

New Deal Agonistes

A farmer would marry and beget sons. Then the children come of working age, the father would deed the land to his eldest son by mortgage and retire to live on the proceeds for the rest of his life. The younger sons moved westward and staked out, preempted, 'squatted on' or otherwise got hold of farms on which to repeat this process. It was all very romantic much of our national epic was based upon this way of life – but it was also very shortsighted.

Rexford Tugwell, 1935.

Bureaucracy is ever desirous of spreading its influence and its power. You cannot extend the mastery of the government over the daily working life of a people without at the same time making it the master of the people's souls and thoughts.

Herbert Hoover, 1928

His name was Rexford Guy Tugwell and he was an economist and a good one. A star student at the Wharton business school, he was a full professor at Columbia University before he was forty. He was one of the nation's leading public intellectuals, a respected and prolific scholar with a wide range of interests. He published in the nation's leading academic journals and wrote for the *Saturday Review* and *The New Republic*. He was witty and smart, devilishly handsome and charming, and a snappy dresser. He moved easily in political circles, a valuable advisor to the New York and national Democratic Parties. In 1928, he wrote Al Smith's positions on agricultural economics and four years later FDR tapped him to serve in the original "Brains Trust." He was, by then, the nation's foremost advocate of the planned economy, believing that anarchic markets had damaged

the overall economic health of the country, and that greater government regulation would benefit more Americans. After taking office, Roosevelt named Tugwell second-in-command at the Department of Agriculture. Two years later, the president rearranged whole segments of the federal bureaucracy to give Tugwell his own massive new agency, the Resettlement Administration (RA) tasked with ending rural poverty and fixing the Dust Bowl. Within eighteen months, Tugwell – by then one of the most hated men in America - was out of government, his Resettlement Administration smashed, and the shards of his agency stashed across the governmental world like horcruxes.

In West Texas, conversations about Rexford Tugwell revolved around whether the head of the Resettlement Administration was a ruthless communist who had wormed his way into Roosevelt's inner circle to set in motion a plan to sovietize American agriculture and turn farmers into penniless peasants or just an out-of-touch eggheaded dilettante who was exploiting the tragedy of the Dust Bowl to test a bunch of impractical economic theories. A kinder impression was that Tugwell was just an obvious and embarrassing example of a liberal bureaucracy gone haywire. Conspiracy theories about Tugwell abounded, among the most widespread was that he was launching a secret plan to depopulate the plains and move farmers back to the cities. On panhandle congressman promised to sock Tugwell in the nose. The RA's publicity director in Amarillo quit his job to protest Tugwell's leadership and urged every "newspaper, chamber of commerce and public spirited citizen living on the Plains" to do what was necessary "to bring about the

resignation of Dr. Rexford G. Tugwell, Resettlement Administrator.”¹ For someone looking for the moment when West Texans began to distrust and fear the federal government, Tugwell’s Dust Bowl years might be a good place to start.

I

In 1935, when Tugwell launched the Resettlement Administration, the ecology of West Texas was on the verge of collapse. 100,000,000 million acres in danger of permanent desertification. Summer brought a domestic refugee crisis, with tens of thousands of blown out farmers and their families hitting the road.² Towns emptied. Emergency relief funds were the only thing keeping people alive. Livestock starved; fields lay barren. Tugwell was responsible for fixing all of it. (Along with rural poverty in general.) Drawing whole agencies and divisions from other parts of the federal government as well as appropriating whatever state agencies he thought might help, Tugwell created the largest, most complicated, and most expensive bureaucracies in government.

One of the nation’s leading agricultural economists, Tugwell had long believed that the nation’s history of frontier farming – which he labeled “riotous” – was the root of rural poverty. A century and half of a chaotic land system that pushed the nation’s poor and desperate out beyond the limits of established agricultural areas onto a frontier that itself

¹ AG 19 May 1936. The immediate cause for publicity director Ralph Bray’s decision to resign was a Resettlement Administration’s film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. He accused Tugwell of using the movie to “pry more money out of Congress and the White House to continue his Communistic experiments.”

² They were joined by thousands more migrants from dust bowl adjacent places like eastern Oklahoma and Arkansas where the sharecropper economies had failed.

beckoned reckless capital and risk-takers had created a modern reality of a hyper-transient farming population, out-of-whack land prices, and terrible soil management. A place of ruin. America's frontier heritage, as Tugwell saw it, was no triumph but rather an embarrassing arrangement where generations of farmers pushed onto barely-farmable lands and went broke, but not before destroying the soil, the ecosystem and the local economy. The Dust Bowl was Exhibit A.³

Broadly, the Resettlement Administration was supposed to relocate poor and destitute farm families into new homes and onto new land; restore the nation's soil, streams, coasts, and forests and protect them from future floods, droughts, and natural disasters. Further it was to provide American farmers the resources and programming they needed rehabilitate their ravaged acres. Operating hundreds of projects and spread across dozens of agencies, the Dust Bowl presented the RA's greatest challenge, and nothing less than the future of the Great Plains and American agriculture was at stake. Tugwell ran his Dust Bowl project out of the RA's District 12, a specifically designated region tasked with addressing the problems of drought and dust in Texas, Oklahoma, western Kansas and eastern Colorado. The office took up 18,000 square feet of office space in downtown Amarillo's most prestigious business address. Using the federal government's biggest and most productive publicity department, Tugwell meant to market his grand ambitions by first completely reframing of the history of settlement on the Great Plains and casting the Dust Bowl as its penultimate chapter. The villains in the Tugwell story, were greedy and

³ Tugwell laid out his argument in an essay just as the Resettlement Administration was launching. Rexford G. Tugwell, "No More Frontiers," *Today* (22 June 1935). Also helpful: Tugwell, "The Problem of Agriculture." *Political Science Quarterly* (1924),

shortsighted farmers who had perpetrated the greatest ecological crime in history. The land itself, however, would be saved in the last act by government planners who would strictly regulate space, people, and markets and usher in a new golden age. It didn't play well in the Agricultural Wonderland.⁴

[Insert Image – Tugwell]

II

It was October 1935, the RA just five months old, when rookie filmmaker Pare Lorentz and his small crew showed up in Dalhart where they wrapped up principal shooting for a Dust Bowl movie. On assignment for Rexford Tugwell's Resettlement Administration, they had been traveling south from Montana for six weeks, filming on the fly as they went. There was no script, story boards, or even a treatment. But Lorentz had a \$6000 budget, some cool new special cameras, a tricked-out pick-up, and a steadfast belief that the dusty images of the Great Plains Deathscape would tell his story of disaster. He was lucky enough to score footage of a massive dust storm as it smothered Amarillo. Over his month and half filming the American interior, Lorentz found his movie: Close ups of plows scraping the hardpan, wrecked fences, miles of dunes, lean sunburned men staring into rainless skies, farm machinery buried in dust, broken-down and loaded family trucks

⁴ Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, 1964; Rexford G. Tugwell and Michael V. Namorato. *The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: The New Deal, 1932-1935*. (1992).

lurching west, broken women shoveling dust out front doors. His most powerful images were from his last week in the Texas Panhandle. What he couldn't find, he staged.

