



Movie marquee for the film "The Plow That Broke the Plains," circa 1936.

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"Taking Pictures of the History of Today": The Federal Government Photographs North Dakota, 1936-1942

D. Jerome Tweton

The 1930s, deeply etched in the collective American memory by the Great Depression, was a decade of innovative ideas and creative solutions. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's remarkable New Deal spawned a complicated maze of federal agencies to address the nation's widespread poverty and social problems. In order to explain and justify the new programs and accomplishments, agencies such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Public Works Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Resettlement Administration established offices, published books and pamphlets, sent speakers into communities, and documented their work through films and photographs. Roosevelt, who masterfully used radio to explain his ideas and positions, understood the power of communication through visual and printed media. North Dakota received its share of federal attention, in part through visual documentation. A half-dozen talented Resettlement Administration photographers included North Dakota in their sweep of the northern Great Plains, and a New Deal film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, contains footage and significant concepts from the state's daunting depression years.¹

In April 1935, Rexford Guy Tugwell, former Columbia economics professor and Undersecretary of Agriculture, took over the reins of a new federal agency — the Resettlement Administration (RA). Created by presidential executive order, the agency was charged with long-range planning that emphasized rural rehabilitation. The RA and Tugwell focused on the "little farmer" — those who were deeply in debt, who worked submarginal land, who were destitute. The RA was the social planner's delight for it meant advising people where and how to live. The resettlement concept that emphasized relocation of farmers became one of the

New Deal's most controversial schemes. To some this was socialism; to others it was the reclaiming of human resources. Tugwell soon earned the reputation as a radical member of the New Deal's brain trust. He astutely realized that his agency's program and the depression needed to be translated into terms that the person on the street could understand. The problems that confronted the "little farmer" had to be documented in such a way as to create a sympathetic public.

Tugwell, therefore, placed a high priority on public information. His Information Division produced a flood of creatively written newspaper stories, radio scripts, educational speeches, and magazine articles. That division's Historical Section left the most lasting mark on the nation, for under the supervision of Roy Emerson Stryker it took on one of the New Deal's most ambitious projects — the photographing of America.²

When Tugwell appointed Stryker as Chief of the Historical Section in July 1935, he was calling upon someone who had his complete confidence. In 1921 Stryker and his bride left their Colorado ranch for an eastern honeymoon trip and the exciting possibility of finding employment with a New York City settlement house project operated by Union Theological Seminary. While working in the city's slum area, Stryker attended Columbia University where he formed a lasting friendship with Tugwell who taught him economics. He learned compassion for people at the settlement house and the importance of a broad education at Columbia. Between 1924 when he earned his B.A. in economics and 1935 when he joined the Resettlement Administration, Stryker worked closely with Tugwell, completing an M.A., teaching introductory economics courses, collaborating on their jointly authored text, *American Economic Life*, and organizing an imaginative new

¹ For example, a Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) put together a film, *The Story of FERA in North Dakota* (1936), which depicted people who were working on relief projects throughout the state. Although the film is not of professional quality, it does give the viewer an excellent overview of how FERA worked and what FERA

did for North Dakota. A copy is available at the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

² Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics, The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 4, 93, 118.



Joe Kramer, Williams County, North Dakota, September 1937.
Photograph by Russell Lee.

course, "Contemporary Civilization."

Although Stryker was not a photographer, he believed strongly in the use of pictures to explain economics as well as social problems. In 1934 Stryker followed Tugwell to Washington where he found work with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. With Tugwell's support he began work on a book in which photographs would be used to illustrate the development of American farming. The project was never completed, for Tugwell needed Stryker's keen eye for visuals to make sure that the Historical Section succeeded in its task.³

