

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE ARTS

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 8-12

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PREVIEW COPY
INCLUDING THE COMPLETE FIRST LESSON

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ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS
AND THE
NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

INTRODUCTION

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

The National Center for History in the Schools and the Organization of American Historians have developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. Our units are the fruit of a collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, and literature from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

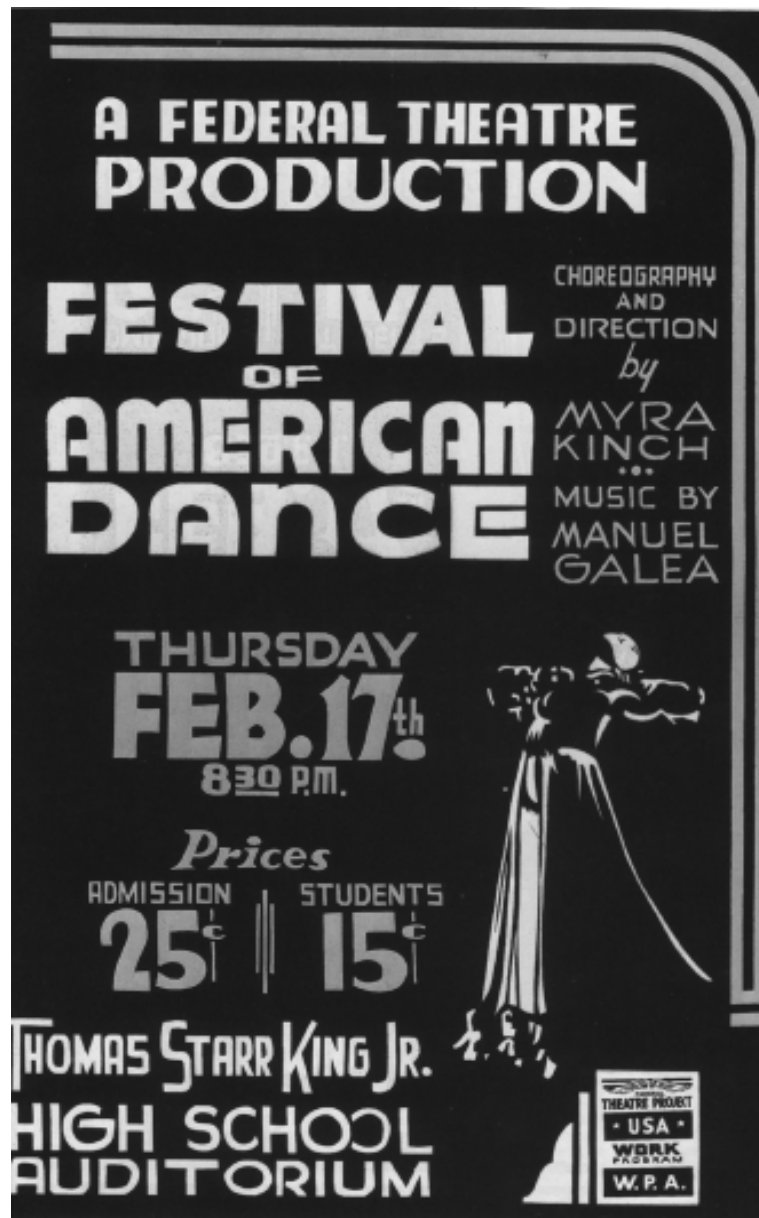
CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 8-12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific “dramatic moment” to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

INTRODUCTION

The lesson plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.



Los Angeles Federal Theatre Project, WPA, 1937
National Archives, Records of the Work Projects Administration

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

And then the Depression came.” This familiar lament more than distinguishes one decade from another. Within its meaning are the images and realities of disaster: the crash of the stock market, the howl of the dust storms, the cry of the hungry, the silence of the shamed. Thousands of Americans watched their destinies evaporate. The horizon of prosperity looming “just around the corner” seemed to fade from view. While the Depression may have jolted many out of the American Dream, its pattern of unemployment, frustration, and despair was neither a universal nor identical condition.

Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal was the political response to the Great Depression. Establishing the foundation of the modern welfare state while preserving the capitalist system, the New Deal experimented with unprecedented activism in an attempt to relieve the social and economic dislocation experienced by “one-third of the nation.” Federal programs extended not only into American business, agriculture, labor, and the arts; but into people’s daily lives. Despite a mixed legacy with respect to recovery and reform, the political response under Roosevelt proved that economic crisis did not require Americans to abandon democracy. Moreover, American popular culture during the 1930s revealed that economic and social “hard times” did not cause an abandonment of imagination, humor, or fun.

The material in this unit is designed to impress upon students the varying effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on the lives of ordinary Americans. The unit’s focus is primarily (but not exclusively) on the people rather than the policies, especially their fears, uncertainties, resilience, commonality of suffering, and survival. Individual lessons ask students to make inferences and to develop historical perspectives based upon evidence. The New Deal’s documentary impulse and funding for the arts provide a unique opportunity for students to expand their skills in “reading” the visual and literary records of the 1930s. Still, it is important to note that the exercise of documenting the Great Depression gained momentum as the crisis wore on. What students see and read as records of life in the thirties tells only part of the story.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit concerns artistic and political responses to the worst economic crisis in American history. These lessons fit into the context of a larger unit on the Great Depression. Teachers should introduce these lessons after examining the causes of the Great Depression. Students will then be offered not just an experience (however limited) of depression-era life, but historical antecedents for contemporary debates over the proper role of government in business, labor, agriculture, the arts, and individual’s lives.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

This unit is designed to correlate with Era 8: Standard 1B of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). In seeking to “understand how American life changed during the 1930s” students will utilize materials and activities which provide opportunities to (a) “explain the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on American farm owners, tenants, and sharecroppers,” and (b) “explain the cultural life of the Depression years in art, literature, and music, and evaluate the government’s role in promoting artistic expression.”

This unit cannot provide all of the possible ways to understand how American life changed during the 1930s; nor all the ways the New Deal addressed the Great Depression. It does offer a variety of documentary source materials--plays, literature, public record, and writings--to enable students to analyze significant aspects of life in the 1930s and some New Deal responses. This unit also provides a variety of options enabling teachers and students to go beyond the documents provided and extend the lessons.

Lessons provide active learning strategies. Reading, writing, role playing, and creating visual exhibits are some of the activities which challenge students to think on a variety of levels utilizing different approaches for different learning styles.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- To explore the effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on ordinary Americans.
- To understand how some aspects of American life changed during the 1930s.
- To explain aspects of the cultural life of the Depression years and debate the government’s role in promoting artistic expression.
- To identify cultural trends of the 1930s by analyzing the documentary expression in the arts.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Documentary Film—“The Plow that Broke the Plains”
2. Documenting the Migrant Experience
3. Film Study of the Grapes of Wrath
4. The New Deal’s Federal Theater Project

VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE ARTS

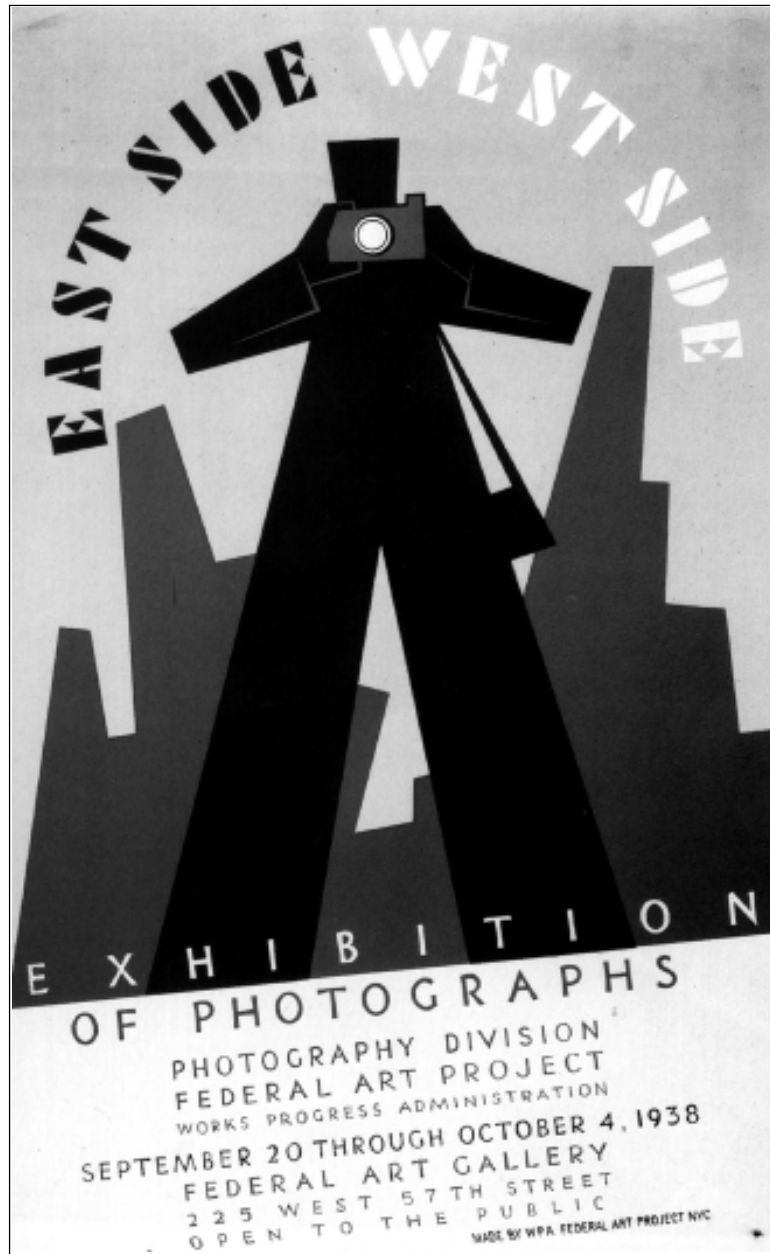
The 1930s marked the worst economic collapse experienced by this nation. Unemployment peaked at nearly 25% and hovered above 15% throughout the decade. Many a “forgotten man” disappeared into the Depression. Wavering confidence in the nation’s political and economic institutions called for bold experimentation and compelling leadership. Although Roosevelt’s New Deal measures never brought the country to complete recovery, government activism that produced Social Security, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), direct relief, labor reform, work projects, housing, and agricultural subsidies was unprecedented. Many saw Roosevelt as a savior who genuinely cared about the American public. To them, his voice over the airwaves gave reassurance that the values defining the American political experiment and cultural identity would prevail.

Under the New Deal, the notion of work expanded beyond the construction of roads, bridges, dams, and buildings. Government patronage for the arts inspired creativity, provided entertainment, and promoted American culture. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) became the New Deal’s largest employment agency. Under the WPA the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers’ Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Federal Music Project employed thousands of artists, writers, actors, film makers, musicians, and dancers. Other government agencies also supported aesthetic endeavors. The Resettlement Administration (RA), later absorbed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), produced documentary photographs, and the Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture commissioned post office murals. Not only did this New Deal for the arts put Americans to work, it also celebrated American workers, the nation’s history, its talents, and its diversity. Arts projects did not necessarily ennoble ordinary lives, but these lives became the subjects for plays, interviews, murals, and photographs, producing a documentary record of how the Great Depression affected them.

Like other New Deal remedies, however, the arts programs endured controversy. Critics charged that these programs were wasteful, amateurish, or that they flagrantly promoted the New Deal agenda and radical politics. At the same time, independent artists such as John Steinbeck and John Ford, who found creative inspiration in these socially conscious times, came under fire from forces who saw their work as leftist dogma disguised as art. However, the America that wasn’t on the breadlines generally embraced the trend by artists to record the American that was. And even those who eked out a living on government relief sometimes found it possible to listen to the radio, go to the “pictures” (movies), enjoy “the funny papers,” or read popular fiction from the Book-of-the-Month Club.