Lorentz was an interesting choice as the nation's first-ever government documentarian. Before going to work for the RA, he was known mostly as a clever and caustic movie critic.⁵ His witty and keen reviews appeared in magazines like *Judge*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *McCall's*, and *Town and Country*.¹ He was the youngest film critic in the country with his own byline. Lorentz was, as they say, a "director's critic," interested in the entirety of a film. He saw movies as collections of parts more than just acting, script, and story; they were lighting, set design, music, camera work, and more. Even in his most scathing reviews – and there were plenty - Lorentz was quick to offer praise for quality work by a set designer or sound engineer, often naming the person and taking the time to explain their work. It was an approach steeped in his profound appreciation of film as art. He had no patience for much of the drivel that he believed a profit-driven system served up to an unwitting public. In 1929, he co-authored one of the earliest and most in-depth critiques of movies and the industry. *Censored: The Private Life of the Movies* was a survey of the most egregious examples of Hollywood studios altering a film's source material to avoid controversy and/or appeal to mass audiences. "At its

⁵ In his review of the biggest movie of 1933, Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*, which won three Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director and which the *New York Times* called "affecting and impressive" and that *Variety* described as a "big, brave and beautiful picture," Lorentz dismissed the film as a "superlative newsreel" and "very cheap theatrical observation from the choleric old empire-builder, Mr. Coward." *Vanity Fair*, March 1933, 48. A testament to his indefatigable energy and catholic nature of his reviews, in the same issue, he reviewed the "latest boo epic" *The Wax Museum*; Mae West's *She Done Him Wrong*, "good fun" and "surprisingly good"; *Hot Pepper*, "just a hundred percent wrong"; *State Fair* directed by Henry King and starring Will Rogers "good-humored"; the Irene Dunne vehicle *The Secret of Madame Blanche* "the re-write of all the re-writes of *Madame X*"; and *Parachute Jumper*, a "wry attempt to turn Fairbanks Jr. into Fairbanks Sr."; and also threw in some random comments on *The Vampire Bat*, *Hard to Handle*, *Hello Everybody* ("a movie in which Kate Smith sings"), *Tonight is Ours*, and *42nd Street*.

worst” Lorentz said, American film “is illiterate and childish. At its best, its America’s greatest contribution to art. Yet, at its best, it is unable to escape the unlearned and stupid hecklings of the censor.”⁶

Lorentz leveraged his reputation as a film critic into a larger role as an observer of American culture and politics in essays for *Newsweek* and a regular column of D.C. snark for the Hearst newspapers.⁷ He tried to get a documentary on Roosevelt’s first year in office produced but couldn’t get the funding. Instead, he used the images he had collected and published a coffee table book for Funk and Wagnall’s, *The Roosevelt Year*.⁸ That book earned Lorentz the attention of Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture who called the critic/writer to his office in Washington. At their first meeting, Lorentz pitched a movie that would document the USDA’s efforts to save the American farmer. Wallace demurred and passed him along to Tugwell. The new RA director grew so excited that about movies that he started babbling to Lorentz about producing ten, fifteen, eighteen new films. Lorentz talked him down to one – about the Dust Bowl.

The rookie filmmaker imagined a first-class and serious film playing to packed audiences in every movie house in America. State-sponsored films were all the rage in Europe, especially in England and Germany, but in the United States, government films had until then been restricted to short instructional reels for small, targeted audiences. But this was a chance to create important art, make a significant statement, and do real good.

⁶ Morris L. Ernst, and Pare Lorentz *Censored: The Private Life of the Movie*, (1930).

⁷ Hearst fired him when he wrote a complimentary story about Franklin Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace.

⁸ Lorentz, *FDR’s Moviemaker*, 17-36; Pare Lorentz, *The Roosevelt Year: A Photographic Record*, (1934).

“We used the film,” as he later told Congress, “as a graphic medium to reach millions of people, city people, who never had seen the Panhandle of Texas; who never saw the western plains; who had no idea about conditions.” He believed that for the millions of Americans who had never set eyes on the Great Plains “only the camera” could capture its size and grandeur.”⁹

Lorentz, to the frustration of the professional Hollywood camera crew he used to do that capturing, had only a vague sense of how he planned to put his movie together.¹⁰ He wanted to tell his story through historical vignettes where the land itself would be the protagonist and the setting. The film was to be visual experience; hopefully without any need for narration. His plan was to create a script from the editing bay, stitching together the images he and his crew had filmed into a logical and linear narrative about the Dust Bowl. He had plenty of footage of languid cattle and dust-covered farms and abandoned land and worn-out tech and sand stretching across horizons. Lots of symbols of death and dying. When hit with inspiration while on his filming tour, Lorentz would improvise whole scenes and hire locals as actors and rent whatever equipment he needed to bring his visions to life. For one important scene in the movie, he had a brigade of tractors crest a hill in formation, even having to purchase gas for the machines that had been dormant for years. He filled out his movie with supplementary images he culled from studio stock footage.¹¹

⁹ U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, *Hearings on Department of Labor – Federal Security Agency Appropriations Bill, 1941, 76th Congress, 3rd Session*, 248.

¹⁰ They were also not completely down with the idea of a film where the land was the subject; committed leftists, they wanted to focus on industrial capitalism as the destructive force that brought farmers to ruin.

