Albert A. Doerr, lender, landlord, and businessman of Larned, Kansas.
The Lender and the Modern Land Renting System: Albert A. Doerr’s Impact on Great Plains Farming Patterns

by Jaclyn J. S. Miller

The narrative of the foreclosing banker is a long-standing one in popular culture. John Ise observed in his classic memoir of pioneering in western Kansas that his parents generally regarded bank loans as risky ventures upon their home and land. To cover medical expenses in the early 1890s, they once had to pay 15 percent interest up front, or $45 of scarce cash. The Ise family’s fear of failing to pay the bank reverberated through the pages of Ise’s book. A Farmer’s Alliance pamphlet by Luna Kellie picked up this theme in a still more critical tone, when she accused railroads, bankers, and lawyers of “robbing farmers of their prairie homes” and forcing the former owners to pay the robbers “for a chance to till the soil.” In John Steinbeck’s classic novel, The Grapes of Wrath (1939), an infamous scene depicted machines completing the process of dispossession at the direction of the bankers who owned the land.1 In the midst of the post–World War I agricultural crisis and especially during the Great Depression, the threat that bankers might take over farmers’ land if they were unable to pay their mortgages was pervasive.

This article concentrates on the system of land turnover in western Kansas during the interwar period (1918–1939), with the intention of better understanding lenders’ influence over changing patterns of landownership while also adding nuance to the popular and scholarly narratives of the foreclosing banker and the unpopular increase in tenancy that resulted. Scholarship has focused largely on the conditions of tenancy in the nineteenth century and mirrored the criticisms of the popular literature outlined above.2 Critiques of the environmental effects of tenancy meanwhile

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dominate discussions of tenancy in the twentieth century. Understanding how and why lenders built large holdings of farmland during this era of sustained economic hardship for ordinary farmers in the region helps to offer a more complete picture of the changes being wrought in the agricultural economy. Farming on the Great Plains was moving rapidly toward consolidation and mechanization, heavily financed through an increasingly complicated credit system. The process of financing land and implements purchases made lenders active participants in the transition to the modern system of farming, and they facilitated this modernization as a result of a complex system of economic and cultural values. Even when purchasing or foreclosing land from distressed farmers resulted in the protection and expansion of lenders’ own financial interests, maintaining the land’s productive capacity in partnership with successful tenants also fulfilled lenders’ visions of progress and signaled their continued contributions to the productive use of land in the Great Plains.

Albert A. Doerr’s record as a lender and landlord in southwestern Kansas during the 1920s and 1930s illustrates how rural elites participated in the transformation of Great Plains agriculture to the consolidated and mechanized system it is today. As the owner of a large hardware and farm implements mercantile in Larned, Kansas, Doerr operated as a creditor for many customers making large purchases to expand their farms and machinery. He also served as a director of several regional banks and building and loan associations, thus engaging in the institutional lending field. Through his business interests and personal connections, Doerr amassed a large estate in nine Kansas counties over the course of the 1920s. He rented this land out to tenants and corresponded in detail with them about farm operations. These letters provide insight into the relationship between a landlord and his tenants in a changing system of land ownership and occupancy. They also reveal the hardships of maintaining a livelihood on the Plains during a period when crop and land prices remained unpredictable and production costs increased dramatically, especially when drought and dust descended on the region in the 1930s.

The process of land turnover is an odious part of regional lore, but Doerr’s case suggests that in addition to serving his personal business interests, buying out heavily indebted farmers both relieved them of mortgage burdens and served to stabilize a farming culture that few people wanted to upend. Land came into the hands of a few wealthy families, who kept it in production by way of tenant operators as the region weathered a depression and, later, years of drought. These investments were not merely speculative, and local businessmen did not simply seek to hold the land until they could sell it at a better price. Doerr’s example represents the intentions to hold these farms as valuable assets over the long term and to maintain the legacy of the farming culture within which he had matured.

Although many family farmers lost their livelihoods during this era, and tenants were sometimes more vulnerable than landowners, a place remained in the regional farming system for those who could manage large farms on an industrialized basis, even if they could not afford to own all the land they operated. The letters between Doerr and his tenants demonstrate how this system functioned and how the tenants were able to hold to their identity as farmers even as the region suffered from poor markets and terrible dust storms. Agricultural data provided by the Kansas State Census and the Kansas Board of Agriculture also indicate that over the interwar period, those who rented land could experience some success—even during difficult years—and often could aspire to own part of the land they operated. These data represent the transition of the regional farming landscape into its present form, where farmers mix land rental and ownership in order to maximize the efficiency of their operations.
large-scale grain and cattle operations and to provide maximum profit for themselves and the landed elite of the region.

Research into the landholdings of Albert Doerr illuminates the circumstances through which prominent individuals accumulated a vast amount of land in the wake of World War I. Deed and plat records noting when farmland changed hands show the significant pressures of overextended credit among many farmers in the 1920s. The acquisition of land by those who had lent aspiring farmers the money for expansion or improvements was a direct result of these pressures. Following the tides of reform and farm modernization, as well as the boom in farmland prices during World War I, lenders of all sorts had been actively involved in the expansion of credit as a means of increasing the size and quality of the independent farming population. Farmers’ debt burdens increased substantially owing to the purchases of tractors and farmland. American tractor purchases tripled between 1920 and 1930, from 246,000 to 920,000. In Kansas the number of tractors and combines on farms increased from 45,994 and 11,203, respectively, in 1928 to 87,515 and 41,572, respectively, in 1940. Though sales stalled in the drought-stricken southwest, one in two farms still owned a tractor.5

As farm implement purchases increased, the percentage of mortgaged farms rose to 42 percent by 1930. Expansion made some financial sense during the relatively wet years of the 1920s, when farmers continued to produce bounteous wheat crops, but deflation and unstable crop prices made it difficult for all but the most secure farmers to maintain control of their debt. Contemporary observers tended to blame unscrupulous bankers for overextending credit within the region.6 Indeed, rather than increase the landholdings of ordinary farmers, the process of mortgage seeking and land buying ultimately increased lenders’ hold on the land. Many clients failed to meet their commitments during the 1920s, and banks experienced pressure to call in their loans and foreclose.

Nothing about this situation spelled opportunity for national policy-makers or local lenders. Low crop prices and declining values of farm real estate meant that lenders had little to gain from their clients’ failure to pay. They would not earn much in the short term from acquiring the land themselves, as reselling the land at a good value was out of the question. Planting cash crops was risky due to the already strained markets, and if someone else managed the land, the owner would receive only one-quarter to one-third of the crop. Finally, purchasing land cheaply at the sheriff’s auction would reflect poorly upon local businessmen. Historian David Danbom commented that lenders therefore “tried to be liberal, extending loans and delaying payments when they could,” that is, until

Landlords such as southwest Kansan A. A. Doerr concerned themselves with every aspect of the farming cycle, including the timing of planting and harvesting as well as instructions for marketing their share of the crops. During the 1920s large producers increasingly mechanized their wheat farming operations in an effort to maximize profits during good times and bad. The Edwards County wheat harvesting crew, depicted here in 1927, posed with a Case Combine and McCormick-Deering tractor.

their own creditors forced them to call in mortgages. In the 1930s weather complicated the situation still further by making land investments risky and maintenance difficult. Temporary moratoriums on foreclosure passed at the state and national levels, combined with New Deal refinancing schemes under the Farm Credit Administration, prevented lenders from taking over land in the 1930s. Although circumstances in the 1920s did drive many lenders and other businesspeople in agricultural regions to invest deeply in farm real estate at the expense of smaller farm owners, conditions did not support high rates of foreclosure in southwestern Kansas during the 1930s.