With a meager budget and vague directives, Stryker organized, oversaw, and completed the most successful and largest photographic operation in the nation's history. Between 1935 and 1943, the Historical Section

took more than 272,000 photographs of the American scene. (The merger of the RA into the Farm Security Administration in 1937 did not interrupt the project.) Stryker had the uncanny knack of employing imaginative photographers, most of whom would go on to prominent careers in camera art — Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, Carl Mydans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Margaret Bourke-White, Marion Post Wolcott, John Collier, Jack Delano, and John Vachon.⁴ These were exceptionally talented people who took fine photographs, but it was Stryker who demanded excellence in their work and insisted that the photographs have context and meaning. Carl Mydans recalls the day that he was getting ready to leave for an assignment in the Cotton Belt. "By the way, what do you know about cotton?" Stryker inquired. "Not very much," Mydans replied. The young photographer learned about cotton before he was allowed to leave for the South. "We sat down and we talked almost all day about cotton . . .," Mydans remembers. "He talked about cotton as an agricultural product, cotton as a commercial product, the history of cotton in the South, what cotton did to the history of the U.S.A., and how it affected areas outside the U.S.A."⁵ The federal photographers were not just taking pictures; they were producing a documentary of the American people and their land. To the chief and his crew, this was a grand crusade.

Stryker and Tugwell agreed that the initial thrust of the section's work should be the documentation of what they called "the lower third" — that one third of the nation which in his 1936 inaugural address President Roosevelt described as "ill-clad, ill-housed, ill-nourished." The section's first field photographers (Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Carl Mydans, Ben Shahn) went out into the American landscape to capture the plight of hungry, tattered people on film. The "lower third" received the section's primary attention through 1937. In 1938 Stryker changed the focus of his photographers' assignments. The approach became much more positive. Themes of progress such as transportation and radio were developed. He instructed his photographers to develop innovative projects. They did. For example, Lee stumbled on Pie Town, New Mexico, and did a series on the life of the people who lived there. The series became a classic and was featured in *U.S. Camera* during 1941. Rothstein headed to the West to snap a "positive" image of the region that he had visited during the drought of 1936.⁶

³ F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade, Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), pp. 4-16, 26-27. Hurley's work is the best general study of the RA/FSA's Historical Section.

⁴ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, pp. 118-119.

⁵ Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, pp. 56-58.

⁶ Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared, A Classic Portrait of America And Its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), pp. 137, 22. This volume contains individual biographical and interpretive sketches of the major RA/FSA photographers. It reproduces an excellent sample of each photographer's work.



(Top) Fritz Frederick of Grant County, North Dakota, shows height of wheat if no drought, July 1936. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein. (Bottom) Farmer and stock in drought near Dickinson, Stark County, North Dakota, July 1936. Photograph by Paul Carter.





(Top) Fargo, North Dakota, 1939. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein. (Bottom) Vacant farm near Westfield, Emmons County, North Dakota, August 1936. Photograph by Carl Mydans.



Each of the Historical Section's photographers tended to concentrate on specific regions. Walker Evans, the most accomplished and artistic of the group, worked in the South prior to his firing in the summer of 1937. "I was too wild to have around; I was unmanageable," Evans admitted.⁷ Dorothea Lange, whose reputation as a splendid photographer preceded her Section years, covered mainly the West Coast and the Southwest. Lee and Vachon did the lion's share of the Midwest and Great Plains photography. Of the Section's photographers, six travelled through or throughout North Dakota: Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, Paul Carter, Russell Lee, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott.

Arthur Rothstein, one of Stryker's former students at Columbia, became the Historical Section's first employed photographer in July 1935. After spending his first year photographing every aspect of the internal work of the Historical Section and processing the incoming pictures of photographers Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and Dorothea Lange, Rothstein received his first assignment. In the spring of 1936 he made his way to the Great Plains, which was in the throes of its most severe drought. If one was to capture the ravages of nature on the land, the plains was indeed the photographer's dream. Rothstein worked his way north from Oklahoma to North Dakota, catching the Dust Bowl and its people on film. In South Dakota, his "dream" turned into "nightmare." While he was in Pennington County, he came across a sun-bleached steer skull that was resting on cracked and parched ground. He took a variety of shots and then moved the skull to a grassy area to achieve a contrasting view. Soon after his negatives arrived in Washington, the Resettlement Administration released *The Skull* to the press, a common practice with especially noteworthy photographs. The release coincided with President Roosevelt's visit to Bismarck where a Congressional drought-study committee was scheduled to report to the President. "The day before the meeting, the campaign train was flooded with copies of the *Fargo Forum*, featuring a front-page story and one of my skull photographs under the caption "A Wooden Nickel," Rothstein later recalled. "The paper was strongly anti-Administration and local pride had been wounded." The *Forum*, according to the photographer, had labeled *The Skull* as well as other RA photographs as "fakes" and had accused him of "using the skull as stage property." The *Forum* "warned members of the President's party not to be taken in by 'unreliable stories' of the drought in that state [North Dakota]."⁸