¹¹ Leab, “Pare Lorentz and American Government Film Production,” 41-45 and Snyder, Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film, 30-40

As he stitched together his movie, he began to interview composers to score the film. Music was the only thing for Lorentz that was as important as the images. He hired the brilliant young Virgil Thomson, an innovative musician whose first opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts* had opened on Broadway the year before. It featured a libretto written by Gertrude Stein and had an all-black cast. Lorentz had enjoyed the opera and was captivated by Thomson's use of contrasting music types and his willingness to take risks. Although Thomson had never scored a film before, he and Lorentz were in sync as to style and inspiration. The composer would draw upon traditional folk music, especially cowboy songs and church hymns, to match the "feel" of the film as he watched footage and looked at stills and storyboards. The two worked closely together with Lorentz editing the movie in many cases to fit the soundtrack and Thomson arranging softer spaces (mostly woodwinds) in the score where narration could be added if needed. The final score was recorded by the twenty first chairs of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Alexander Smallens. It is widely considered one of the finest examples of mid-century American music and most effective soundtracks in the history of film.¹²

Eventually deciding to include narration, Lorentz kept it to a minimum, just 700 words and hired Thomas Chalmers, a former baritone opera singer and aspiring director to narrate the movie. Chalmers, who hated narration almost as much as Lorentz, nevertheless offered a knowing and powerful interpretation of the script imbuing the different

¹² Jason M. Hartz, "*The Plow that Broke the Plains: An Application of Functional Americanism in Music*" Ph.D. diss., Ohio University, 2010.

repetitions required – there are, for example, four different versions of the phrase “country of high winds, and sun and of little rain” – with great meaning and capturing the script’s tonal shifts and perspective changes with grace and brio.

The final product was one of the most powerful documentaries of the first half of the twentieth century. *The Plow that Broke the Plains* screened at the White House in March 1936. Roosevelt loved it. Tugwell couldn’t wait to get it into movie theaters.¹³

Then the trouble started. First it was Hollywood; studio heads were incredibly wary about the government getting into the movie business. And over the course of his career, Lorentz had made his share of enemies among studio elites.¹⁴ When the film was ready for distribution, the studios, who owned almost all the nation’s theaters, simply refused to book it. Most claimed that its 28-minute running time made for awkward show times, a few squawked about not wanting to broadcast government propaganda. One unnamed producer said: “We would not release [the] picture even if it were Ben Hur.”¹⁵

Independents picked up the movie: “Dare to See the Movie that Others Won’t Show.” It got very positive reviews: the Boston *Globe* called it a “valuable addition to modern pictures [that] illustrates what uncharted territory the commercial pictures have yet to discover.”¹⁶ It went into wide distribution by June. One scholar has estimated that the film was screened 7000 times over the next three years.¹⁷

¹³ The script is included in Lorentz, *FDR’s MovieMaker*, 45-50; Jason Hartz included a transcript of the epilogue in his “The Plow that Broke the Plains,” 191-192, which was very cool of him.

¹⁴ When he was putting his movie together, studio heads refused to allow Lorentz access to the stock footage he needed to finish, and he had to rely on his good friend the director King Vidor to sneak him the film he needed.

¹⁵ “Dust-Storm Film” *The Literary Digest*, 16 May 1936.

¹⁶ *NYT* 24 May 1936; *Boston Globe* 16 July 1936.

¹⁷ Leab, “Pare Lorentz and American Government Film Production,” 46.

The message of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* is as subtle as a brick to the face. Arranged in ten linear vignettes, the movie spreads across three acts. Act I tells the story of the grasslands from its days as a cattlemen's paradise to the beginning of the Dust Bowl. Act II focuses on the tragic and sad story of the people and land on the contemporary plains. A short third act describes the current efforts being made by the federal government to help people and restore the land. The film makes a simple and powerful indictment of plains farmers. This "country of high winds, and sun and of little rain" was never meant to be plowed. The federal government and national media had been tiptoeing around naming the actual causes of the Dust Bowl since 1931, focusing instead on the drought as a natural disaster and an indomitable people toughing it out on the last frontier, but *Plow* takes a hard stand: greedy boosters and gullible farmers had brought farming to a land historically, ridiculously unsuited for agriculture. The Dust Bowl, *Plow* made perfectly clear, was a man-made disaster, the unfortunate, but logical consequence of an acquisitive, restless, and individualist mentality that had no place in the modern world.¹⁸

The grass is the star of the movie. After its expository title sequence, *Plow's* first two minutes are little more than loving and lingering shots of grass; medium shots of grass, close ups of grass, long shots of cowboys on horses riding up grassy slopes. The plains were, as Chalmers intones, a "cattlemen's paradise" and "an uncharted ocean of grass." But, in the first of the jarring shifts that defined the film, as Chalmers declares the

¹⁸ Some very good work has been done on the film and Lorentz: Daniel J. Leab, "Pare Lorentz and American Government Film Production," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* (Spring 1965); Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, (1968); Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films* (1973).

“plowman followed the herder and the pioneer came to the plains” the screen fills with chaos: abrupt, non-linear jump cuts of wagons, dust, and terrified cattle accompanied Thomson’s spastic arrangements of bugles and banjos along with weird mashups of hymns and folk songs.

The title’s villain makes its first appearance around a quarter way into the film, a closeup shot of a moldboard plow slicing prairie sod. The narrator warns: “Settler plow at your peril.” From there, Lorentz presents a juddering chronicle of agricultural technology and expansion, the rise in wheat markets, and the proclivity for droughts on the plains. A master of visual storytelling, Lorentz marches towards the inevitable destruction of the prairies and an indictment of all Americans for their role in the Great Plow Up.

Particularly powerful is his treatment of the expansion of wheat markets during the Great War when in a fit of Eisensteinian frenzy, Lorentz merges the mechanical destruction of plains grasses by tractors with the mechanical destruction of the Belgian wheat lands by tanks. With Thomson’s militaristic score overlaying the minute-long section, Lorentz moves back and forth between tractors and tanks, including the shot of his battalion of tractors moving in formation. Moving seamlessly from the wartime demand for wheat into his history of the bonanza years of the 1920s, Lorentz lays out his case against the farmers and speculators. Thomson’s score shifts from his breezy interpretations of American folk tunes to his only original composition, a funereal take on Dixieland jazz. Over rapid cuts that move between various ads for wheat lands, stock tickers, headlines on wheat prices, smokestacks, tractors, combines, and, for some reason a jazz drummer, Chalmers narrates, noticeably switching to first-person plural:

Then we reaped the golden harvest
then we really plowed the plains
we turned over millions of new acres for war
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!

The stock ticker falls from its perch.

[FADE TO BLACK]

[FADE IN: EXT DAY: CLOSE ON COW SKULL IN DRIED CREEKBED]

The second act is pure disaster porn, a little less than a six-minute catalog of catastrophe. Broken, abandoned machinery almost smothered by dust. Broken land, cracked creekbeds, sand dunes. There's a fifteen second, 180-degree tracking shot of a desert outside Dalhart. Dejected peasants trudge along dusty paths. Blowing dust. Abandoned homesteads. Chalmers: "the rains held off and the sun baked the earth." A dust storm accompanied by a soaring Thomson score that crashes into melancholy. The second act concludes with shots of families digging out their homes with grain shovels and piling their meager belongings into the bed of some barely-running truck, abandoning their homes, and heading west. Chalmers chants:

"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.