Although the process of farm consolidation overturned long-cherished notions of individual ownership of small farms, it did not represent a shift in the cultural valuation of the land for agriculture. Many of the new owners,

8. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 152–53; Peter Fearon, Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 154. The legal implications of the foreclosure moratoria, which were upheld as emergency measures in the U.S. Supreme Court, are discussed in John A. Fitter and Derek S. Hoff, Fighting Foreclosure: The Blaisdell Case, the Contract Clause, and the Great Depression (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).
in building up increasingly larger estates, intended to keep the land under cultivation over the long term. The efficiencies of large-scale, mechanized wheat farming would allow their large landholdings to turn minimal profits as landlords rode out the farm crisis. Even as the Depression deepened and drought convulsed the region, landlords like Doerr would continue to hold on to the land in hopes that it would eventually form a valuable part of their personal legacies. In doing so, landlords played key roles in maintaining the regional identity as a farming culture, even while they also accelerated the transformation of the farm economy into one centered on the ownership of large amounts of property by elite families and on the management of renters.

Despite his humble origins, Albert Doerr is representative of western Kansas’s wealthy business class, which went on to own vast amounts of land in the region. Doerr’s family moved to western Kansas in 1877 from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during the early phase of the region’s settlement. At this time Albert, the eldest son at age eleven, began helping his father farm the family homestead. He earned a certificate to teach in country schools when he was twenty-one, but he continued to farm. After briefly serving in the 1890s as the editor of a Larned, Kansas, newspaper, the Tiller and Toiler, he embarked upon a mercantile and agricultural implements business in Larned. Doerr built up a business demonstrating and selling the modern conveniences required for the new, modern vision of “country life,” such as threshers and tractors, automobiles, and fixtures for household electricity and plumbing.9 His success in managing the A. A. Doerr Mercantile Company allowed him to invest in many other ventures, including several banks and lending institutions. He purchased thousands of acres of farmland throughout southwestern Kansas and rented them out, often simultaneously serving as his renters’ implements dealer and mortgage lender. Many businessmen, especially rural bankers and merchants, considered land purchases for speculation and rental purposes a matter of course.10 But Doerr’s background in farming undoubtedly influenced his decision to invest in land; his position as a commercial farmer, a merchant of the mechanized tools of modern farming, and a creditor gave him a strong interest in the future of modern agriculture in the region.

Over the course of his lifetime, Doerr purchased and maintained nearly 15,000 acres of farmland throughout nine counties in southwestern Kansas, a large holding even for this part of the state.11 Deed records from these counties, along with corroborating detail from section indexes displaying the mortgage and ownership transactions on a particular piece of land, help to illustrate Doerr’s land purchasing patterns. His land purchases from the 1880s through the 1910s came in his home county of Pawnee, in the Sawmill, Valley Center, and Pleasant Valley townships. Although Doerr occasionally sold farm real estate for a profit, in rich-soiled Pawnee County more than anywhere else, in the overwhelming number of cases he retained the land over the long term.12 Instead of building a monetary estate for his family out of the sale of his land once it recovered in value in the 1940s, Doerr held the land for his heirs. This confirmed his commitment to landholding as a stable investment for his family estate.


11. The total number of acres owned by Doerr derives from deed records in Pawnee, Ness, Ford, Hodgeman, Grant, Kearny, Hamilton, Finney, and Scott Counties. The deeds were cross-referenced with section records to ascertain how long Doerr held the land. My tally of 14,680 acres includes all of the parcels of land Doerr purchased and did not resell in the short term (there were very few of these cases). This does not include countless town lots purchased and resold over his lifetime. To put this in perspective, the average farm size in the state of Kansas was only 374 acres by Doerr’s death in 1950. Even considering that farms on the Plains of western Kansas were substantially larger than those in the east, Doerr’s estate was several times greater than the western average. See “Farm Creation in Kansas, 1860 to 1997,” citing the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 67th Annual Report and Farm Facts (Topeka: State Board of Agriculture, 1984); and “State Fact Sheets: Kansas,” USDA Economic Research Service, http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts.HTM.

12. Warranty Deed (WD) 2-56 (February 28, 1901) sold a quarter section purchased for $1,200 for a $300 profit. WD 13-154 (March 17, 1904) and WD 13-172 (March 22, 1904) sold three quarter sections purchased by an executor’s deed for $4,100 for $5,800. WD 17-379 (May 9, 1906) conveyed a quarter section to Doerr, which he sold two years later (March 26, 1908) for $5,000 (WD 18-398).
Doerr accumulated nearly 50 percent of his landed estate during the 1920s from those experiencing substantial mortgage distress. In counties west of Pawnee, including Hodgeman, Kearny, Hamilton, and Finney, the effects of heavy mortgage debt among those who deeded their farms to Doerr became clear. On several occasions Doerr purchased multiple parcels from the same individuals, indicating that perhaps they had been trying to expand their landholdings but could not manage to pay off the debt accrued while poor crop prices prevailed. One individual had owned 400 acres in Hodgeman County and a quarter section (160 acres) in Grant County but mortgaged them for $7,000 and ultimately sold out to Doerr in three separate deeds between June and September of 1921. A farmer in Finney County had managed to mortgage his 640 acres to multiple lending institutions, including the Federal Land Bank of Wichita, local banks, and eastern mortgage companies, for an incredible $16,150.13 This large sum must have caused quite a burden before the owner sold the land to Doerr in 1926.

In a few cases Doerr purchased farms from foreclosing institutions. For example, in 1926 he purchased 160 acres in Garfield from the Jellison Trust Company. Jellison had foreclosed on the property and repurchased the sheriff’s deed to the land for $1,736. It was a common practice for lending institutions to recoup the collateral on their debts and hold them until they could be sold at a reasonable price. In this case, the company sold to Doerr at a slight discount.14 As a successful businessman interested in farmland investments, Doerr had a long-standing relationship with the Jellison Trust Company; at one time, Jellison had even referred several potential buyers to Doerr when he was considering selling his mercantile business. Transacting purchases through trust companies was common among the financial elite in western Kansas. The practice had the benefit of avoiding direct foreclosure sales and probably helped to insulate Doerr from harmful backlash within the region, a matter of utmost importance for a merchant-lender dependent on farmer clients for the success of his implements business.