Ironically, Rothstein, using a Zeiss Super Ikonta B camera, snapped the series of North Dakota pictures that best document the terrible drought of 1936. During July when North Dakota temperatures soared to record highs (121° at Steele), Rothstein toured southwestern North Dakota where the scorching sun and hungry grasshoppers had totally ruined the crop. *Wheat Eaten by Grasshoppers*, taken near Beach, illustrates the devastation that the insects could work on a once thriving field of grain. Reflecting Stryker's guiding spirit, Rothstein and the other Historical Section photographers attempted to relate people to the land. In what has become a symbol of the North Dakota drought, *Farm Near Dickinson* reflects Rothstein's sensitive approach to picture taking. A young boy sifts the dust near a plow that seems useless against an angry Nature. In the background, two structures pierce the horizon: a chimney where a farmstead had once prospered and a church where the local people had undoubtedly prayed for rain. *Fritz Frederick of Grant County Shows the Height of Wheat If No Drought and Sod Homestead Near Bowman* capture a spirit of despair. Fritz Frederick grimly signals the height to which his wheat would have grown in a normal year. Surrounded by a grassless and treeless land, the Bowman County resident looks dejectedly downward at the sun-baked earth. These four examples of Rothstein's 1936 trip into North Dakota accomplished what the Historical Section intended — documentation of the grim reality of the depression.

The shift in the Historical Section's focus in 1938 is mirrored in *Fargo, N.D.*, which Rothstein took on his return to North Dakota in 1939. He had convinced Stryker that he should return to the West to take "positive pictures." Stryker agreed. Undoubtedly this photograph was part of the Stryker plan to document American progress in transportation. The picture's mood is in stark contrast to the 1936 photographs. The Great Northern depot scene is optimistic; the man who is pushing the cart is smiling. In Rothstein's 1936 drought photographs, people did not smile. Rothstein left the Historical Section in 1940 to pursue a distinguished photojournalism career with *Look* and *Parade* magazines.⁹

Russell Lee joined the Historical Section in September 1936 after flirting with careers in chemical engineering and painting. By 1935 he had decided to pursue photography and began developing a portfolio with his Contax 35mm camera. A native of Illinois, Lee earned a reputation as the "ideal FSA photographer" and spent most of his government career photographing the

⁷ As quoted in Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, pp. 44-48.

⁸ As quoted in O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, p. 21. The RA/FSA photographs that are discussed in this article are from the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library,

University of North Dakota. They are from copies from the original negatives, which form the FSA/OWI Collection in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹ O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, p. 22.

Midwest and Great Plains. He took more photographs and spent more time on assignment than did any other Historical Section photographer. He earned a reputation for his sensitive eye. His *Children Eating Christmas Dinner*, which was taken in Iowa in 1936, depicted four children eating "potatoes, cabbage and a pie" for the festive holiday meal. Picked up by the news services, the photograph touched the nation.¹⁰

Lee's North Dakota assignment came in the fall of 1937 after a year in which he photographed flooding in the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys, farming in Iowa, and life in the cut-over region of northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.¹¹ He took most of his North Dakota pictures along Highway 2 and in Williams and Divide counties. Like Rothstein, Lee intended to capture people who were facing the worst economic and climatic disasters in American history. His *Joe Kramer* (Williams County) and *A Farm Family Near Ambrose* (Divide County) are attempts to show that one-third of a nation that was "ill-clad, ill-housed and ill-nourished." A determined Kramer, with his wife looking on apprehensively, could well be defending the farm against foreclosure. The Ambrose Farm Family portrait is a study in gloom — five sad-faced children and two adults who could be thinking, "What future do these children have?" Lee's



George P. Moeller listening to war news, Adams County, North Dakota, February 1942. Photograph by John Vachon.