All they wanted, he assures, was a chance to start anew. In the film's "last" shot, the camera moves across the desert one last time to slowly zoom in on a barbed wire bird's nest perched in the crook of a long dead tree.¹⁹

The Resettlement Administration shows up in Act III. The shortest part of the film, it's a clunky and preachy and stat-filled description of the agency's work over government B-roll. There's no more music. Even Chalmers seems bored. Lorentz, who apparently was not really involved in its inclusion, didn't care for it. He liked his barbed wire nest ending.²⁰

[Insert Image – Plow 1 – cattleman's paradise]

[Insert Image – Plow 2 – plow as villain]

[Insert Image – Plow 3 – desert]

[Insert Image – Plow 4 – bird nest]

The film made its glitzy Panhandle premier at Amarillo's most prestigious movie house, the Paramount Theater. There were fancy dresses and red carpets and searchlights, a little taste of Hollywood in Potter County. Earlier that day, local Jaycees sponsored a screening for area businessmen and boosters.

¹⁹ O'Connor, "Plow that Broke the Plains: Case Study," 286-288; Hartz, "Plow that Broke the Plains", 77-88, 191-202.

²⁰ Apparently competing versions of the film were in distribution simultaneously over the next couple of years. The epilogue version was pulled from distribution sometime in 1937. Many speculate that because of its specificity in solutions, the epilogue was too easily read as "socialist." Removing *Plow's* overt "political" message, the reasoning went, strengthened its cultural and historical importance.

They were not happy. Calling for the government to yank the film from distribution and toss Tugwell from office, boosters and politicians and editors objected to almost every aspect of the movie. What they found most galling was not the historical narrative that cast panhandle farmers as the perpetrators of the greatest environmental crime in history, but tellingly, that section of the film that focused on the contemporary conditions in the Dust Bowl. Boosters worried that the film cast the region in an unflattering light. It was okay, as the regional director of the RA suggested, to show the film to Congress so that its members might be “frightened” into coughing more money for relief, but the film should not be meant for broad consumption. The Amarillo Chamber of Commerce launched a fundraising drive to “effectively combat” the film’s negative publicity. The *Globe-News* called the movie “thinly disguised” propaganda and predicted that “theater goers are going to rebel.” The paper’s official review of the film criticized it for its “low and cheap propaganda” as well as its “innuendo, misrepresentations and plain untruths.” It called it a “vicious and damaging document, produced by taxpayers money” and warned that “the agricultural population of the country will look with suspicion upon any program offered by Mr. Tugwell to the detriment of all concerned.”²¹ The WTCC sent out a carefully worded press release, urging the RA to screen the film only in the Dust Bowl so as not to scare potential settlement or investment. (It also praised federal efforts in “water and soil conservation.”²² One Amarillo man urged his neighbors to “form a united front with solidarity of purpose and unanimity of thought to stop this malicious portrayal (or betrayal)

²¹ AGN 1, June; 2 June; 31 May, 1936.

²² AGN 5 June 1936.

of our territory." If it must be shown, he said, only show it to Congress and "ONLY in order to obtain increased appropriates for our territory."²³ John McCarty, ever boosting, called *Plow* a "tool of the government, designed to drive people from the land" and was ultimately "bound to do more damage to our credit and our agriculture."²⁴ The *Pampa Daily News* called it *The Libel on the Plains* and urged the "Federal EXPERTS who judge the plains" to remember the proverb: "Mas sabe el loco en su casa que el cuerdo en la ajenu."²⁵ Fiery young Shamrock politician Eugene Worley (who would replace Marvin Jones in Congress) threatened to punch out Rexford Tugwell if the film wasn't pulled immediately. The Texas Panhandle, he proclaimed, "is far from being a desert. It is a rich agricultural region, and home of the nation's finest, most hospitable, and courageous people."²⁶

Ralph Bray, the publicity director for District 12, not only quit his job over the film, but published an open letter in the *Amarillo Globe News* explaining why: "I am resigning in protest against a lot of pedantic principles by Tugwell's academy of bubble blowers, dilettantes and doctrinaires whose carnival of blundering and squandering of public funds the past year is making doubly difficult the reconstruction of agriculture." It was time, he said, to shed the government's "radical philosophies" and for West Texans to reclaim control of their land. "I sincerely believe that I could take a group of dirt farmers,

²³ Ibid., Joe Jacobson, Letters to Tack, 3 June 1936

²⁴ Quoted in Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 261. In another article that was reprinted in several newspapers across the nation, McCarty pointed to recent rains and predicted (incorrectly) "bumper crops and prosperity are bound to follow the bountiful rain. . . corn and small grain production may be so great as to upset the market places of the world." *AGN* 1 June 1936.

²⁵ A fool understands his own home better than a wise man can understand a stranger's." *PDN* 31 May 1936.

²⁶ *New York Times* 10 June 1936; *The Wellington (Texas) Leader* 25 June 1936.

prominent county officials and public-spirited citizens and, with a small part of the expense incurred, show some material program in correcting misuse of lands throughout this section that have caused wind erosion and dust storms."²⁷ He demanded Tugwell's immediate resignation, and that the RA put an end to their propaganda. "The people on the Plains don't want charity and they don't want a lot of Communistic philosophies foisted upon them, and they don't want their country, which is one of the finest on earth . . . maligned and pictured as an American Sahara by a bunch of Tugwellian sophists."²⁸

II

At one point the Spade Ranch was one of the largest and most modern cattle operations in the American West. Originally conceived as a showcase for barbed wire, it was the brainchild of longtime pioneer rancher John "Spade" Evans and the Superior Wire Company. A quarter of a million acres were divided into pastures by tight, arrow straight six-string fences. Each had a windmill and water tank and were connected by telephone and caliche roads. Cowboys were still on horseback, but management drove automobiles. Once the railroad finally arrived in 1924, the Spade pivoted to farm sales. In those land-hungry years, Ellwood Farms (the name of the Spade's real estate division) sold close to 100,000 acres, fetching great prices, upwards of \$35-\$40 dollars an acre. The typical

²⁷ See *AGN* 19 May 1936. The letter was reprinted across Texas see *Rio Grande Farmer* (Harlingen, Texas) 22 May 1936; *PDN* 19 May 1936; *LA* 19 May 1936