Doerr did not just protect his own image in making indirect purchases such as these. Dealing directly with former owners helped these farmers avoid humiliating foreclosure proceedings, and allowed them to choose whether they wanted to deed the land directly to someone they knew in the region, rather than to a faceless mortgage company or bank. The merchant certainly protected his financial investment through this process, as well. Doerr and his hardware store, the A.A. Doerr Mercantile Company, did not grant many mortgages with farm real estate as collateral, but the terms on which many farmers signed over their deeds to Doerr suggest that they were connected financially to him in some way. One common condition of the deeds was that Doerr paid the previous owner “$1 and other valuable considerations.”15 One dollar was and is the minimum price for transferring land to another individual; this price is perhaps most typically observed when considering honorary or charitable donations of land from wealthy donors. In this context, however, the monetary price did not likely convey a charitable intent. The phrase, “other valuable considerations,” ambiguous as it is, is most important to understanding these transactions. Given that the former owners’ mortgages later were recorded as paid off, it seems probable that Doerr gave them some amount of money for repayment of their debts to outside parties, and perhaps erased their smaller debts to his own mercantile company into the bargain. In receiving the land as payment for this financial assistance, Doerr recovered claims that likely would have gone unpaid in a legal foreclosure system that favored the holders of first mortgages on real estate.

Anecdotal evidence of similar cases from the 1920s into the early 1940s suggests a number of trends in the region. As many as 42 percent of farmers held mortgage obligations in 1930 as they tried to remain afloat during poor marketing seasons and maintain their stake in the farm economy through expansion and mechanization.16 When they proved unable to make payments, lenders and prominent merchants (who often had overlapping roles) stepped in to release farm owners from their debts and ultimately from the land they could not afford to own. This was true especially in the 1920s, before New Deal programs—carried out at the federal and state level—stepped in to assist farmers in keeping their homes. In some cases, working directly with lenders in turning over the deeds to their land could prove less shameful.

13. Hodgeman County WDs 12-174, 12-187; Grant County WD 21-184; Finney County WD N-570.
15. The “$1 and other valuable considerations” price was listed in ten out of fifteen deeds conveyed to Doerr or to the A. A. Doerr Mercantile in one county (Hamilton) alone. In an additional case, the price was “$10 and other valuable considerations.”
for farmers—if no less painful—than the foreclosure proceedings so common in popular accounts of the crisis. The assumption of mortgage debts in exchange for deeds, however, likely obscured a large number of distressed farmers from the already overwhelming records of farm foreclosures during the 1920s and early 1930s. More farm families were in distress than the historical record has demonstrated, and the transfer of land to wealthy businessmen under these circumstances was a direct result.

Doerr’s interest in buying all of this land and keeping it in the family estate thus continued a pattern whereby an increasing number of large farms were held by the few who could afford them. Former owners then migrated to town centers, moved out of the region, or became renters. As landlords such as Doerr could not manage their extensive holdings alone, they utilized some of these renters to keep the land in production. Although the returns from farming remained low until the onset of World War II boosted prices, landowners continued to place a high cultural value on farm real estate. Their predictions that the land would return to profitability if they could just keep it under good management ultimately proved correct.

As the size of individual landholdings on the Great Plains increased through the purchase of land from the insolvent, landlords grew concerned with managing the land properly.17 Exhibiting a long-term interest in preserving his estate, Doerr would have considered more than just short-term profit in coordinating his farms. Communication between the landlord and his farm operators revealed the ordinary concerns of tenants and landlords as well as the extra tensions of such relationships in the period of environmental and economic distress in the 1920s and 1930s. That Doerr extended forms of credit to many of his tenants added a further layer of complication to their interactions. Still, his attention to the details of farming, marketing, and to some extent soil conservation went beyond his concern for securing profits from his crop shares, rent, and loans. He was also interested in the long-term viability of his land investments.

The letters between Doerr and his tenants provide rare insight into the process of managing an extensive estate. They concerned every aspect of the farming cycle, including the timing of planting and harvesting as well as instructions to tenants about marketing the landlord’s share of the crops. An examination of letters from the early parts of the production cycle highlights some common characteristics of this correspondence. In the fall and spring planting seasons, tenants routinely informed Doerr about weather conditions and their progress in plowing the land. In the 1930s tenants from Rozel—close to Larned in west-central Kansas—to Ulysses (130 miles...
to the southwest), reported persistent drought. One tenant complained that he could not plant on time, as Doerr requested, due to a lack of rain. Doerr also paid close attention to his tenants’ maintenance of the soil. He often visited the farms to view the land and discuss instructions with his tenants. After visiting the farm of one of his long-term tenants in Garden City in September 1930, Doerr wrote: “I looked at the sod to-day, along the west side only and it looks as though it was necessary to disc same again. Please sow as soon as land is dry enough to work. Should any part of the sod need to be disced again do so, as it was to [sic] wet to examine the field.”

Doerr routinely visited his farms and had much to say about their maintenance. At the beginning of the planting cycle, Doerr’s letters frequently included instructions about seeding. The landlord purchased the seed from a nearby elevator and sent his tenants to pick up their portion. He followed the scientific farming maxims of the day in either purchasing treated seed or paying his tenants to treat it. Over the course of several letters, he gave specific instructions as to how much seed to plant per acre, varying from twenty quarts of seed to the acre near Garden City to eighteen quarts in Ulysses. This correspondence shows Doerr’s attention to the timing of the planting; in 1926 he wished to have the wheat sown by October 1, and in 1930 he was “anxious to have the wheat sown during the week of September fourteen to twenty-first.”

Doerr’s observations and detailed instructions to his tenants are an indication of his farming acumen, and his concern for all aspects of the farming cycle as well as other quotidian affairs of farm management—such as providing for repairs and building fences—reflected his position in a crop-share leasing arrangement common in the wheat region of western Kansas. As a Kansas State Agricultural College bulletin observed, this leasing system made landlords and tenants partners who shared in the risks of crop failures and mutually benefited from maintaining soil fertility and good farming practices. The bulletin concluded that “as a result, landlords whose farms are rented for a share of the crops usually take a more active interest in the farming practices than those who rent for cash.”

Relations between landlord and tenant were not always smooth, however. Occasionally, tenants did not perform the maintenance Doerr required, and they received letters directing them in no uncertain terms to improve their operations. In 1930, for instance, Doerr exchanged letters with his tenant Earl Pitts of Jetmore and with a neighbor who observed that Pitts had failed to break all of his leased acreage. Pitts held an unpaid note with Doerr and, as Doerr had also advanced him a sum

18. I. M. Friesen (Garden City) to A. A. Doerr, April 15, 1930; Dave Thiesen (Garden City) to Doerr, September 5, 1930; Dave Thiesen (Garden City) to Doerr, October 25, 1930; Geo. Price (Ulysses) to Doerr, October 2, 1931; Verdie Young (Rozel) to Doerr, October 7, 1931; Doerr to Lawrence Simpson (Cimarron), September 23, 1933; and Simpson to Doerr, September 26, 1933, Series III, box 2, folders 6, 7, and 9, Doerr Papers.


20. Doerr to C. A. Main (Garden City), September 10, 1926; Doerr to George Basler (Ulysses), September 16, 1926; and Doerr to I. M. Friesen, September 13, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers.