Farm House (Williams County) pictures a tarpaper/wood shack set in an exceptionally trashy yard. By the 1930s traditional wood frame houses had replaced most homestead shanties. The Lee farm house was not a typical North Dakota farm. *Farm House* reflects the Section's mission to depict the problem of "the lower third."

Lee's work primarily focused on people. His friendly nature took him into many homes like that near Ambrose, and he became a master of flashbulb photography. He was intensely interested in the American scene. "Well, I'm taking pictures of the history of today," he explained his task. After 1942, when he left the Historical Section, Lee continued a successful photographic career with the government, private industry, and the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Texas.¹²

John Vachon was the youngest and least experienced of the Historical Section's photographers. In 1935, at age twenty-one a recent graduate of the College of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN), he hitchhiked to Washington, D.C., where he hoped to study literature at Catholic University of America. In May 1936, Stryker hired the Minnesotan as a messenger and file clerk. Vachon whiled away his time captioning and filing the photographs as they came in from the field. In early 1937 Stryker allowed Vachon, who had claimed to have no interest in photography, to do some shooting around Washington. His work "turned out" and soon he was taking pictures outside of the District. In October 1938, now classified as a "roving junior file clerk," Vachon was sent to Nebraska and Kansas as a photographer. "... in Omaha I first realized that I had developed my own style of seeing with a camera," he later observed.¹³

After spending 1939 back in the Washington files, Vachon officially became a "junior" photographer. He set out in early winter of 1940 to photograph North and South Dakota, and travelled through the Red River Valley and central North Dakota during October and November. He concentrated on small-town life, especially mainstreet scenes in towns such as Michigan, Velva, and Max. Election day found Vachon in McIntosh County at a rural schoolhouse polling place, Beaver Creek Precinct. Vachon produced some of his finest human character portraits when he spent the day photographing German-Russian farmers at the polling place. *German-Russian Farm Women on Election Day* illustrates the high caliber of his craft as well as his human touch.

A year and a half later, Vachon returned to North Dakota. In January 1942, he began a six-month photographic tour — his last for the Historical Section. He had become photographically attached to North

¹⁰ Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, pp. 80-82; *Christmas Dinner* appears in John Zielinski, *Unknown Iowa, Farm Security Photos, 1936-1941* (Kalona, IA: Photo Art Gallery Publications, 1977), p. 13.

¹¹ O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, p. 136.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 267-268; Robert L. Reid, *Picturing Minnesota, 1936-1943, Photographs from the Farm Security Administration* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

Lunch at rural school of three pupils and teacher, Williams County, North Dakota, February 1942. Photograph by John Vachon.



Dakota. "In February I reached the eastern edge of my beloved Plains," he recalled.¹⁴ During February he moved throughout western North Dakota, enthralled with the possibilities of winter photography. *Lunch at Rural School of Three Pupils and Teacher* (Williams County) presents a pleasant glimpse of an important aspect of rural life. *George P. Mueller Listening for War News* (Adams County) blended two subjects that increasingly became Historical Section topics: the impact of radio and the course of the war. The plains winter, however, as pictured in *Hettinger, N.D.*, became a Vachon fascination. "There was exhilaration in the glowing snow. In yellow-lighted Western Union Offices mothers wired money to sons in camp," Vachon recalled about North Dakota. "I was supposed to be taking pictures to show that this was a great country and I was finding out it really was. This was a sparsely populated area, still least affected by the war. I didn't know it at the time, but I was having a last look at America as it used to be."¹⁵

After military service during World War II, Vachon went on to a prominent career in photography. His 1942 winter tour in North Dakota must have had a profound influence on the young photographer, for his final project, as a Guggenheim fellow in 1973-74, involved a study of North Dakota in winter.¹⁶

