

Plow that Broke the Plains script

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.

The last reel begins after the shot of the barbed wire bird's nest:
Then the film enters a fact-distribution phase. No more music, but text which
appears within the borders of the Great Plains outline established at the opening of
the film

"400,000,000 acres. The Great Plains seemed inexhaustible.

Yet in fifty years we turned a part of it into a dustbowl.

We put too many cattle and sheep into it.

We granted homesteads on rangeland that never should have been plowed.

We tore up grass for war wheat.

We invented new machinery making it possible for one man cheaply to plow
thousands of acres.

An unprecedented drought completed the havoc.

There was no grass left to hold the light soil against the light winds.

A fifty-year record. 40,000,000 acres of land ruined perhaps forever. Two hundred
million acres badly damaged.

The great part of this vast area of damaged land can be saved, and the federal
government has worked strenuously during the past few years to restore these lands.

The Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service, the CCC and the Resettlement
Administration are cooperating with the Department of Agriculture in working
sixty-five land improvement projects in the plains.

The Resettlement Administration will take title to 5,800,000 acres of this land and
put it to its proper agricultural use.

On a second front, the federal government is working to rehabilitate the stricken
farmers of the drought area. Various emergency agencies have distributed millions
of dollars of direct relief and thousands of farmers from dire poverty [sic]. The
Resettlement Administration has loaned millions to farmers whose lands were not
damaged beyond repair but who needed seed, farm equipment, and credit in order
to carry on.

Most important, the Resettlement Administration is taking over 4,500 farms in the
drought area, and it will move families from this land that cannot be farmed into
natural agricultural districts. Model farm strips, such as this one being constructed
in Nebraska, are being built to house these resettled farmers, and they not only will

be paid for their old farms, but they will be given a chance to buy their new homes on long- term credit. [The film shows a lovely house in a field, trucks, obviously on their way to build more homes like it pass by the foreground at regular intervals, gives way to shots of men building these modern two-story homes with shutters, and windows, and chimneys.] Modern equipment, irrigation, good land, electricity, sanitation, schools: the Resettlement Administration is bringing these benefits to thousands who were left stranded and without hope.

[music begins] The camera pans across the lovely area of farms

But the winds still blow [back to shots of the dust and sand blowing. and the sun still bakes the land. We must practice control and conservation if we are to save the rest of the grass. The rains will come again. The plow will dig again. Another decade of reckless use and the grasslands will truly be the great American desert. Fades on wheat with the new home in the background.