21. “Farm Leases in Kansas,” Bulletin No. 221, Agricultural Experiment Station, Kansas State Agricultural College (Manhattan: Kansas State Printing Plant, June 1919); Repairs and fence building came up in a number of letters throughout the years. For examples, see David Johnson (Jetmore) to Doerr, April 15, 1922; Doerr to Johnson, April 24, 1922; R. D. Smith (Dodge City) to Doerr, October 7, 1930; Geo. Price (Ulysses) to Doerr, November 2, 1930; Coon Litzenberger (Jetmore) to
of money for the breaking, this made the situation worse. When he first learned of the issue in June, the landlord remarked: “It is certainly a great disappointment to me to have you handle the breaking in such a manner. If you are not going to finish please return the $35.00 that I let you have to break that you did not earn.” When Pitts failed to break the land by August, Doerr again demanded that he return the cash advance and “take steps to settle the balance of your note which with interest amounts to more than $475.00. This is an old note and we must have settlement of the same.”

When Pitts failed to reply to his landlord and lender’s letters, Doerr told him tersely in September: “I am hereby notifying you that unless you make satisfactory settlement on the breaking deal, as well as your old note, legal action will be taken against you within ten days from date. This will involve Mrs. Pitts, as well as John Love. Better give this matter your attention.” This threat finally provoked a response about the land breaking, with Pitts agreeing to finish up with the oversight of his neighbor. He did not, however, make any promises regarding the payment of the loan. Doerr’s concern with the character of his tenants and their ability to fulfill obligations—both financial and farm-related—was important because to remain viable, his farms needed good operators. As the number of farm operators declined over the course of the twentieth century, Doerr sustained the practices of the best farm managers while pressuring others to improve or get out of the business. In several cases Doerr observed an ugly growth of weeds on his properties and sent off letters demanding that his tenants attend to the problem. In a note to Dave Bradford of Jetmore in 1932, the landlord reprimanded the farmer for leaving fifty acres unworked and weedy. He wrote: “For some reason you seem unable to work for yourself. You had plenty of time to work the land if you had kept at it.” He added that if Bradford did not intend to put in a crop that fall, he should say so, as Doerr did “not care to let a good farm raise weeds only.” The landlord sent a less strident letter about weeds to E.V. Pizenger, also of Jetmore. Pizenger’s response revealed that in tough economic times, even mild suggestions from the landlord could sometimes evoke vituperative reactions from hard-pressed tenants. The tension in his words is palpable: “Yes Mr. Doerr I realized that the ground was getting weedy and I started to work it Friday.” He added that he had much more pressing concerns in needing to get some threshing done and earn money to pay the gas bill. Pizenger illustrated his dire economic situation: “As you know Mr. Doerr I spent $1100.00 putting out 500 acres of wheat last fall and lost it all but about 60 or 70 acres and it made 6 bu. I put out 200 acres of corn and this spring spent another $300.00 planting and working it and its [sic] all about burned up. So out of 700 acres of crop I will not get my seed back. Taxes Interest and Insurance always are due and must be paid.” These letters suggest that not only the common issues of land tenure—such as the prevailing notion that lazy tenants did not care well enough for their farms—but also the increasing pressures of depression and drought strained the landlord-tenant relationship.

A series of letters relating to soil movement in the Dust Bowl region provides further evidence of these added stressors. In 1936 and again in 1939 Doerr received complaints from neighbors, and from the Hodgeman and Finney County Boards of Commissioners, about soil blowing on his tenants’ land. Although each of the tenants involved tried to lay blame elsewhere, Doerr nonetheless cautioned them and other nearby tenants to take care and properly contour the land to avoid further blowing. When Doerr again chastised a tenant for letting weeds grow on his acreage in the Garden City area in 1937, the threat of blowing soil caused the tenant and even his neighbor to push back against the landlord’s instructions. Ralph Mead explained that some weeds were necessary to hold the soil, and his neighbor, R.E. Gasche, defended this conclusion. Gasche begged Doerr to reconsider his

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Doerr, June 8, 1931; Doerr to Geo. Wittig Jr. (Jetmore), June 23, 1931; R. D. Smith (Dodge City) to Doerr, September 17, 1931; and R. D. Smith (Dodge City) to Doerr, April 12, 1932, Series III, box 2, folders 6–8, Doerr Papers.

22. Doerr to Earl Pitts, May 9, 1930; June 19, 1930; and August 2, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers. 

23. Doerr to Pitts, September 4, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers. 


27. John Tarman to Doerr, February 14, 1936; Board of County Commissioners of Hodgeman County to Doerr, February 27, 1936; Tarman to Doerr, February 27, 1936; Tarman to Doerr, undated; Doerr to Andy Springer, February 29, 1936; Doerr to Friesen, March 6, 1936; Logan Green (county attorney, Finney) to Doerr, March 7, 1936; Ralph H. Mead to Doerr, January 25, 1939; and Doerr to Mead, January 28, 1939, Series III, box 2, folder 12 and Series III, box 3, folder 1, Doerr Papers. 

28. Andy Springer to Doerr, March 2, 1936; Doerr to Ralph Mead, March 9, 1936; and Doerr to Verdie Young, March 9, 1936, Series III, box 2, folder 12, Doerr Papers.
instructions for plowing under all weeds and stubble, remarking: "It seems to me that you would have just as good a chance at a wheat crop to drill in this stubble as to work ground the condition it is now. I do not want to feel that I am trying in any way to dictate to you, but I am trying to live here and that has been almost impossible the last few years [due to blowing dust]." The Dust Bowl created conditions that exacerbated the tensions between Doerr and his tenants during the production and maintenance phases of farming. The landlord’s interest in the weed-free appearance of his farms certainly caused some push-back from some of his tenants who had other priorities and ideas about the soil’s needs.

Beyond the correspondence related to the planting and maintenance phases of the farming cycle, Doerr also communicated with his tenants frequently during harvest and market times. These letters, again, share certain characteristics, with the weather occupying a primary role. Sometimes Doerr had to ask about hail damage or rain, but more often tenants volunteered this information. The vast majority of the letters concerning harvest and marketing, however, simply reported that the tenant had completed the job. Tenants often asked Doerr for advice about when to sell his share of the crop, and Doerr always gave instructions about when to sell, when to hold for better prices, and whether he planned to provide storage bins for holding the crop. Part of the success of the landlord-tenant relationship involved the easy exchange of information about challenges and successes in the farming process. The landlord’s marketing experience and business expertise often led tenants to trust his decisions.

Even if the system worked efficiently, it did not create large profits for many tenants or for the landlord during these years of agricultural depression; consequently,

29. Doerr to Ralph H. Mead, July 2, 1937; Mead to Doerr, July 14, 1937; and R. E. Gasche to Doerr, July 16, 1937, Series III, box 3, folder 1, Doerr Papers.