The New Deal had its weaknesses. It failed to alleviate the protracted poverty of migrant workers and urban poor, and either excluded or restricted access to relief agencies by racial minorities and women. Roosevelt’s “court packing” scheme threatened to undermine the system of checks and balances. Even the Keynesian

experiment of deficit financing, which fueled the successful war economy, resulted in reliance on government spending as policy, rather than careful application of deficit spending as an emergency action. Nevertheless, at a time when fascism seemed to some like the most expedient solution to economic crisis, the New Deal proved that capitalism and democracy could adapt and survive.



East Side West Side Exhibition of Photographs
Anthony Velanis, New York City Federal Art Project, WPA, 1938
Library of Congress

DRAMATIC MOMENT

The subject of the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper production of *One-Third of a Nation* focused on Franklin Roosevelt's second inaugural address in which he remarked:

. . . In this nation I see tens of millions of citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life.

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hands over them day by day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago.

I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions.

I see one-third of a nation ill-houses, ill clad, ill-nourished.

In the Living Newspaper production the characters "Little Man," and "Mrs. Buttonkooper" discuss the issue raised in the inaugural address. The play concludes with a comment from an off stage voice called the "Loudspeaker."

LITTLE MAN: By golly, that's right. According to what we've seen here tonite people have been going around for a hundred years or more—taking notes, making surveys—but nobody's ever done anything!

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: That's it. What good are all those surveys and speeches to us when we've got to live in a place almost as bad as that twenty-four hours a day! . . . What good are all those new laws that nobody obeys when maybe those kids are going to turn out to be crooks or murderers!

LITTLE MAN: Sure! And what good are all those housing bills that take care of less than two percent of the trouble? What good are they when we still have this? (Points to tenement.)

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: Look at it—and don't forget that isn't only New York. It's Philadelphia and Chicago and Boston and St. Louis! According to a man named Roosevelt, it's one-third of a nation! . . .

LITTLE MAN: (pause) Well, what are we going to do about it? . . .

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: (interrupting): You know what we're go-

ing to do—you and me? We're going to holler. And we're going to keep on hollering until they admit in Washington it's just as important to keep a man alive as to kill him!

LITTLE MAN: Will that do any good?

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: Sure it will. If we do it loud enough!

LITTLE MAN: Do you think they'll hear us?

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: They'll hear us all right if we all do it together—you and me and LaGuardia and Senator Wagner and the Housing Authorities and the Tenant Leagues and everybody who lives in a place like that! (Pointing to tenement, TENANTS start to fill the tenement as lights come up on it.)

LITTLE MAN: (excitedly): All right, all right, when do we begin?

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: Right now.

LITTLE MAN: *Now?*

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: *Now!* (Shouting) We want a decent place to live in! I want a place that's clean and fit for a man and a woman and kids! . . .

LITTLE MAN: Do you think they'll hear us?

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER: And if we don't *make* them hear us you're going to have just what you've always had—slums—disease—crime—juvenile delinquency. . . .

LOUDSPEAKER: Ladies and gentlemen, this might be Boston, New York, St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia—but let's just call it, "one-third of a nation!"

Source: Buttitta, Tony, and Barry Witham. *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

LESSON ONE: DOCUMENTARY FILM— “THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS”

A. LESSON OBJECTIVES

- To explain the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on American farm owners, tenants, and sharecroppers.
- To examine how the New Deal Resettlement Administration documented and dramatized the Dust Bowl.
- To analyze documentary film focusing on the elements of script, music and visual imagery.

B. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Charles Dickens begins *The Tale of Two Cities* with “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” The Great Depression was a devastating experience for many. The 1930s was a time of grinding poverty and suffering yet it was also a period of incredible creativity for the arts. Part of this creative effort was a movement to document the devastation brought about by the Depression.

This documentary movement is most visible in the many photographs taken as part of the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (RA) and its successor the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Often reprinted, these photographs provide most people with their images of the Great Depression and the efforts of the New Deal to solve the Great Depression’s problems.

Rexford Guy Tugwell, director of the Resettlement Administration (RA) and John Franklin Carter, the RA’s Office of Information Director, decided that more than still photographs were needed to document and dramatize the Dust Bowl. They chose Pare Lorentz to produce a film documenting the drought conditions affecting the Great Plains. The result was what has become a classic documentary film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Shown first for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in March 1936, distribution was hampered by Hollywood executives who feared commercial competition and argued it was government propaganda. Eventually commercial distribution did occur. Documenting the serious conditions of the Dust Bowl and raising larger issues about the role of laissez-faire capitalism and individualism, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* became an effective tool in the New Deal’s efforts to “fix” the broken Plains.