Three other Historical Section photographers visited

North Dakota, spending less time and taking fewer pictures than did Rothstein, Lee, and Vachon. Carl Mydans, an accomplished newspaper reporter-turned-photographer, had published several pictures in *Time* by 1934, when he joined the staff of the Suburban Resettlement Administration (SRA). Visuals had become an important component of the SRA's work, and by 1935 it came under the administrative control of the RA. Stryker was elated to inherit Mydans. Although his stay with the Historical Section was brief, Mydans took on major assignments in the South and New England.¹⁷ August 1936 found him in southern North Dakota where he took *Vacant Farm Near Westfield* (Emmons County). Mydans primarily photographed the daily lives of people, but this North Dakota scene demonstrates that he was a fine landscape artist. In late 1936, Mydans embarked upon a long career with *Time-Life* publications.

Marian Post Wolcott entered the Historical Section in 1938, as Stryker was in the process of expanding its vision beyond "the lower third." She was an experienced photographer, having worked for Philadelphia's *Evening Bulletin*. A city woman, she had attended the New School for Social Research in New York City and studied in Vienna.¹⁸ Although she concentrated most of her assignment time in the South, in 1941 she developed a North Dakota portfolio along Highway 2 on her way to

¹⁴ As quoted in O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, p. 268.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

¹⁷ Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, p. 42; O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, pp. 115-117.

¹⁸ Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, p. 110.

Montana. Her North Dakota photographs confirm her reputation as one who possessed "a near romantic view of the countryside."¹⁹ Her *White Earth, N.D.* captures a distinctive rural beauty, and *Flour Mill in Grand Forks* demonstrates her fascination with the agricultural setting. She retired from the Historical Section in 1942 to raise a family.

Paul Carter's tenure with the Historical Section was brief — late 1935 into mid-1936. Stryker discouraged him from a career as a photographer, and Carter left government employment to open a camera shop.²⁰ Some thought that he lacked energy and the all-important "eye"; yet his July 1936 North Dakota trip produced vivid drought documents. *Farmer and Stock Near Dickinson* vividly depicts the horrible impact of the drought on animals.

The RA/FSA Historical Section succeeded beyond anyone's expectation in its bold and visionary project. Edward Steichen, the director of photography at New York City's Museum of Modern Art, praised its accomplishments as providing "the most remarkable human documents that were ever rendered in pictures."²¹ F. Jack Hurly, the project's historian, concluded, "Never again would the government engage in documentary photography on such a scale or with such skill . . . They [the photographers] taught that a picture could be beautiful and still possess a social con-

science."²² The Historical Section was successful for two major reasons. First, the photographers believed in the project. "The energy and zest with which almost all the FSA photographers pursued their work stemmed from a belief, a sense of destination, a conviction not only that something *could* be accomplished toward bettering the life of people, but that it *was* being accomplished, and that they were, in some part, doing it."²³ That assessment by Bernarda Shahn, RA/FSA photographer Ben Shahn's wife, captured the project's spirit: commitment. Those photographers, however, could not have achieved success without the other critical factor — Roy Stryker, whose vision and force drove the Historical Section. "In all the years since I left him," Carl Mydans observed, "when making pictures I often hear him say 'Now what are you doing that for? Why are you making that picture?' I still feel I have to justify myself before him as I did when I worked for him."²⁴

Fifty years later, the Historical Section's photographs are reminders of the Great Depression's dark days and the face of America and North Dakota during the 1930s. In a decade throughout which few Americans and fewer North Dakotans could afford cameras, film, and the cost of processing, these pictures captured the essence of North Dakota and its people.

The Historical Section provided Tugwell and the RA



White Earth, Montrail County, North Dakota, August 1941. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76; Reid, *Picturing Minnesota*, p. 3.

²¹ As quoted in Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, p. 118.

²² Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, p. 173.

²³ O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, p. 7.

²⁴ As quoted in Hurley, *Portrait of A Decade*, p. 175.

Hettinger, Adams County, North Dakota, 1942. Photograph by John Vachon.



with poignant still images of a depression-ridden people. Tugwell, however, realized that the nationwide distribution of a motion picture could explain the rural problem and justify the RA's work to millions of Americans.