31. There are many examples of this type of letter contained in Series III, box 2, folders 6–12, Doerr Papers.
harvest and market time still produced the greatest strains on the landlord and some of his tenants. Doerr monitored his tenants closely during postharvest and marketing periods, and when tenant practices did not meet his standards, he scolded the tenants. If a tenant did not care properly for the harvested wheat, Doerr became especially irritable. As he wrote to a Garden City farmer in August 1930, “I was certainly displeased to find some of my wheat on the ground. Had I thought you was going [sic] to be all fall in getting it to town I certainly would have employed someone else to haul it.”32 In another case, a tenant near Bazine had left poor wheat in the granary well past harvest time. Doerr wrote to him exasperatedly: “You are about the only person that has [let] wheat spoil this year. I do not feel that I should be asked to stand a loss of my wheat on the ground. Had I thought you was going to [be] all fall in getting it to town I certainly would have employed someone else to haul it.”33

If tenants failed to bring the crop to market on time or send Doerr the check for his share of the sale, relations with the landlord tended to sour. Doerr’s tone ranged from firm to quite chilly, depending on the severity of the situation. Most frequently, he simply urged his correspondents to stop delaying and market the crops.34 Tenants who repeatedly failed to respond to his requests for information and payment at harvest time especially tested the landlord’s patience.35 Cases that involved tenants badly in arrears on their rent, of which there were at least six between 1920 and 1940, unsurprisingly provoked the strongest admonitions. Still, although Doerr occasionally told the tenant that he would not renew the lease, more often he exercised leniency. During the Dust Bowl, despite evidence that many farmers rushed to secure more land for planting wheat outside of their allotment contracts with the government, Doerr tended to stick with his current tenants.36

The poor economic climate of the Depression also created problems for tenants at harvest time, as destitution drove some individuals to criminal acts. Twice in one year, stolen grain caused headaches for Doerr and his tenants. In August 1930 two truckloads of wheat were stolen from one of Doerr’s farms near Garden City. This prompted him to reprimand the tenant responsible: “This wheat that was taken belonged to both of us and you will have to stand ¾ of the loss and I ¼ my rent share. The wheat was in your possession and you had permission long ago to market the same but did not do so. When we make final settlement we will adjust the same.” Doerr offered a $25 reward for the arrest and conviction of the wheat thieves and sent letters warning his other tenants in the area to “keep a close watch on the bins containing my wheat.”37 Unfortunately, thieves struck again in December, as another of Doerr’s Garden City tenants reported. This time Doerr seemed to accept the inevitable and tried to forestall more thefts by asking all his tenants in the area to move their grain to the Farmer’s Equity elevator in town.38

As an extended drought ground on through the 1930s, tenants repeatedly lamented the lack of rain that made operations difficult. In some cases, the tenants decided the crop was not worth cutting, and in one year Doerr asked several of his tenants to simply plow up the wheat and prepare for the next year.39 In one case, the poor yield made a tenant so hard-pressed for cash that he needed assistance in order to harvest the crop and keep operating for the next year. I.M. Friesen of Garden City wrote in July 1932 that he expected to harvest only four or five bushels of wheat per acre and that these would fetch only

32. Doerr to Ralph H. Mead, August 12, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers.
33. Doerr to Ed Beltz, April 11, 1933, Series III, box 2, folder 9, Doerr Papers.
34. The correspondence files between 1920 and 1940 contain numerous examples, including Doerr to Arthur Meredith (Larned), May 5, 1922; Doerr to S. H. Holden (Cimarron), January 7, 1925; Doerr to H. N. Meredith (Larned), May 23, 1928; Doerr to S. I. Taylor (Jetmore), April 19, 1929; and Doerr to J. W. Collins (Larned), April 2, 1931, Series III, box 2, folders 6–7, Doerr Papers.
35. Doerr’s correspondence with Fred Cosman of Jetmore, Kansas, represented his annoyance at a tenant’s failure to provide a full account of the amount of wheat harvested and prices at its sale. See Doerr to Cosman, July 19, 1930; July 19, 1930; September 3, 1930; October 15, 1930; and October 27, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers. Doerr even wrote to the Turon Mill & Elevator Co. to inquire after Cosman’s account. See Doerr to Turon Mill, October 28, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers.
36. Hurt, “Prices, Payments, and Production,” 80, 87; and Doerr to McComas, July 7, 1920 and July 22, 1920, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers. M. D. Brown, one of Doerr’s tenants residing near Larned, was a repeat defaulter and received several pleas for payment in 1931, 1932, and again in 1940. Doerr never appeared to evict him. See Doerr to Brown, June 9, 1931; November 2, 1931; and January 23, 1932, Series III, box 2, folders 7–8; and Doerr to Brown, June 14, 1940, Series III, box 3, folder 2, Doerr Papers.
37. Doerr to Calvin Kerschner (Garden City), August 12, 1930; Doerr to Dave Thiesen (Garden City), August 12, 1930; and Doerr to Sheriff’s Office (Garden City), August 13, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers.
38. Ralph Mead (Garden City) to Doerr, December 11, 1930; Doerr to Mead, December 12, 1930; and Doerr to Dave Thiesen, December 12, 1930, Series III, box 2, folder 6, Doerr Papers.
39. See, for example, George E. Price (Ulysses) to Doerr, June 1, 1932; and June 21, 1933; I. M. Friesen (Garden City) to Doerr, June 21 and 26,
the "landlord's right to rent payments."42 But this was not the landlord’s lien comprised the first part of a tenant's obligations to their landlords.

Doerr’s status as a merchant-lender complicated his relationship with his tenants in good times, but especially once the Depression hit. What tenancy reports termed “the landlord’s lien” comprised the first part of a landlord’s demands on his renters. This functioned as a “statutory lien upon the crops or chattels of the tenant” and was built into leases as a means of protection for the “landlord’s right to rent payments.”42 But this was not unusual among the rural business elite.

Occasionally, Doerr had to be quite firm in defending his fiscal interests in a crop and in demanding payment for a note. In one case, a tenant informed his lender-landlord that he was having trouble coming up with money to make a payment on a McCormick-Deering tractor note. He explored several options for paying it off, including having a neighbor buy some of his wheat in repayment for services. Doerr apparently did not approve of this solution, or it was insufficient to cover the loan. When the tenant later sold some of the wheat in his own name, Doerr wrote a stern letter to the tenant’s father informing him that his son needed to remit the payment to the mercantile

44. The letters in this file reference only a sampling of the credit accounts for clients of the A. A. Mercantile Company, because the credit collector Harvey Eckert wrote them only during periods when the boss was traveling extensively in 1934 and 1940. These are fairly indicative of the lending practices of that institution, however. Doerr and Eckert were lenient in extending the credit of good customers but less so on untrustworthy customers. For contrasting examples, see Eckert to Doerr, January 27, 1934; February 1, 1934; and March 3, 1940, Series III, box 3, folder 3, Doerr Papers.

45. It was only in 1940 that the mercantile contracted with the Industrial Bank and Trust Company of St. Louis, Missouri, to sell its loan papers to the mortgage lender. The mercantile continued to exercise authority in accepting loan applications and collecting on notes and thus retained a great deal of control over the local credit scene. See the Agreement, Series III, box 3, folder 3, Doerr Papers.

