. She was 2/3 burned over her body."¹⁴¹ Rose was rushed to St. Luke's Hospital in Aberdeen, but the severity of the burns was too much for her to overcome. She passed away two days later. On October 29 Lacher wrote, "My Lord and my God, Rose died 3:30 [a.m]. Have mercy on our dear daughter Rose, who passed out of this life of misery." Lacher and his family forever remembered their dear daughter Rose that was taken from this world too early. As the family showed time and time again throughout the 1930s, tragedy was handled one day at a time and they were far too accustomed to putting troubles behind them. Joseph Lacher concluded 1941 with his daughter Rose on his mind and her memory forever in his heart.

As the Great Depression drew to a close, Americans across the United States shifted their focus to the troubles looming across the seas. Adolf Hilter and the Nazis raged across Europe following their invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and the United States finally entered World War II after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The tough times of the Dust Bowl seemed to be a thing of the past as crops fruitfully sprouted from the ground. Crop prices increased as the demand for food grew with the scale of the war overseas. Historian R. Douglas Hurt mentioned in his book *The Great Plains During World War II* that South Dakota farmers made over \$234 million from their crops in 1942.¹⁴² He wrote, "The war years were good years for farmers on the Great Plains."¹⁴³ South Dakota faired especially well during the first few years of the war, and the numbers for 1941 "placed South Dakota second among the 48 states in production of durum wheat, third in other spring wheat, second in rye...[and] eighth in total acreage of crops harvested."¹⁴⁴

As South Dakota prospered with high prices, so did the farmers who produced the crops. Joseph Lacher called his harvest for 1942 the "Best grain-corn-hay crop in all [the] years I have farmed."¹⁴⁵ Lacher's crops for 1942 blew the previous year's totals out of the water, which he

¹⁴¹ Lacher, 1941, Oct. 27.

¹⁴² Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 169 (see note 8).

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ "Last Year's Record Farm Output Is Base for Bigger Production," *Rapid City Daily Journal* (Rapid City, SD), Feb. 26, 1942

¹⁴⁵ Personal diary of Joseph D. Lacher, 1942, Dec. 31.

considered at the time to be his best yields in over a decade. Lacher harvested 2,888 bushels of oats (62 bushels per acre), 3,326 bushels of wheat (31 bushels per acre), 2,163 bushels of barley (35 bushels per acre), and 1,000 bushels of ear corn which totaled over 9,300 bushels of crops harvested for 1942 and almost doubled his total from the previous year¹⁴⁶ Lacher concluded, “The year 1942 goes down in history as one of the most prosperous since 1920. A very cool summer [with] only 3 warm days, [and] rainfall above normal. Hay and feed crop the best in history to my recollection. Crops never were any better, no rust, no grasshopper damage.”¹⁴⁷ Prosperity returned to the Lacher family farm and the woes of the Great Depression were pushed far back in their collective memory.

The years 1933-1942 challenged every aspect of life on the Great Plains. The story has been told time and time again, yet it is still a story of desperation and defeat, of trial and perseverance, and of failure and success. The purpose of this paper was to tell the story of Joseph Daniel Lacher and his family as they set out to beat the odds and survive the Dust Bowl on the Great Plains. Lacher’s story has been told through the lens of his personal diaries that illustrated the challenges he faced on a daily basis. When studied closely, Lacher’s story is one of a man and his family who overcame persistent trials and never gave up. Hope is the one thing that kept Lacher and his family together as they persevered through the dirt, drought, and destruction that signified the 1930s. These journals hold the memory of a man long gone, but ever present through the stories they tell. Joseph Lacher’s stories will be forever remembered, just like the days of dust they described.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., Dec. 31.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., notes pages.

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