

## 9/19: Presentation: The Dust Bowl

- The Dust Bowl (1931-1941)
  - caused by long-term drought, and intensive agriculture...
  - occurred in the Great Plains: especially parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado
  - people most affected: farmers who lured out their by promise of “*agricultural wonderland*” by railroad companies, real-estate corporations
  - “dust storms” → thick, brown dust (almost like flour); especially affected babies, elderly, cattle and other animals
    - created a belief that “God was punishing them”...
  - What is the “dust”?
    - new plows turned over grass intensively and moisture went away, turning into powder
    - “dry farming” → putting down dust on fields as rains came
    - issue: you could only plow vertically and the wind can blow the dust away
    - storms blew all the way into the ocean

### \* Background: *sharecropping*

- began after the Civil War in 1860s (originates with freed slaves who wanted access to family security like access to schools)
- couldn't farm all of the land by themselves, so the owners gave small plots away to families/loaned technology, but they got 30% (always advantageous to whoever owns the land)
- eventually both white and black Americans involved in this process
- In the 1930s, *New Deal* caused landowners to decrease cotton production (govt. gave them cash) → with their new capital, Southern farmers bought tractors and other equipment to work all of their land
- many families had to leave plots and go into cities or other places - a “refugee crisis”

- Narratives about the Dust Bowl
  - \* through the New Deal Government and the national media
  - “let’s try to fix what happened” (1931-1936)
  - “it was the farmers’ fault” (1936-1941)
    - *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1937) - until now, farmers were the protagonist of the American story; taken off air and not shown again till the 1960s (politicians were convinced it was socialist, communist propaganda)
  - Rexford G. Tugwell - said you shouldn’t be able to farm wherever you want...
    - started the Resettlement Administration
    - founded experimental, model communities → e.g. “Ropesville” (right outside of Lubbock, TX)
      - main idea: can a family with every single opportunity farm on the Great Plains? → No.
- *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1937)
  - first government documentary made in the United States
  - directed by Pare Lorentz (a “director’s film critic”) → Tugwell gave him permission to shoot the film
  - music composer: Virgil Thompson
  - narrator: Thomas Chalmers
  - protagonist: The Great Plains...
  - use of “we” as the American people

- “cowboy” as an American symbol
- discussion of cattle ranging, railroads, settlement, etc.
- then: human-imposed order, dust; cattle crowding together representing farmers
- “*progress came to the plains*”...
- a history of the technology on the Great Plains, too
- first drought of 1880s-90s
- effects of the First World War; cultivating wheat as patriotic: “wheat will win the war”...
- more land for cultivation for profit: wheat, wheat, and more *wheat!*
- showing the destruction, dead animals, landscape forever changed, dust storms in the sky, people having to move away
- argument: same kind of “greedy motivations” that led to Jazz Age, Depression, led to the environmental disaster on the Great Plains; we set aside too much land for wheat, and plowed, cultivated too much
- antagonists of the film did not want to show contemporary images of these places → they still wanted to sell land

\* being aware of the bias/motivations/narratives of sources...

**9/21: Presentation/Workshop: The Art of the Dust Bowl: Film, Photography, Painting, and Music**

- “Ten-Minute Research Paper”...
    - *Dutch Survivors* (1936) by Alexander Hogue
    - “A Little Rain Will Do” by Cody Canada and the Departed
    - Thinking about these sources as “political documents” (of the 1930s and the 21st century, too); connections to the film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*
    - Thinking about the processes for researching and writing
- \* see your notes and “research papers” for more...