46. Ralph Mead (Garden City) to Doerr, September 7, 1930; and Mead to Doerr, February 14, 1931, Series III, box 2, folders 6, 7, Doerr Papers.
company for the mortgage it held on the wheat. In a second case, Doerr agreed to extend one of his tenants' loans for three years but balked at the tenant's attempts to stall the interest payments. Even when a fellow banker wrote to Doerr on the tenant's behalf, he responded, "The proposition of extending the interest payment does not appeal at all to me; since I am not compelling them to take up the loan." He added, "Personally, we are in need of just such items in our own affairs." Doerr clearly felt the strain of the Depression, too. He concluded as much in a letter to a friend in 1936: "This is the fifth consecutive complete failures [sic] in this territory and human hope has about vanished, and unless the climate reforms and becomes somewhat normal, this part of Kansas will be depopulated. You can imagine what collections are under such continued abnormal conditions. We are renewing a lot of paper that would outlaw this year for want of a payment to keep it alive." The poor agricultural and economic climate put stresses on the lending business, yet Doerr hoped for improvement and thus remained invested in agricultural enterprise. In most cases, this hopefulness led him to exercise leniency in his relations with loan clients rather than simply foreclose on their collateral.

Throughout the farming cycle, Doerr and his tenants had to contend with problematic conditions involving the climate and the economy in addition to the regular plowing, planting, harvesting, and marketing operations of the tenure system. The landlord's attention to even the most mundane details of farm appearance, operations, and marketing showed that Doerr did not simply
purchase a vast amount of land and leave it to tenants, seeking only to wring out the highest yields of wheat possible and giving little attention to the manner in which tenants performed the farming. Knowing a great deal about the farming business and keeping a close watch on operations from his home base in Larned, Doerr exhibited not the typical characteristics of the absentee “suitcase farmer,” but rather those of a highly invested landlord of a crop-share leasing arrangement.

Doerr’s record as a landlord provides some nuance to scholarly criticisms of suitcase farmers who cared little for the region and environment, but merely monitored their land’s seeding and harvesting while seeking maximum profit. Correspondence with his tenants during all points of the agricultural cycle reveals a significant amount of tension over the appearance of the farms, the tenants’ inability or unwillingness to do the work of farm maintenance, failures in marketing, or the upkeep of the soil. The latter cases in particular exemplify the growing impact of industrializing agriculture in the twentieth century and efforts to bring the tenure system up to grade in contending with environmental and economic challenges. Some of Doerr’s decisions indicate that he did not fully understand the complexity of the Great Plains ecology, and his comments hoping for a return to the region’s “normal climate” and precipitation level made it apparent that he did not believe a long-term revision of practices was necessary. Hoping for the return of the “usual” productivity of the soil, he continued to extract as many profitable bushels of wheat from his land as possible.

Thus, in his role as lender and landlord, he did embody some of the typical attitudes of the period’s farming frenzy, and his concerns for output largely reflected economic interest. Much like the region’s other farmers during this period, he participated in the exploitation of a fragile ecology and paid the price during years of drought and dust.

Nonetheless, Doerr learned over time the necessity of reducing erosion so as to prevent the soil on his farms from blowing. Although he and his tenants had contending notions about how to hold the soil—whether through deep fallowing or leaving unsightly weeds and stubble on the ground—Doerr advocated the improved techniques of conservation modeled by New Deal conservation programs. He and his tenants participated in the AAA’s allotment programs for wheat and the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act’s plans for farm management improvements. They submitted yearly farm plans and cooperated with local supervisors and extension agents in taking steps to reduce production and protect the soil.

Doerr (back row, left) was thoroughly intertwined in the regional economy of southwest and west-central Kansas in the 1920s and 1930s. He aided in the changeover from manual and independent approaches to farming to highly consolidated and mechanized agricultural practices across nine Kansas counties.
Doerr placed the land that he operated himself into the conservation program, and his farm plan was diverse in terms of soil conservation and building practices. He implemented noncrop pasture and fallowing systems while allowing livestock to graze on his land, produce manure, and enrich the soil. Scholars have criticized the federal government’s unfulfilled mission to redress the social and environmental problems of tenancy and its neglect of soil conservation efforts in its drive for economic recovery. Yet the combined efforts of local farmers and the government to at least temporarily assuage the loss of soil in the Dust Bowl should not count for nothing. Doerr’s participation in New Deal agricultural programs reveals his growing understanding of soil conservation needs.

Certainly the economic imperative for participation in the New Deal allotment programs was strong as well. The AAA provided landlords and farm operators the opportunity to earn income on land that had become unproductive during several years of drought, thus functioning as a kind of crop insurance. Doerr received a share of the AAA allotment payments for crop reduction proportional to his usual share of the crop—typically a one-quarter interest. But even more than that small stake in the AAA payments, he stood to gain in other ways from the money in his tenants’ pockets. Historian Peter Fearon has cited a statewide Extension Service questionnaire that reported, “Approximately 40 percent of the first adjustment payment was devoted to clearing debts; 26 percent was committed for home supplies, including food, clothing, and repairs to farm and home equipment; and 23 percent was earmarked for taxes.” The funds that would come back to Doerr for his loans on farm equipment provided strong incentive for supporting the AAA.

Doerr and his tenants continued to share the advantages of government benefit payments and advice on conservation. The sharing of benefits between landlord and tenants reflected the differences between wheat allotments and the cotton programs of the South, which allowed landowners to evict sharecroppers and keep the full payments themselves. Even in western Kansas, landlords sometimes took over their land to farm themselves in order to reap the full benefits. Correspondence with government agencies on behalf of his tenants, allowing them to participate in the AAA and other programs as well as supporting their applications for government loans, showed that Doerr was willing to foster the well-being of his longtime tenants as he himself received partial payments and indirect financial help from the influx of funds into the regional economy. With opportunities from Doerr, many of his tenants were able to improve their circumstances, continue long-term land rental contracts, and often purchase some land of their own to farm in conjunction with the rented land. These results demonstrate that the roots of the modern system of landholding and farming in western Kansas and the Great Plains more broadly began well before the boom in land and commodity prices in the wake of World War II and took on a different dimension than popular depictions suggested.

Portraits of a few of Doerr’s tenants help to humanize the twentieth-century farm tenancy relationship that provided an opportunity for both cooperation and independence in farm operations. Farm tenancy, which reformers viewed as an aberration from the American dream of landownership, nonetheless proved attractive for farmers on the Great Plains. During the 1920s and 1930s some were forced to become tenants due to their inability to repay debt, but others chose to remain tenants or to rent additional land rather than invest in acreage during an increasingly unstable economic period. Many tenants were members of their landlord’s family and thus faced no significant pressure to buy land themselves. As Peter Fearon put it, “There was little difference in status between tenants and owners, especially in central and western Kansas, and it is quite possible that some owners contemplating the burden of their debts envied renters, whose obligations were limited to livestock and machinery.” In Kansas, farm rental was becoming increasingly normalized. Farm operations in 1930 were composed of “57,151 full owners, 129


52. Fearon, Kansas in the Great Depression, 178. See also Hurt, “Prices, Payments, and Production,” 80.

37,611 part owners, and 70,326 tenants;” and these numbers remained fairly stable during the following decade. As the farm system advanced into its present form, it shaped new roles for both the landlord and those who operated the farms. For the farmers who rented Doerr’s land, tenancy did not proscribe opportunities for economic and social success, and renters on the Great Plains occupied a permanent place in the community. In fact, the tenants with whom Doerr chose to operate represented a stabilizing regional farm population—almost exclusively white, American-born, farm-raised individuals—devoted to their communities and to the continuation of a farm economy with maximized profits.