This lesson gives students the opportunity examine a film script to see how the problems and potential solutions to the Dust Bowl were presented by a New Deal agency.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES (2 days)

Distribute copies of the film script (Document 1) and the “Reading the Script” questions to students (Student Handout 1). Have students write their answers to the questions and conduct a discussion based upon their work.

After this analysis activity, students can view the film. The key task for students is to have them analyze the visual imagery and relate it to the script. View the film in sections based upon the script. Ask students to analyze the visual imagery, the music, and the text as a coherent, integrated document.

Have students write the answers to the “Making Inferences” questions (Student Handout 2). Conduct a discussion based on student responses.

D. EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

To extend the lesson focus, students can relate “The Plow that Broke the Plains” to 1930s films in general.

Have students view and compare and contrast Lorentz’s film “The River.”

Have students compare and contrast other films. Andrew Bergman’s *We’re in the Money: Depression America and its Films* provides categories and themes that are very useful for analysis. It is not necessary to show complete films in class. The most effective presentations are brief clips illustrating major themes of analysis. Students can select film clips which illustrate the themes identified below. Such an extended look at 1930s film would require research work done by students and/or teachers outside of class. A class period could cover film clips and analysis of a number of films. These can be student based presentations or primarily teacher led. Students can also be given research tasks to find and present other films on each genre.

Give the students the theme or themes, helping them to understand their basic meaning. Students would view the films for homework and select brief clips which illustrate the themes. Student reports to the class would feature film clips and explanations about how the film presents the particular theme. A number of these reports can be done in one class period.

You may wish to choose from the following:

1. Gangsters
Themes: Concern for law and violence
Mobility and the failure of legitimate institutions
Film: “Little Caesar”

2. Urban civilization
Themes: The moral weakness of the city
The corrupt evil-doers who live in cities
Film: “Lawyer-Man”

3. Anarcho-Nihilist Comedies

Themes: Comedies reflecting bitterness and despair of the 1930s

The purposefulness of chaos

Film: "Duck Soup"

4. Musicals

Theme: Escapism but reflecting the facts of life of the Great Depression

Film: "Gold Diggers of 1933"

E. RESOURCES

The following resources will assist in the development of this lesson:

Bergman, Andrew. *We're in the Money: Depression, America and Its Films*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971.

Lorentz, Pare. *FDR's Moviemaker: Memoirs and Scripts*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992.

Muscio, Giuliana. *Hollywood's New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997.

“The Plow that Broke the Plains” Film Script

I: PROLOGUE

This is a record of land...
of soil, rather than people
a story of the Great Plains:
the 400,000,000 acres of wind-swept grass lands that spread up
from the Texas Panhandle to Canada...
A high, treeless continent,
without rivers, without streams...
A country of high winds, and sun...
and of little rain...
By 1880 we had cleared
the Indian, and with
him, the buffalo, from
the Great Plains, and
established the last frontier...
A half million square
miles of natural range...
This is a picturization of
what we did with it.

II: GRASS

The grass lands...
a treeless wind-swept continent of grass
stretching from the broad Texan Panhandle
up through mountain reaches of Montana
and to the Canadian Border.
A country of high winds and sun...
High winds and sun...
without rivers, without streams,
with little rain.

III. CATTLE

First came the cattle...
an unfenced range a thousand miles long...
an uncharted ocean of grass,
the southern range for winter grazing
and the mountain plateaus for summer.
It was a cattleman's Paradise.
Up from the Rio Grande...
in from the rolling prairies...
down clear from the eastern highlands
the cattle rolled into the old buffalo range.
Fortunes in beef.
For a decade the world discovered the grass lands
and poured cattle into the plains.

The railroads brought markets to the edge of the plains...
land syndicates sprang up overnight
and the cattle rolled into the West.

