

The River

By Dr. Robert J. Snyder

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Producer-director Pare Lorentz has two films on the National Film Registry. However, were it not for a map on the wall of a bureaucrat's office, "The River" may never have been made.

Lorentz, a nationally recognized film critic, had already made one film for the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," a documentary that is also included on the National Film Registry.

Despite favorable reviews for his first film and its reasonable distribution, Lorentz had become frustrated to the point of quitting film making. Based on his lack of a background in film production, he had constantly butted heads with his production crew. Additionally, due to his lack of experience in navigating and playing by the rules of a bureaucratic government, Lorentz had gone significantly over-budget on "The Plow" and wound up footing the bill.

In June of 1936 Lorentz walked into office of his supervisor to resign. As he turned to leave, Lorentz saw a map of the Mississippi River on the wall. The river and its tributaries, he said, would make an obvious subject for a film. Lorentz's supervisor asked him to sit down and offer an explanation. From that conversation, Lorentz received a call on July 4th that President Roosevelt had provided \$50,000 for a new film and that Lorentz's salary would be bumped to \$30 a day.

Lorentz began compiling research notes. His initial plan was to start at Lake Itasca in Minnesota and film while floating down the river to the Gulf of Mexico. Lorentz had a clerk from the Treasury Department assigned to him, making the management of finances much more efficient. In the summer of 1936 Lorentz traveled to the Mississippi and realized the impracticality of his plan. He decided, instead, to follow the river through its tributaries. There are few shots of the Mississippi in the final film. Lorentz had the advantage of lessons learned from his prior experience. For example, rather than film what he came across, as he had done during the production of "The Plow," he had a production plan, scheduling shoots in Minnesota, New Orleans and other locations. Field production wrapped up in mid-January, 1937.

At that time, significant floods broke out along the Ohio River. Lorentz seized the opportunity and sent



Two young boys impacted by regular devastating flooding on the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

a crew to Memphis on January 21, where he would eventually join them. The crew worked their way up the river to Cairo, Illinois, sometimes working continuously for 36-hours. Lorentz even rented a floppy winged Waco with a single Lycoming engine to get aerial footage. Lorentz recalled for me that the cameraman, Willard Van Dyke, shot some fine footage, even though Van Dyke was so scared he leaned out of the plane, pressed the button and hoped for the best. As he had for "The Plow," Lorentz would again hire Virgil Thomson to compose the music for "The River." Thomson would integrate an original theme song and southern folk music. There are also two scenes in the film, inside a steel factory and alongside emergency levees being constructed, where the music functions as sound effects. Thomas Chalmers, the narrator for "The Plow," reprised his role for "The River."

Lorentz decided that the overall theme in the movie would be the close relationship between the land, water and the people. This combination had, over a few generations, created environmental and economic problems of national significance. As the film explained, we had built a new continent since the end of the Civil War, but, ironically, at what a cost. The film would conclude by examining the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority as one solution to the problem of the long-running abuse of the natural environment and resulting series of environmental catastrophes.

The narration unexpectedly developed into poetic form. Lorentz had drafted two versions of a report on the flood for "McCall's" magazine. One was a five-thousand word article that Lorentz felt was too statis-

tical and too long for the magazine's readers. The other report was more lyrical in style. "McCall's" editor chose to publish the latter version and subsequently the magazine received 150,000 requests for copies. This is decades before email and copy/paste, readers literally had to make the effort to mail in their request for a reprint. Based on that popular response, Lorentz knew the poetic version was the way to go for the film's script. This decision was vindicated when the script for "The River" would be nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

Additionally, James Joyce described the script for "The River" as the most beautiful prose that he had heard in ten years, and Carl Sandberg noted that Lorentz's script was among the greatest of the psalms of America's greatest river.

While the script is poetic, the visuals are largely symbolic. A couple of shots of tributaries, for example, represent the script's roll call of all of the Mississippi River's tributaries. The flood sequence in particular, roughly half-way into the film is pure cinematic genius and lends itself to deconstruction. It begins with a few single drops of water, accompanied by the steady beat of a kettle drum; drip drip drip drip drip. In perfect parallel structure, the drops of water build to a visual climax of catastrophic flooding, with the river in full destructive fury, accompanied by a soundtrack that at its zenith is a cacophony of chaos, grounded in music, sound effects and sense of urgency from the narrator. Some may call it an illustration of chaos theory.

"The River" debuted in New Orleans on October 29, 1937 to rave reviews. One reviewer hailed "The River" as "one of the noblest films that America has ever produced." Lorentz worked out a distribution agreement with Paramount Pictures. The film was made available to theater owners without charge, except transportation expenses. "The River" may have been the first documentary ever telecast when BBC Television aired it in March, 1938.

"The River" was the first American documentary to be awarded First Place at the Venice International Film Festival, beating out Leni Riefenstahl's

"Olympiad." "The River" was added to the National Film Registry in 1990.

Due, in part, to the international success of "The River," the United States Film Service was established by President Roosevelt in August, 1938. Lorentz was named its director. His work now had a permanent, but short-lived home. However, the unit's output would be limited to three films; "The Fight for Life," directed by Lorentz, "Power and the Land," directed by Joris Ivens, and "The Land," directed by Robert Flaherty. Eventually, the combination of World War II, Hollywood displeasure and congressional politics led to the demise of the United States Film Service in June, 1940.

Lorentz's contribution to the documentary genre is recognized through the International Documentary Association's Pare Lorentz Award. The annual prize is awarded to a film that, according to the IDA website "demonstrates concern for the appropriate use of the natural environment, justice for all and the illumination of pressing social problems."

And it all started with a map on a wall. . . .

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 material 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 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.