Pare Lorentz, who had never made a movie, became Tugwell's film genius. Born in 1905, Lorentz grew up in a West Virginia family that prized a healthy environment. Lorentz recalled from his childhood an old man named Roach who during Saturday barber-shop discussions condemned the companies that cut down all the trees and polluted the rivers with chemicals. "My father was that kind of man — fought endless battles trying to keep the bass from being killed off. I grew up among such people."²⁵ Lorentz was not a radical such as were many documentary film people, but he was a political liberal who as motion picture editor for *Judge* in the 1920s fought movie censorship and who in 1933 published a picture book titled *The Roosevelt Year*. William Randolph Hearst had fired Lorentz as a political columnist for writing "nice things" about Henry Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture, in his King feature, "Washington Sideshow." Lorentz clearly was sympathetic with the aspirations and objectives of

Roosevelt's New Deal and Tugwell's RA.²⁶

Angered by the ravages of the Great Plains drought, which he witnessed first hand in 1931, Lorentz declared that it was "appalling to see how the machinery of business has in one decade physically exhausted and financially overpowered the country."²⁷ In 1934 Hollywood filmmakers rejected his idea for a movie about the drought. Later that year he was in Des Moines, Iowa, where he laid out his drought movie plan to James D. LeCron, a distant relative and an assistant to Secretary of Agriculture Wallace. Through the efforts of LeCron, Tugwell was persuaded to hire Lorentz as the RA's film consultant, in June 1935. Lorentz had found a sympathetic sponsor for his movie and Tugwell had found a sympathetic filmmaker for his agency.²⁸

By September Lorentz had developed a sketchy script and had hired his cameramen — Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, and Leo Hurwitz — all of whom had been associated with Nykino leftist filmmaking. The trio wanted and strove for a movie that would bitterly and openly condemn the capitalist system and its rape of the land. Lorentz, however, envisioned a film that would deal with the historical problem of drought — a straightforward story about human tragedy, not an anti-

²⁵ As quoted in Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films, A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1973), p. 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Pare Lorentz, "A Young Man Goes To Work," *Scribner's* (February,

1931), p. 208.

²⁸ William Alexander, *Film on the Left, American Documentary Film From 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 96; MacCann, *People's Films*, p. 63.

capitalism polemic.²⁹ Lorentz prevailed; after all, it was his film.

Better than any other documentary or Hollywood feature, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* captures not only the human tragedy of drought but also the historical context for the agricultural problems. In its twenty-five minutes, the film traces the settlement of the Great Plains, explains the impact of World War I on farming and overproduction, and arrives at the heart of the depression and its concurrent drought. Although the documentary embraces the entire Great Plains, it can be understood and viewed as a lesson in North Dakota's past. It is uncertain which sequences were filmed in North Dakota. Lorentz's crew started in Montana and Wyoming, then worked southward from the Dakotas to Texas during the seven-week trip.³⁰ Regardless of where the film shots took place, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* explains graphically and accurately fifty years of North Dakota's development.

The Plow That Broke the Plains consists of several dramatically structured units. As the film opens, a narrator explains the nature of the region, emphasizing that the Great Plains has always been a place of high winds, few rivers, and little moisture, and, as such, was intended to remain a grassland. A note of warning — even foreboding — characterizes the voice superimposed over the impressive and panoramic shots of the endless plains. The cattle frontier is then introduced — a voice conveying great excitement and optimism accompanies scenes of cattle moving onto the grasslands. The cattlemen's herds overgraze the plains, but it is the coming of the "plowman" that seals its doom. "Plow at your peril," the narrator warns. The land boom lures hundreds of thousands of farmers, armed with mechanization that harvests dust from the once fertile grasslands. Periodic drought drives many of the unsuspecting farmers from the plains. World War I becomes the prime villain in the region's over-plowing. In response to insistent government slogans that "food will win the war," farmers plow up more and more grassland. The film's juxtaposition of clips of tanks in Europe with tractors on the plains illustrates the interconnection between the buildup of World War I and the expansion of agriculture on the plains. The immediate result is depression and drought. Lorentz effectively and dramatically captures the dust storms that choked the region and the human tragedy that accompanied the environmental catastrophe. The portrait is both compelling and condemning. People had misused the land, and now the land was striking back at its abusers, forcing its people from the soil. No lens has better caught the heart and soul of a land in torment.