²⁸ Anti-communism in critiques of government programming, which we will see emerge with greater clarity in the 1950s, showed up a lot in critiques of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*; when it played in New York City as part of a series of documentaries from around the world, local wags wryly commented that it was no coincidence that the film shared the marquee with two Soviet films. *AG* 26 May 1936; Hurt, 62-63.

buyer either purchased a half-section plot and tractor farmed cotton or bought a two-section family ranch.²⁹

Starting in 1931, the drought brought land sales to exactly zero. Worse, farmers failed to make their payments and went into tax default. And Ellwood still had a hundred thousand acres to sell. As the drought dragged on, Lubbock boosters grew nervous. It wasn't just Ellwood Farms, the entire real estate business had bottomed out and cotton markets and production were in the tank. In 1934, a semi-desperate Lubbock Chamber of Commerce applied to join a new government program designed to get city folks to move back to the country where they would run subsistence farms. It was a pet project of Roosevelt, a true zealot of agrarian fundamentalism, who believed deeply that self-sufficient family homesteads played a key role in American life. (Tugwell harbored no such feelings.) Part of a suite of programming in the first months of the New Deal, the Subsistence Homestead division was set up to settle the urban poor onto small government-owned farms where they could grow their own food, market a few commodities, work for wages a few hours a week in some nearby factory or mill, enjoy a healthier life, and build strong frontier-like communities. It was run out the Department of Interior by the hopeless romantic agrarian M.L. Wilson. In addition to providing pre-built homes and ready-to-go farms, the new homesteading program would also organize work programs and other government assistance. Lubbock boosters, facing high unemployment

²⁹ Mayme Carol Ludeman, "The Land Phase of the Colonization of the Spade Ranch" MA Thesis, TTU, 1938.

and an agricultural economy in tatters, loved the idea of a government-sponsored back-to-the-land movement.³⁰

The Lubbock Chamber proposed an Industrial Farm – small truck farms of about forty to sixty acres ringing the city that would provide Lubbockites with fresh produce and cotton mills with industrial labor. Once the operation was in place, boosters assumed “private capital” would step in and run the operation. With the one time startup cost born by the government, yet another new style of farming might replace or serve the cotton kingdom. If successful, the Chamber reasoned, the model could be adopted by local land developers to sell off more of the old ranch lands. As a special bonus, the Industrial Farm might “rehabilitate” tenant farmers and sharecroppers “instead of dropping them on the dole.”³¹ After padding the proposal’s numbers with rosy projections of the viability of vegetable farming in Lubbock based on production numbers from a single irrigated farm, with no intention of irrigating their Industrial Farm, the Chamber sent it off in January 1935.

It was approved a few weeks later. With no other agency in place to facilitate the funding of the project, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration bought 4000 acres from Ellwood Farms, whose manager had sat on the committee that wrote the original proposal. The government paid \$25 an acre, two and a half times the going rate for

³⁰ Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (1942); Paul K. Conkin, “The Subsistence Homesteads Program,” in *Tomorrow a New World, The New Deal Community Program* (1959) and David B. Danbom, “Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Agricultural History* (1991).

³¹ William Clayson, “The Lubbock Chamber of Commerce, the New Deal, and the Ropesville Resettlement Project,” *Great Plains Quarterly* (1998), quote from page 5.

undeveloped ranch property.³² Just as the project was about to launch, the entire program was moved into Rexford Tugwell's Resettlement Administration.

Director Tugwell had little patience for nostalgic fantasies of poor folk making good in the country with vegetable gardens, industrial piece work, fresh air, and old-time pioneer spirit. This was 1935, not 1866. What Tugwell wanted was data to help him solve the riddle of rural poverty. So, he turned the subsistence farm program into an "experiment" on the feasibility of rural farm life on the plains.³³ Was it even possible, under optimum conditions and with adequate help and expertise from the government, for a family to make it on a small south plains farm? That's what Ropesville – the project's new name – was designed to find out. Given the cyclical nature of the region's ecology, the RA sought to plot a solution to the boom and bust cycles that had plagued the American prairies for three quarters of a century. It considered every variable it could think of: crops, credit, equipment, farm size, personal food production, outside income, quality of farmer as it designed the Ropesville experiment.

The RA carved up its 4000 acres into thirty-three farms, each around 130 acres. Big for a family farm, but too small to tractor. (Tugwell never even considered the Chamber's proposal for its farmers'-market mill-worker model.) It also arranged with Ellwood to bring

³² USDA Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, number 37, Texas, 751.

³³ A rural sociologist Paul Jehlnik summarized in his 1941 summary report on Ropesville: "The project is admittedly an experiment. The people, coming from diverse areas, had little in common except the common feeling which may have grown out of their former individual experiences in the disheartening struggle against the overwhelming forces of drought and depression. Many of them were most familiar with the simple cash-crop system. In their new environment they must learn a new system if they are to make a living. To inaugurate the diversified system requires considerable capital resources, which they do not have. The Farm. Security Administration [which replaced the RA] is loaning them the needed capital, giving them technical guidance, and supplementing incomes with grants." Paul Jehlnik, "Level of Living on the Ropesville Project" USDA BAE, 1941 2.

forty-four more units online over the next couple of years. With the government holding the title and promising credit and other benefits, the RA was able to convince farmers to experiment with crops and agree to gather appropriate data on finances, food, production, and use of technology. While grinding out a living on a hundred acres of government scrubland in Hockley County and filling out regular reports for eager bureaucrats was nobody's idea of the American Dream, the RA still received 1000 applications for those first thirty-three slots.

Seeking applicants familiar with the country, the RA recruited exclusively among locals. There were four criteria: "If you were a good farmer, if you were stable, if you paid your debts, and if you were broke" as one former resident described them.³⁴ The lucky few who made the cut stepped onto some of the most well thought out farming units ever devised. The RA had no interest in replicating frontier conditions, allowing residents to live in holes in the ground, or forcing them to build out their farms piece by piece. To eliminate variables, the land had already been terraced and fenced and there was already an easily-marketed crop in the ground or ready for planting. Every farm had a windmill, water well, small barn, and corral in place. Each had a cute little four-room farmhouse with lots of windows, front porches, trellises, running water, and a water pressure system.³⁵ (Local opposition killed the original plans that included indoor toilets and electricity.) Every resident was provided access to low-cost loans that allowed them to purchase equipment, furniture and household goods, and supplies. An onsite manager

³⁴ Quoted in Johnson, "Rural Rehabilitation in the New Deal," 284.