Peter C. Kiistner was one of Doerr’s most successful tenants. He was born in Grant County, Kansas, in 1889 and lived with his parents there until his marriage in 1914. By 1920 the federal census indicated that he owned his own farm free of a mortgage. Data from the Kansas State Agricultural Board in 1922 showed that Kiistner managed 1,435 acres of land in Grant County (where his parents lived) and 215 acres in Kearny County, where he made his home in the Kendall township. Kiistner followed still prevalent regional norms of planting a diverse range of crops while also leaving a great deal of land in prairie grass for the sustenance of his stock. Although historical census and agricultural board records failed to indicate the precise ratio of farmers’ rented versus owned land, correspondence records indicated that Kiistner rented part of Doerr’s land in Kearny County. The land under Kiistner’s management in Kearny County had increased to 320 acres by 1925. Again, he operated in a diverse fashion, with two-thirds of this land remaining in prairie grass and the remainder divided among winter wheat, corn, kafir, and milo. By 1937 a Kansas State Board of Agriculture record showed that Kiistner’s farm in Kearny County had once again expanded to 640 total acres. The proportion of land planted to winter wheat increased dramatically to 56 percent (360 acres). More than a quarter of the land (170 acres) remained in grass, while Kiistner maintained his tradition of planting a small acreage (110 acres) of other forage crops such as kafir and milo. This sizable operation, including land rented from Doerr, represented the achievements of a lifetime of farming and perseverance through a difficult period of economic and climatic pressures.

Walter Zook exhibited a similar background and life trajectory. He was born in 1891 and lived with his parents in Pawnee County, Kansas. His parents progressed from rental status to farm ownership by 1910. Walter Zook graduated from a two-year Mennonite college in 1912 and married in 1914, then mirrored his parents in moving from farm rental to partial ownership by 1940. His operations in 1915 on his farm in Pleasant Valley, Pawnee County, included 320 total acres, 150 acres of which he planted to winter wheat. He devoted 62 other acres to forage and fodder crops for his small number of horses, mules, cattle, and swine: 25 acres of corn, 6 of kafir and feterita, 16 of alfalfa, and 15 of cultivated hay. A Kansas Board of Agriculture survey in 1922 noted that his farm had expanded to 480 acres, with 260 (54 percent) of these acres planted to winter wheat. He had built up his livestock holdings considerably, and these animals had


55. Grant County data for 1922 from the Kansas State Board of Agriculture indicated that F. C. Kiistner held 1,320 acres of prairie grass, 20 acres planted to winter wheat, 5 to corn, 20 to kafir, 30 to milo, 30 to sorghum, and 10 to other uses. Kearny County records for the same year included 100 acres of prairie grass, 15 acres planted to winter wheat, 10 to corn, 25 to broom corn, 15 to sorghum, 20 to kafir, and 30 to milo. Kansas Board of Agriculture Farm Statistics for 1919–1924 and 1937–1940 (and later) are available on microfilm at the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka. A number of scholars have offered quantitative evidence of the diversity of Great Plains farming, including Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005). Since publication of this book, Cunfer has participated in other studies based on Geographic Information Systems analysis of agricultural census data for Kansas. The initial data setup is discussed in Kenneth M. Sylvester, Susan Hautaniemi Leonard, Myron P. Gutmann, and Geoff Cunfer, “Demography and Environment in Grassland Settlement: Using Linked Longitudinal and Cross-Sectional

56. Statistics for 1925 from Kansas State Population and Agricultural Census, 1925, Kendall, Kearny County. Kiistner, along with several other tenants, had participated in the AAA’s allotment program, with Doerr’s permission. See Correspondence, 1933, Series III, box 2, folder 9; and USDA-AAA-ACP Wheat Allotment Contract, Series III, box 5, folders 3–4, Doerr Papers.

57. Daniel B. and Mary M. Zook are listed in the 1900 Census, Pleasant Valley, Pawnee County (Supervisor’s District 7, Enumerator District 172, Sheet 3A, Line 54). They rented a farm at this time. In the 1910 census for Pleasant Valley (SD7, ED 125, Sheet 6A, Line 46), they were listed as owners of a mortgaged farm. Walter Zook classified himself as a renter on state and federal censuses from 1915 until 1930, but the 1940 census noted that he owned his home farm. Again, the exact portion of rented versus owned land is unavailable, but it is clear that Zook continued to rent some land in addition to what he owned.
the benefit of feeding from 45 acres of alfalfa and 80 acres of fenced pasture. Zook also owned a tractor and a cement silo, which signaled that his operation was becoming a sizable one befitting the common needs of expansive farm operations on the Plains. Only three years later, the state census reported that Zook controlled 640 acres in Pawnee County: 340 acres devoted to wheat, 160 to corn, and the rest to the upkeep of his many livestock. He had purchased a combined harvester-thresher by this time, probably from the A. A. Doerr Mercantile. Although Zook’s operations suffered somewhat during the Dust Bowl, he benefited from a number of New Deal programs and was able to maintain a solid stake in his community. Upon his death in 1963 the Great Bend Daily Tribune called him a “prominent Pawnee County farmer-stockman” and reported that he had served as a district director for the Kansas Farm Bureau, as a “field man” for the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers, and as the president of the Larned Rotary Club. 

Even those tenants who never owned land of their own during the time they rented from Doerr still managed some stability over the long term, as evidenced by their ability to stay in the business of farming even during a period of great out-migration from the farming regions of western Kansas. Verdie Young, who moved to Kansas from Kentucky sometime between 1918 and 1920, rented farms from Doerr in Pawnee and Finney Counties for at least twenty years. In 1925, for example, he operated 560 acres just in Pawnee County. He made his living largely from raising winter wheat (400 acres), though he also planted some feed crops and kept some pasture for his small herd of livestock. He owned a tractor, and he was a valuable enough tenant that Doerr allowed him to take contracts for threshing, hauling, and other seasonal activities.

58. Kansas State Agricultural Census, 1915, Pleasant Valley, Pawnee County. In 1922 Zook reported to the Kansas Board of Agriculture that he owned 12 horses, 21 mules, 5 milk cows, 45 other cattle, and 50 swine. The 1937 report of the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy noted that in northern states, including Kansas, tenants tended to own high-value machinery (worth an average of $866 per capita), even higher-value than that owned by farm owners in the region ($733 per capita), presumably because they operated greater acreages to make ends meet. See Gray and Wallace, Farm Tenancy, 55.