Still frame from *Plow That Broke the Plains*.

Only near the end of the film does Lorentz hint at a specific solution to the problem of dispossessed people of the plains. As cars loaded down with people and household goods turn into what is presumably a government camp in California, the voice-over blares:

Blown out, baked out, and broke;
Nothing to stay for, nothing to hope for.
Homeless, penniless and bewildered,
They join the great army of the highways.
No place to go, and no place to stop;
Nothing to eat, nothing to do.
Their home on four wheels.
Their work a desperate gamble for a days
labor along the highways — the price of
a sack of beans or a tank of gas.
All they ask is a chance to start over
And a chance for their children to eat,
To have medical care, to have homes again.³¹

That "chance," the narrative suggests, could be provided by a federal agency such as the Resettlement Administration.

The camera visuals are breathtaking and creative. The narration is forceful and direct. The musical score ties the narration and the visuals together in an uncanny way. The music is haunting and heightens the spirit of the film. Fortunately, Lorentz was able to engage composer Virgil Thompson. The two detested traditional Hollywood scores and shared a common interest in American folk music, which would become the basis for the melodies in the film.³² Thompson's score is master-

²⁹ Alexander, *Film on the Left*, pp. 97-102.

³⁰ MacCann, *The People's Films*, p. 63.

³¹ Quotations and descriptions are based on *The Plow That Broke*

the Plains (1936).

³² Erik Barnouw, *Documentary, A History of The Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 115.

fully orchestrated to strengthen the themes of the documentary. Sometimes it is loud and pointed; sometimes it is quiet and subtle. For example, over a scene of a dust storm one hears the gentle refrain of "Are you sleeping, are you sleeping, brother John, brother John?" As the camera sweeps across a dust-blown farmstead and dejected wind-blown people, one hears the muted but unmistakable strains of the Doxology. The music becomes a message of irony.

The Plow That Broke the Plains debuted on May 10, 1936, at a hotel in Washington, D.C. Although critics used phrases such as "thirty minutes of unforgettable film" and "a work of art," Hollywood distributors refused to book Lorentz's film into their theaters. Undaunted, Lorentz convinced independent theaters — especially in the Middle West — to show his film. Of the nation's 14,161 motion picture theaters, about 3,000 showed the film.³³ Since most North Dakota theater operators were independents, it is likely that the documentary played in the state.

In July 1936, *McCall's* allowed its movie critic, Pare Lorentz, to review his own documentary film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. "We had two prime objectives in making the picture," the novice filmmaker explained. "One, to show audiences a specific and exciting section of the country; the other to portray the events which led up to one of the major catastrophies in American history — to show the Great Drought which is now going into the sixth year." He characterized the movie as a "melodrama of nature" and described his cast: "Our heroine is the grass, our villain the sun and wind, our players the actual farmers living in the Plains country."³⁴

The Plow That Broke The Plains is an important historical document. Its broad, expansive theme of land abuse, however, makes Lorentz's work as appropriate for the 1990s as for the 1930s. What began essentially as a propaganda film for the Resettlement Administration turned out to be a documentary film classic — a dream that became a reality because the New Deal sought to document the plight of the people during depression.³⁵

The unique setting of the Great Depression and the experimentally pragmatic New Deal fostered a new spirit of innovation across the nation. The New Deal's determination to conquer the nation's economic woes sparked a broad spectrum of creative solutions and measures. Few, perhaps none, more creative than the Resettlement and Farm Security Administration's photography and film projects. They provide us, so many years later, with a window on the past — that of the nation and of North Dakota. ND

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³³ MacCann, *The People's Films*, pp. 69-70.

³⁴ *McCall's*, July, 1936, in Lorentz on Film, *Movies 1927-1941* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, Publishers, 1975), pp. 135-136.

³⁵ *The Plow That Broke the Plains* is available through the North

Dakota Film Library. For a general treatment of Lorentz see Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