³⁵ For images of the homes see the Winston Reeves, Photograph Collection, Southeast Collection, Texas Tech University. Clawson, "Resettlement Experience," 39-41

provided advice on farming techniques, household finances, and planning. There were regular community meetings, events, and programming. Farm experts from the USDA and Texas Tech held exclusive seminars and provided one-on-one tutorials for residents. There were regular visits by experts in home economics and rural health. A large community center included a commercial style kitchen and plenty of space for dances or quilting bees. Ropesville even had its own baseball team.

[Insert image – Ropesville]

[Insert image – Ropesville 2]

The plan was designed to answer a simple question: Given every logical advantage, could the average failing American farmer work their way out of poverty and become “become successful, contributing citizens”?³⁶ To answer that question, the RA needed to gather information. To get more accurate production capabilities, the agency would not allow sharecropping (which encouraged overproduction), but instead insisted on cash rents (to gain a more accurate assessment of crop and land values). Every family was required to keep and regularly share a detailed record book. Each year, they had to year submit a lengthy and complicated action plan for their farm and home. The plan had to be approved by the local manager who also gave families “accomplishment” slips that they had to fill out and return. Personal family economics were shared publicly at annual meetings. Any larger than usual expense meant another application and additional approval process. Farm women had to track their canning, garden production, and

³⁶ Johnson, “Rural Rehabilitation,” 286.

household expenses and were subject to visits by the project manager. Families even had to file reports on their food consumption. What residents resented as useless red tape and embarrassing intrusions into their personal lives, the RA saw as valuable information. No fewer than four separate RA agencies leaned on its manager for more data, more reports. Ropesville's first manager quit in frustration over their demands.³⁷

Lubbock boosters hated Ropesville. The government, it seemed, had completely abandoned the frontier model of settlement that they believed was the foundation of the region's character. The RA, rather than insisting upon hard work, had instead rewarded poor and lazy farmers with a new utopia. Keep in mind that the original Industrial Farm plan concocted by the Lubbock Chamber of Commerce was to utilize a government program to help them find a new way to market the millions of acres in the area that had not yet been developed. They were not expecting luxurious turnkey farms subsidized by American tax dollars. Their biggest gripe seemed to be around the fact that the government had not forced its residents to undergo the rugged rigors of frontier life. "I know a little about this country," one of them claimed. "You go out there and see people living in dugouts" on \$200 farms and "go back in three or four years, and they have a nice house. There is something beautiful about it."³⁸ Acting as if modern necessities would somehow spoil the poor, they halted efforts to have Ropesville houses plumbed and electrified. Texas Tech President Bradford Knapp, a huge supporter of Ropesville, nevertheless boasted that he had grown up without indoor plumbing (he was born in

³⁷ Jehlnik, "Level of Living on the Ropesville Project, 3.

³⁸ Quoted in Clayson, "The Lubbock Chamber Of Commerce, the New Deal, and the Ropesville Resettlement Project," 16.

1870) and was willing to bet “that nine-tenths of the people in that country don’t have them [bathrooms].” Another booster added that if the project was to furnish residents with “bathtubs, electric lights and a lot of other things they are not used to, they will never be able to pull out [of poverty].”³⁹

While Lubbock businessmen might view years of using an outhouse as an important life experience, New Dealers saw it a reckless and stupid attachment to an archaic way of life. While the sixty-six-year old Knapp might wax nostalgic about latrines and burning buffalo chips for heat, RA officials asked - why, in 1935, should anyone live in a house without electricity or plumbing? This work-up-from-nothing-on-virgin-soil frontier thinking was, Tugwell thought, exactly what had created the Dust Bowl and every other farming catastrophe scattered across American history. And as a trained (and gifted) economist he, of course, took no truck with the attitude, common in rural America, that the poor were somehow solely responsible for their fate and that only by publicly demonstrating their worth – through the sod-house-to-tidy-farm narrative – should they be allowed to live like modern folk. Nor did he agree with the notion that rural “poverty was the result of shiftlessness and incompetence” or individual “faults of character.” It was that kind of regressive thinking, he would come to believe, that explained the lack of support in rural America for the Resettlement Administration.⁴⁰

By all accounts, Ropesville was a success. It grew to seventy-nine units and was taken over by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937. The FSA completely

³⁹ Ibid., 15, 16.

⁴⁰ Rexford G. Tugwell, “The Resettlement Idea,” *Agricultural History* 33.4 (Fall 1959), 162. See also Brian Q. Cannon, *Remaking the Agrarian Dream* and

changed the way the project worked. It eliminated most of the reporting requirements and permitted sharecropping arrangements with tenants. The program was phased out starting in 1941 when its lands were sold off (most to residents) under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act.⁴¹ Farms sold out in two years. A careful and detailed study by the FSA based on the data that it had collected during its five-year experiment at Ropesville, however revealed an important truth, there was simply no way a family could live on a subsistence homestead on the southern plains; the annual “the cash outlay for family living is less than the actual earned income.”⁴²

III

Rexford Tugwell visited Amarillo in August 1936, part of a research delegation who had come from Washington for a ten-day tour of the Dust Bowl. He looked characteristically crisp in his white linen suit and carefully blocked Panama hat as he stepped off the train on a blazingly hot and sunny Monday morning. The other members of Great Plains Drought Area Committee followed him onto the platform and across the street to the Herring Hotel ballroom where they would breakfast with the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce. Along the way they jostled with reporters and joked about the weather and long train ride from DC. Marvin Jones was there and photographer Arthur Rothstein. The

⁴¹ Created by Marvin Jones and Senator John Bankhead from Alabama, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 provided low-cost, long-term, and flexible loans to sharecroppers and tenants to purchase land or machinery and special incentives to adapt new uses for worn-out farms.

