

The Plow That Broke the Plains

By Dr. Robert J. Snyder

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A relative few documentaries are on the National Film Registry. Pare Lorentz has two of them. Ironically, he never set out to make movies.

Born, raised and educated in West Virginia, Lorentz attended West Virginia University in Morgantown. Upon his graduation in 1925, Lorentz said his qualifications for employment were that he knew a little bit about music, knew his way around a printing office and was familiar with life in the mountains, lumber camps and coal towns.

Lorentz moved to New York City where he had a series of writing jobs. While at “Judge” magazine, he was named staff critic, making him, at the time, one of the youngest American columnists with a by-line. He was neither a movie buff nor fan but began writing film reviews. He would later be a film critic for the New York Evening Journal, Vanity Fair and the Hearst King Features Syndicate. In 1930, along with publishing industry attorney Morris Ernst, Lorentz published the book “Censored: The Private Life of the Movies,” an attack on Will Hays and the National Board of Review but it also included a plea for more realism on the movie screen.

Lorentz relocated to Washington, D.C., where he was hired to write a column called “The Washington Side Show” for Universal Services. Lorentz became interested in photographing the changes taking place in America through The New Deal. His D.C. connections eventually led him to Henry Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture. Wallace then suggested that Lorentz meet with Dr. Rexford Guy Tugwell, administrator for the new Resettlement Administration.

Tugwell was so enthusiastic about Lorentz’s ideas that he wanted 18 movies made. Lorentz suggested that they start with one movie; he proposed a film on the Dust Bowl. He was hired as a technical consultant at a salary of \$18.06 per day with a per diem of \$6. Thus, the man retained by the federal government to produce a movie on the Dust Bowl had never made a movie in his life. Yet, thanks to his work as a film critic, Lorentz knew he wanted to make a film that emphasized pictures, music and words, in that order. He also wanted the production to be a film of merit; it would have to hold its own on the screen next to the productions of Hollywood. Not just technically, the film also had to be dramatic, capable of holding an audience’s attention. This approach



A rancher and his horse survey his grazing cattle. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

would allow Lorentz to create, quite arguably, symphonic cinema.

Lorentz’s lack of a production background would hurt him. For example, when Tugwell asked what budget he would need for this first film, Lorentz literally guessed \$6,000. That first film, “The Plow That Broke the Plains” wound up costing nearly \$20,000. Lorentz, with help from his wife, the actress Sally Bates, would wind up paying for the overage.

The cost overrun was due not only to Lorentz’s lack of production experience, but also a lack of understanding as to how the bureaucracy in Washington worked. When he left Washington to begin filming, he only had a sketchy outline, but not a script nor a rundown, of the project. He wanted to film some dust storms but beyond that had no specific plan for the rest of the footage. Lorentz made a smart move in hiring a professional camera crew, consisting of Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, each of whom had produced documentary films of their own. However, due to a lack of organization, they didn’t understand what Lorentz wanted to accomplish. This, and their political differences, led to conflict among the crew.

When it came to his budget, Lorentz paid farmers in cash to drive their tractors, for example, but without prior approval from Washington. Lorentz hoped to use Hollywood stock film footage to fill in some gaps on the film. But the major studios were not interested in cooperating with the federal government’s movie making efforts, perhaps out of a fear of competition, a loathing of President Roosevelt, or both. A few sympathetic directors eventually helped Lorentz obtain some footage.

Lorentz interviewed 12 potential composers for the musical score. He settled on the last person he talked to, Virgil Thomson, the composer of the opera "Four Saints in Three Acts." Thomson, while knowledgeable in all aspects of American music, had never written a film score. This shared lack of a film production background may have been a plus, as the two became true collaborators. They would talk at length about what Lorentz wanted to do with integrating music into the story. Lorentz might strum a musical idea on a guitar. Thomson would play his evolving score on the piano during the playback of edited sequences.

Because his budget had already been blown, Lorentz had to hire someone to teach him how to edit. In his memoir "FDR's Moviemaker Memoirs and Scripts," Lorentz recalled that when he had finished editing the footage to Thomson's score, he hadn't written any words. He wanted to write the fewest words possible, have them spoken in time with the music, and relay upon reiteration and repetition.

In the prologue to the film, Lorentz describes "The Plow" as a "picturization of what we did" to The Great Plains. The film opens with a sequence of the grasslands, far as the eye can see, and concludes with a sequence of land that is devastated beyond ruin. While "The Plow" clocks in with a running of 25 minutes, there's just over five minutes and 30-seconds of narration. Tenor Thomas Chalmers would provide the voice over.

Lorentz gave credit to photographer Dorothea Lange and some of her photo captions of migrants when he wrote, "Blown out, baked out and broke. No place to go and no place to stop." While repeating the line "Wheat will win the war," viewers see an army of invading tanks intercut with an army of tractors invading the plains.

The finished film makes a case for resettling the literally, dirt poor farm families, who had been upheaved from now useless farmland and were migrating west, and for restoring the plowed under grasslands of the Great Plains.

Once "The Plow That Broke the Plains" had been assembled, Lorentz next faced the daunting task of getting his film distributed. Lorentz first played "The Plow" for President Roosevelt in March, 1936. "The Plow" had its public premiere on May 16, 1936, at Washington's Mayflower Hotel, under the sponsorship of the Museum of Modern Art. Five other European films were also shown, including an excerpt from Leni Reifenstahl's "The Triumph of the

Will." "The Plow" received excellent press coverage, including rave reviews for its educational value due to its depiction of the country's wasted resources and displaced people. While response to "The Plow" was greater than Lorentz had hoped, commercial distribution was not forthcoming. Some labeled it New Deal propaganda. Lorentz's biggest problem may have been that he added to a government film what Hollywood had for sale; compelling drama.

In order to get distribution for "The Plow," Lorentz devised a plan that would be borrowed by others, including Mel Gibson for his "The Passion of the Christ." Lorentz flew to various cities and arranged screenings for the local press. The press would often hype the film as "the one Hollywood didn't want you to see." This tactic worked as eventually "The Plow" received 3,000 bookings in mostly independent movie theaters. The web site Encyclopedia of the Great Plains claims that "The Plow" was viewed by 10 million people in 1937.

In his biography on the novelist John Steinbeck, author John Parini writes that "The Plow" would have a strong influence on director John Ford as he made the film version of Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath."

"The Plow That Broke the Plains" was named to the National Film Registry in 1999. Lorentz's greatest work as a filmmaker, "The River," was still to come.

It almost did not happen.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Sources for this expanded essay include: "Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film," by Robert L. Snyder, Oklahoma University Press; "FDR's Moviemaker Memoirs and Scripts," by Pare Lorentz, University of Nevada Press; and the author's personal correspondence with Pare Lorentz.

Robert J. Snyder specializes in video production, media law, social media and broadcast journalism and documentary. He received his PhD in Mass Communication from Ohio University and his bachelor's in Radio-TV-Film at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Snyder has written about the Freedom of Information Act, the First Amendment and public access cable television, children's television, and visual literacy theory for television news, and has worked as a consultant for the Iowa Civil Liberties Union and C-SPAN. His late father, Dr. Robert L. Snyder, wrote "Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film" and founded the Radio-TV-Film program at the UW Oshkosh. He may be reached at snyderro@uwplatt.edu.