

TEACHER'S GUIDE
Primary Source Document Collection
MISSION 5: "Up from the Dust"

The Plow That Broke the Plains

The U.S. government's Resettlement Administration, a forerunner of the Farm Security Administration, produced The Plow That Broke the Plains, a documentary film directed by Pare Lorentz. The film combines poetic narration with footage of drought conditions throughout the Great Plains region (some of which was filmed in Dalhart, Texas). Lorentz wanted the film to portray both the greatness of America's agricultural landscape and the dangers of abusing it. In the following seven-minute clip, the film transitions from the growth and abundance of crops following World War I to the barren wastelands of the Dust Bowl era.

Transcript:

VII: BLUES

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

Source: Pare Lorentz, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," U.S. Resettlement Administration, 1936. https://archive.org/details/plow_that_broke_the_plains
(14:15 - 21:03 min)