IV: HOMESTEADERS

The railroad brought the world into the plains
...new populations, new needs crowded
the last frontier.
Once again the plowman followed the herder
and the pioneer came to the plains.
Make way for the plowman!
The first fence.
Progress came to the plain.
Two hundred miles from water,
two hundred miles from home,
but the land is new.
High winds and sun...
High winds and sun...
a country without rivers and with little rain.
Settler, plow at your peril!

V: WARNING

Many were disappointed.
The rains failed...
and the sun baked the light soil.
Many left...they fought the loneliness
and the hard years...
But the rains failed them.

VI: WAR

Many were disappointed, but the great day
was coming...the day of new causes-
new profits-new hopes.
“Wheat will win the war!”
“Plant wheat...”
“Plant the cattle ranges...”
“Plant your vacant lots...plant wheat!”
Wheat for the boys over there!”
“Wheat for the Allies!”
“Wheat for the British!”
“Wheat for the Belgians!”
“Wheat for the French!”
“Wheat at any price...”
“Wheat will win the war!”

VII: BLUES

Then we reaped the golden harvest...
then we really plowed the plains...

we fumed under millions of new acres for war wheat.
We had the man-power...
we invented new machinery...
the world was our market.
By 1933 the old grass lands had become the new
wheat lands...a hundred million acres...
two hundred million acres...
More wheat!

VIII: DROUGHT

A country without rivers...without streams...
with little rain...
Once again the rains held off and the
sun baked the earth.
This time no grass held moisture against the
winds and the sun...this time millions of acres
of plowed land lay open to the sun.

IX: DEVASTATION

Baked out-blown out-and broke!
Year in, year out, uncomplaining they fought
the worst drought in history...
their stock choked to death on the barren land...
their homes were nightmares of swirling dust
night and day.
Many went ahead of it-but many stayed
until stock, machinery, homes, credit, food,
and even hope were gone.
On to the West!
Once again they headed for the setting sun
Once again they headed West.
Last year in every summer month
50,000 people left
the Great Plains and hit the highways
for the Pacific Coast, the last border.
Blown out-baked out-and broke. . .
nothing to stay for. . .nothing to hope for . . .
homeless, penniless and bewildered they joined
the great army of the highways.
No place to go . . . and no place to stop.
Nothing to eat . . . nothing to do . . .
their homes on four wheels . . . their work a
desperate gamble for a day's labor in the fields
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.
50,000 a month!
The sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter
in American agriculture.



A migratory family living in a trailer in an open field without sanitation or water
Dorothea Lange, 1940
Library of Congress

Reading the Script

Title

1. How does the film's title present the irony of the function of a plow and the devastation of the plains?

Prologue

2. Define the Great Plains (e.g. size, location, climate, etc.)

Grass

3. Why is this section a repeat of the Prologue?
4. What is the key feature of the Great Plains?

Cattle

5. Why is the Great Plains a "Cattleman's Paradise"?
6. What do cattle replace?
7. How does industrialism come to the Great Plains?
8. What changes does industrialism bring?

Homesteader

9. Who follows the cattleman?
10. What problems does this create?
11. Explain the warning, "Settler, plow at your peril!"

Warning

12. What warning did nature provide?
13. Was the warning heeded?

War

14. What war is this?
15. What happens because of the war?

Blues

16. This section tells of great success. What is it?
17. Why is this section called "Blues"?

Drought

18. Look back over the script. What words/phrases are repeated often? Why?
19. Why is the drought of the 1930s more devastating than previous Great Plains droughts?

Devastation

20. Describe the devastation.
21. What role does nature play? Humans?
22. What solution do people try?
23. "The sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter in American agriculture." Is this tragedy only the work of nature? Explain.

Making Inferences

1. What are the lessons to be learned from this New Deal document? Consider its critique of capitalism and the values associated with capitalism.
2. What are the elements of this documentary film that would have made it such a critical and popular success?
3. Consider the script as a poem. Analyze those elements which are most effective as poetry.
4. Is the film government propaganda? Assume it is and evaluate its effectiveness as propaganda.

To purchase the complete unit, see the
National Center for History in the Schools catalog:

<http://nchs.ucla.edu/catalog.html>

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