⁴² Paul J. Jehlik, “Level of Living on the Ropesville Project,” Report. U.S. Department of agriculture. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941

committee chair, REA head Morris Cooke, chatted with reporters as did Tugwell. They spoke about the committee's plans for the next few days and the need to a craft long-term plan for the region. But first, as Tugwell put it, the men needed to "rub shoulders" with the Dust Bowl.⁴³

[Insert image – Tugwell in Amarillo]

The stakes could not be higher than they were in August 1936. The essential questions were whether the federal government could or should save the Great Plains and at what cost? Many in and out government, including Tugwell, had determined that the Dust Bowl had moved beyond the disaster stage and now represented an existential threat to the nation. Three years, a half a billion dollars, and hundreds of different programs had done no noticeable good. Every recent study on the economic and environmental health of the region came to the same bleak conclusion: that bankruptcies would continue as would foreclosures, tax delinquency, bank failures, and the collapse of local governments. Experts predicted crop losses in the hundreds of millions of dollars in 1936. Scientific predictions were more dire. Without immediate action, Paul Sears, America's most respected ecologist, warned in his book *Deserts on the March* that the entire middle third of the nation was in danger of becoming an inhabitable wasteland, the American equivalent of the Sahara Desert. And it was an election year. On July 22nd, the President announced the formation of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee. Handpicked experts from a variety of government agencies would conduct an intensive study of the

⁴³ AGT 17 August 1936.

region and produce a report before the end of the year. The committee's eight members included agricultural economists, engineers, and experts in soil, hydrology, and management. The project manager was L.C. Gray, Tugwell's right-hand man at Resettlement. There would be no need to spend time examining the possible causes of the Dust Bowl, the president himself baked the answer to that question right into the Committee's charge: ". . . in this area of relatively little rain, practices brought from the more humid parts of the country are not most suitable under the prevailing natural conditions."⁴⁴

The committee was ambushed by conspiracy theories from the get-go. A few days before launching their research tour an Oklahoma climatologist had published a report that concluded that the Great Plains was overpopulated and over-farmed and urged that the government work out a program to reduce the number of people living and farming the region. The national media got ahold of the story, and soon paranoid fancies about the *real* purpose of the Committee swirled across the plains.⁴⁵ It started with their breakfast meeting with the Amarillo Chamber. "Foolishness" Tugwell called the idea that he was in the panhandle to figure out how to get people to leave. "If there's one agency interested in keeping this area from being depopulated, it is ours," adding, "we don't want to

⁴⁴ Great Plains Committee, Report, 27 August 1936. 2-3.

⁴⁵ The project, led by C. Warren Thornthwaite, into the economy and population of the Great Plains was part a larger two-year study by the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School (with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation) into the relationships between poverty and population distribution. Basing his conclusions on long term studies of climate and twenty years of economic data, Thornthwaite suggested that wheat farming was a losing bet. "The farmers who are hoping to get rich by raising wheat in the Great Plains are unable or unwilling to consider realistically, the odds against them." At best, the report concluded, the region could support a population of 1.3 million people and suggested that 59,000 people be resettled out the region as a necessary first step. C.W. Thornthwaite, "The Great Plains," *Migration and Economic Opportunity*, University of Pennsylvania, 1936.

depopulate the country; we want to fortify it to withstand drouth." They were only there, Cooke said, to develop a plan to conserve soil and water for farmers and ranchers.⁴⁶ "We are out to prove this is permanent country." (The afternoon paper carried a fifty-point headline "No Depopulation.")⁴⁷

Still, boosters were not dissuaded and insisted upon delivering a six-point resolution that various city chambers of commerce had cooked up over the weekend. As an example of the kind of thinking that characterized the booster class during the Dust Bowl, it's worth quoting at length.

1. The people of the Panhandle want to stay where they are, even if they go broke and have to start over.
2. Farmers want some form of a government financial program to aid the man not yet detached from his land because of the drouth and not now a client of any federal relief agency, but unable to get aid from banks.
3. Help for stockmen who are seeking to keep their foundation herd intact.
4. The committee endorses the federal plans for small dams and checks to prevent rain runoff.
5. Financial assistance in pumping water for irrigation.
6. More adequate aid in financial diversified farming.⁴⁸

A universal declaration that the people of the region are going to stick it out, even if they go broke, is followed immediately by five separate demands for government aid.

That afternoon the committee enjoyed good news from the Soil Conservation Service as it toured a demonstration project outside Dalhart. They saw first-hand the remarkable work of local director H.H. Finnell who had, in just a year, begun to win turn back the desert through a careful program of terracing land, planting native grasses, and

⁴⁶ AG 17 August 1936.

⁴⁷ AG 17 August 1936.

⁴⁸ AGT 17 August 1936

contour plowing. In the same spot where Pare Lorentz had filmed sand dunes, there was now once again grassland. As they walked across one of the projects, Peden Farm, Finnell showed them the soil restoration process at work. He sent them away with armloads of reports. On the way back to Amarillo, committee members made a quick detour to snap some photos of that barbed wire bird's nest featured so prominently in *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. That night, while most committee members whiled away the hours over bourbon and branch water, Tugwell caught an early movie and went to bed. It was going to be a long trip.⁴⁹

, the committee would hold several meetings a day as it zig-zagged north to Rapid City. It would hold public meetings as well as hear from farmers, agricultural and soil experts, farm groups, and New Deal agencies operating in the Dust Bowl.

For ten days and 3000 miles, the committee, drove north in a kitted-out Army convoy touring more sites, meeting with more suspicious farmers, hearing from more agricultural and soil experts, reassuring more booster groups and agricultural organizations, linking up with more local New Deal agents and agencies, and gathering up more reports. At the end of the line, the committee had a big summit with President Roosevelt in South Dakota. There it submitted its initial report, most of which had been written before their tour even began. It was grim. If something could not be done to stop the desertification of the Great Plains, the nation would not survive. The agricultural

⁴⁹ AG 18 August 1936

economy would collapse completely, Americans across the country would go hungry, local governments would lie in ruin, and the nation would face a refugee crisis that it simply could not withstand. The report knocked down several optimistic theories floating around: that the environment on the plains was changing, that farmers could use gimmicks to overcome the lack of rain, and that the Dust Bowl was simply the result of drought. "The problem of the Great Plains is not the product of a single act of nature, of a single year or even of a series of exceptionally bad years." It had been, the committee made clear, misguided governmental policies combined with a foolhardy and speculative economic system that had been imported into an environment whose basic ecology could not withstand the stress of commercial agriculture. Luring farmers onto the plains through the Homestead Act and private settlement schemes meant "almost an obligatory act of poverty."⁵⁰ It was now time for the government to take responsibility for its mistakes and step in establish a new form of agricultural economy more in line with "natural conditions." There were a lot of different and specific policy proposals, but the entire report, stamped "personal and confidential," was predicated on the reclassification of much of the land in the Great Plains as submarginal and then limiting its use to government-approved activities like pastures if not retired altogether.⁵¹ Roosevelt won reelection easily. He cut Tugwell loose right after. The economist took a job selling syrup.