59. Correspondence with Doerr on March 2, 1932, confirms that on at least one occasion, Doerr held a note of Zook’s. This lending relationship was likely a long-standing one. See Zook to Doerr, March 2, 1932, Series III, box 2, folder 8, Doerr Papers. Zook was accepted into the 1934 and 1935 Corn-Hog Adjustment Program of the AAA and into the wheat adjustment program in 1939. See Series III, box 5, folders 6 and 11, Doerr Papers; obituary, Great Bend Daily Tribune, October 11, 1963.
Doerr had amassed an impressive amount of land and an expansive network of contacts in western Kansas early in his adult life. During the 1910s he served his Pawnee County neighbors in both houses of the Kansas Legislature. Armed with this experience and his considerable name recognition, power, and influence, Doerr sought and won the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor in 1924. He lost the general election contest to the Republican Party’s nominee, D.A.N. Chase of Linn County.

Doerr permitted him to participate in many of the New Deal acreage reduction and allotment programs, which allowed Young to persevere through tough years.

It has proven impossible to track every individual who rented land from Doerr over the course of the merchant’s lifetime, but an analysis of their correspondence between the early 1920s and the late 1930s allows for the elucidation of the careers of selected tenants in the available statistical measures of the state agricultural censuses and reports compiled by the Kansas Board of Agriculture. This data proves that Doerr’s tenants, in addition to renting land from him and perhaps from other landowners, tended to own some of the land they farmed. Doerr’s tenants’ diverse operations on both owned and rented land illustrate a system of increasingly large and mechanized farm operations. Renters technically occupied a lower class than the wealthy families who could afford to buy thousands of acres of land, but they often were able to invest in smaller acreages on their own as well as to purchase equipment to farm large acreages. They therefore exhibited successful qualities to landlords who allowed them to take over operations of their farms. Some scholars have argued that landlordism—absenteeism and corporation farming included—unequivocally made regional farm operators unstable, but this claim is unsubstantiated. Fears of tenancy in Kansas (which reached a rate of 44 percent by 1935, fairly average for the Great Plains region) and the corresponding fears of high farm turnover and accusations of soil robbing did not fully represent the reality of a farming system that could prove rewarding to those who opted out of the high carrying costs of landownership and focused their inputs upon production.

World War II merely solidified trends of high-input costs for hybridization, chemical use, and mechanization as well as trends toward fewer and larger farms farmed by renters or partial renters. The deed offices in Great Plains counties today reveal that similar patterns of ownership by wealthy families remain in place from before the war. Doerr’s own descendants maintain a sizable estate comprising much of the land that he acquired in the 1920s and began renting out to local farmers as wheat and pasture land. This land remains in a rental system much like the one that took shape in the period under

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60. Kansas State Census 1925, Agricultural Schedule for Grant Township, Pawnee County. See also letters from Doerr to Young, March 13, 1934 and June 24, 1935, Series III, box 2, folders 10–11, Doerr Papers.

61. Other scholars have run into the difficulty of identifying the class of wealthy landowners within the census rolls. James Malin remarked on the lack of data in his article “The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas,” Kansas Historical Quarterly 4 (November 1935): 350.

62. James Malin wrote, “There can be no question . . . that the net effect of both absenteeism and the corporation farming episode was to increase instability of farm operators, even though the extent of that influence cannot be determined.” Malin himself provided evidence that population persistence was greater in periods of depression (when landlords would acquire farms), and this seems contradictory. See Malin, “Turnover of Farm Population,” 351–53. The narrative of stability in the farm population, by contrast, is supported in such works as Craig Miner, Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890–1940 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); and Riney-Kehrberg, Rooted in Dust.

63. Danbom, Born in the Country, 234–37; Hurt, American Agriculture, 321. The USDA Economic Research Service State Fact Sheets for Kansas demonstrate that although the number of acres in farms in Kansas has declined by only four million acres from its 1965 peak of 50.2 million acres, the number of farms decreased in the same period (1965 to 2010).
study. Farmers who may own some land, but must rent a large amount of acreage in order to have sufficient land for profitable operation, continue to hold long-standing relationships with wealthy landowners. The transition to this system began not during an era of profit and high land prices but during the depressions of the 1920s and 1930s, when Doerr and other wealthy elites purchased large amounts of land from those who could no longer afford to pay their debts.

This study of Albert A. Doerr, a Larned, Kansas, merchant and lender, confirms the complexity of twentieth-century tenancy in a region where the subject has been understudied. Letters written between Doerr and his tenants in the 1920s and 1930s illuminate the landlord’s close attention to the details of maintaining his large southwestern Kansas estate and the long-term relationships he held with many of his tenants. The letters demonstrate Doerr’s experience as a farmer and show how Doerr perceived his role as an agricultural adviser to his tenants. Doerr instructed his tenants about proper seeds and fertilizer, crop cycles and fallowing, weed management, and the general maxims of soil conservation. These features of Doerr’s tenure system set him apart from landlords little versed in the principles of farming and dwelling so far from their holdings as to rarely visit or tend to the farming operation.

As a landlord and lender, Doerr certainly demonstrated an economic motive in promoting the success of his farms, extracting the maximum possible crop production, and recovering the money he lent his tenants. His operations contributed to the ecological damage of the region, but ultimately he did what he could to change his methods as farmers’ and government agencies’ understanding of soil science grew. Drought and dust tested the mettle of Great Plains farmers in unimaginable ways. Doerr, like many others residing in the heart of the devastated region, seemed incredulous that the climate could remain so “abnormal” for several successive years and was thus unsure of what to do if the drought failed to break. The conditions of the 1930s could exacerbate tense relations between landlords and tenants and occasionally draw out overt or veiled resistance to the landlord’s exacting demands. Despite some disagreements, Doerr’s disposition to hear out his tenants’ ideas through an extensive correspondence record—and not dismiss them out of hand—is important. Additionally, positive responses to New Deal–era land management programs show a willingness to adapt to the scientific knowledge of experts as well as a desire to do everything possible to maintain the vitality of the land for the long term. This study confirms Doerr’s acceptance of a still widely held cultural value for landholding, although the modern dynamic between an elite landowning class and a class of long-term farm tenants reflects a revision of the old ideal.

Doerr’s case is significant in elucidating landlords’ concerns for proper farm operation, profit, and conservation for the future. The qualitative evidence abundant in the collection of letters between Doerr and his tenants is invaluable in better understanding the lived relationships of tenancy, rather than just the raw statistics tracking farmers’ mobility within the agricultural ladder that have occupied the majority of historical scholarship on tenancy. Analysis of these letters shows that Doerr’s ecological understanding remained inadequate and that he contributed to the continuing degradation of the soil of the Great Plains. This attitude, however, was emblematic of the time and, indeed, of those heavily invested in the capitalist agricultural system. This landlord nonetheless embodied a number of the better traits of landlords and generally understanding local lenders. The system of tenancy under landlord Albert A. Doerr, then, highlights several important issues regarding changes in the tenancy system of the twentieth century, uncovers some of the realities of rural class interactions during a period of tremendous ecological and economic stress, and shows the landlord less as the monolithic figure historians have presented and more as a complex player in farm communities. [KH]