The final report, the most important document the federal government created on the Dust Bowl, *The Future of the Great Plains*, dropped at the end of the year. Tugwell

⁵⁰ The Committee was impressed with the historical land policy of Texas, where the state, as we have seen, responded to the different environmental conditions on its western lands by creating homesteads sixteen times larger than those offered by the federal government.

⁵¹ Report of the Great Plains Committee August 27, 1936.

acolyte, L.C. Gray wrote much of the text and put the whole thing together. Over 150 pages, *Future of the Great Plains*, lays out a plan for the region and has plenty to say about its past and present. Capturing the government's new technocratic approach to farming, the report also has another seventy pages of appendixes and maps. The root cause of rural poverty, Gray, like Tugwell, believed was that too many farmers were working submarginal land. In good years, they contributed to overproduction and drove prices down and in the bad years, they defaulted on loans, went into tax delinquency, and took down local economies. There was no romance in turning a desert into a garden because disaster was never more than a few years away. And, without fail, the report demonstrated, in the years between catastrophes, people fell into the same destructive patterns of land speculation, boosting, and settling more submarginal land. Irony is the great theme of the document; through repeating the same mistakes over and over, frontier farmers kept bringing about their own demise. Rather than a garden from the desert, they had created a desert from a magnificent grassland. It was a tragedy, the sorry destruction of a once majestic landscape and a once proud people and a complete rebuke of the foundational mythology of West Texas and an unqualified rejection its economy and culture.

It got worse. Gray, who had spent months poring over reports that the committee had been gathering for months, presented a "disquieting picture": 24,000 farms covering 15,000,000 acres were incapable of producing anything. 95% of all rangeland was overgrazed. Even its forage value had plummeted in recent years. Tenancy had risen to fifty percent, and it was climbing. Whole communities were emptying, and local

governments were going broke. Farm income was still falling five years after wheat prices had collapsed. Entire harvests were being used just to pay taxes. No local credit. Abandoned farms. Dust Bowl relief and recovery programs had grown so expensive they threatened to break the federal budget. Depending on the county, somewhere between ten and twenty percent of families were on direct relief. The federal government was spending an average of \$200 for every person on the Great Plains.⁵²

The heart of the report was a lengthy section spelling out all of the misguided ideas held by prairie folk that would have to change before the region could be saved.

The Plainsman cannot assume that whatever is for his immediate good is also good for everybody – only of his long-run good is this true, and in the short run there must often be sacrificed; he cannot assume the right always to do with his property as he likes – he may ruin another man’s property if he does; he cannot assume that the individual action he can take on his own land will be sufficient, even for the conservation and vast use of that land. He must realize that he cannot conquer nature – he must live with her on her own terms, making use of and conserving resources which can no longer be considered inexhaustible.⁵³

It was time, Gray said, to let go of those “inherited assumptions which had become ingrained through generations of pioneering experience” and accept a new world of production regulation, government planning, and land classification. Only through new cooperative arrangements and governmental policies would plains farmers be able to enjoy “a mode of life that gives sustenance and great satisfactions to generations.”⁵⁴

While never going into great detail, the committee’s recommendations start with the premise that the federal government will play a much larger role in the lives of

⁵² United States and Morris Llewellyn Cooke, eds., *The Future of the Great Plains* (1936), 5-6.

⁵³ *Future*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Future*, 66-67.

individual farmers. Not to the level of Ropesville, to be sure, but to the average panhandle wheat or cotton farmer, who saw themselves as the absolute lord of their domain and the independent commercial farmer as the bedrock of society, the report's recommendations must have read like dystopian fiction. It suggested an overhaul of credit and capital systems and significant changes to tax, property, and water laws that would generate greater cooperation among farmers, local banks, and government.⁵⁵ It recommended conservation be introduced into public education. Other "Lines of Action" included the government-led, multi-year scientific, economic, and demographic surveys where data on soil, productivity, population, topography, water, grass, and markets would be collected and collated. It suggested that the government immediately step in and purchase 24,000,000 acres of sub-marginal land and either retire it or offer it as grazing land. (This measure rekindled paranoia about the government forcibly removing people from the plains.) Inexpensive federal loans for farmers would be tied to restrictions on land use and production. There were detailed plans for land rehabilitation and sketches of "scientifically selected" farms where the land would be terraformed with terraced farms, new crops and new streams, orchards and lakes. Working with federal agencies, individual states and counties would survey land, build roads, launch irrigation projects, create erosion and grazing districts, reorganize local government and reform the tax code. Independent grazing and wind erosion districts would also work with government agencies on behalf of local farmers and ranchers.

⁵⁵ An outline near the end of the document lists the fifty-six separate departments and agencies that "exercise functions of varying importance in relation to the readjustment of the economy of the Great Plains Region." And this didn't even list the "State county, and municipal and numerous types of districts (conservation irrigation, grazing, etc.) which will have been or will be formed under the provisions of state laws.) 87.

Roosevelt introduced the report during one of his Fireside Chat where he lauded its conclusions and reflected on his own recent tour of the Dust Bowl. He made it clear that he didn't believe that the people of the region could survive another winter without immediate reform. Relief alone, he promised, would not be enough to save the "courageous and energetic people who have been stricken by several years of drought." He urged members of Congress to immediately take up its recommendations. They didn't. And *The Future of the Great Plains* went nowhere. Partly due to the fevered opposition among politicians from the Great Plains, but mostly because, thanks to a controversial plan of the president to revamp the nation's judiciary and expand the size of Supreme Court, FDR didn't have the political capital to force through any significant change.

Tugwell was gone by then, chased from government by a coalition of Democrats and Republicans from agricultural states who had been clamoring for his head for months, threatening hearings and investigations into the Resettlement Administration and writing legislation that would curb its authority.⁵⁶ Few in West Texas were sorry to see him go. The *Lubbock Avalanche*, responding to the news that the nation's "eminent sidewalk agriculturist, Dr. Rexford Guy Tugwell, has resigned his official position to enter private business" had this to say:

To the man on the street – no matter how much he may like the administration and admire the President – Doctor Tugwell is 'one of them smartelick professors' and that's all there is to it. The chief trouble with Professor Tugwell is that he finds the nation, its traditions and the general views of its people entirely out of step with him. He wants to remake everything to set up a little Utopia, regardless of the cost or whether people want it. As an early day active Socialist, he continues to be a dreamer in a

⁵⁶ The coalition continued to hammer on the RA's successor within the Department of Agriculture the Farm Security Administration until they drove it out of existence in 1944.

world faced with practicalities and as such is, we think, entirely unsuited to any public post of power or importance.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *LAJ* 19 November 1936.