

## **Historians' Reaction to the Documentary, *The Dust Bowl***

**PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG, GEOFF CUNFER, R. DOUGLAS HURT, AND JULIE COURTWRIGHT**

*In terms of the agricultural history of the United States, few events have greater significance than the Great Plains drought of the 1930s. Historians, then, were interested to hear that the nation's most prominent documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns, was going to depict this subject matter in one of his widely watched programs. These historians were not impressed with the final product, however. In order to reflect upon *The Dust Bowl* at greater length, several historians gathered at the Northern Great Plains History Conference. The commentaries explore the various failings of Burns, including his unwillingness to address accuracy concerns of historians while the script for the film was being written, and the tendency of the scriptwriters to adhere to a simplified farmers-caused-the-Dust-Bowl narrative.*

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**Some Thoughts about Social History and Ken Burns's *The Dust Bowl***

## **PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG**

I would like to begin my discussion of Ken Burns's *The Dust Bowl* with an anecdote from the cold February day when Burns and Dayton Duncan gathered a group together to view the rough cut of the documentary. After watching the first episode of the piece, Timothy Egan (author of *The Worst Hard Time*) commented on the musical score, exclaiming that it was not dramatic enough. He wanted it to be more foreboding and to create more tension since those poor folks did not know what was about to hit them. I objected. To me, the story was more complex than tragedy, panic, and despair. Based on the research I had done and published in *Rooted in Dust*, the Dust Bowl story was one of endurance, and ordinary people putting one foot in front of another, day after day, even if the situation in which they lived strained their patience, health, and economic wellbeing. Although the representatives from Oklahoma Public Television nodded in agreement with my comments, it is clear that foreboding carried the day. And this is the focal point of my criticism of the *Dust Bowl* documentary. The stories historians choose and the voices they highlight are central to the impression that readers take away from an event. I did not want people, necessarily, to read my discussion of the Dust Bowl and marvel that anyone survived the experience, because the vast majority did. Instead, I wanted my readers to understand why and how 75 percent of the population endured the situation. *The Dust Bowl* documentary never even begins to address this reality.<sup>1</sup>

Before going further, I want to acknowledge the difficulties of dealing in historical nuance and complexity in documentaries. It is very difficult to tell any story in a way that would please historians in a format that has to capture a broad viewing audience and does not allow for footnotes. This is particularly the case in shorter documentaries that try to tell the complete

story of a particular incident or era in the short fifty minutes allowed by, for instance, the “American Experience” series. And it is also difficult to present material in a way that will please a roomful of historians, since no single interpretation of an event will satisfy everyone. Nonetheless, with a running time of two-hundred-forty minutes, there was certainly more opportunity in *The Dust Bowl* to present a nuanced, layered story than there is in the usual television offering. What emerged, however, was a one-dimensional story about a very complex decade.<sup>2</sup>

One of the central elements in this piece was the dust pneumonia story. In every case, the families foregrounded in the documentary were seriously affected by dust pneumonia. I do not dispute that dust pneumonia was a serious problem in communities affected by the decade’s storms. At the height of the spring winds in 1935, 1,500 people in eight counties (one in Colorado and seven in Kansas) suffered from dust-related illnesses. Of the more than sixty Dust Bowl survivors I interviewed, a handful had lost family members to the disease, a few of them had been ill with dust pneumonia, and all had known or knew of someone who was affected. The situation concerned everyone, and particularly those with infants, the elderly, and the sick in their households. To only interview those with immediate experiences and family tragedies resulting from dust pneumonia, however, is a distortion of the experience of the residents of the region, meant to tug at the heartstrings and enhance the impression of impending doom. Yes, people suffered from dust pneumonia. Yes, some people died from the disease, especially those who were very old, very young, or weakened by disease. No, it did not directly affect every family in the region nor should the impression be left that it did by focusing solely on families that experienced the disease first-hand.<sup>3</sup>

*The Dust Bowl* also relies heavily on interviews with survivors to carry the story. The problem with this approach is in the sheer passage of time. The number of Dust Bowl survivors

is diminishing rapidly. Most of the people the producers chose to interview were quite young when the troubles of the 1930s began. A quick glance at the PBS website for the documentary reveals that Sam Arguello was only four in 1930, as was Pauline Heimann Robertson. Floyd Coen was five. Charles Shaw was born in 1936. Focusing so closely on individuals who were very young during the Dust Bowl years is, in some ways, understandable. Those who lived through those years are now quite advanced in age, and almost no one who experienced those years as an adult is alive to tell the tale. Understandable though it is, it is also a problem. None of the interviewees came to their experience of the Dust Bowl with much, if any, perspective. They had no memories of life before the 1930s against which to evaluate their family's trials during that long decade. This had the effect of heightening the level of stress, anxiety, and dread reflected in their memories. Research done with other "children of the Great Depression" confirms this analysis. Sociologist Glen H. Elder Jr. found that individuals whose families experienced serious hardships while they were in early childhood generally suffered more than those who were older and had greater resources upon which to draw. Those who were older had more developed cognitive tools and more opportunities to participate in the family economy in a way that helped them cope in a constructive way with hard times. Four-year olds and six-year olds have no such protections.<sup>4</sup>

The interviews I did in the 1980s with Dust Bowl survivors, many of whom were adults during the Depression, had a very different tone than those in the documentary. Some adult survivors gauged their experience of the Dust Bowl against lives lived in poverty as farm children on the southern plains. Some placed their memories next to recollections of other droughts and dust storms experienced in the 1910s and 1920s. One woman I interviewed had been a homesteader in the very early years of the twentieth century and had experienced decades of challenges in southwestern Kansas. These are very different lenses through which to

view a decade of hard times than that provided by childhood. Survivors' feelings about living through the decade were far more complex than the documentary would suggest. They experienced hard times, but many had seen hard times before. To quote my grandmother, who lived most of the Dust Bowl years in Seward County, Kansas, "we were as happy as if we had good sense." Another one of my interviewees, reflecting on the shared hardships that she and her family experienced, commented, "It was poverty, and I didn't know it." In many ways, her comments were a reflection of the fact that dust storms did not discriminate. They affected the rich and the poor, and the experience of the storms helped to create a certain level of shared suffering in southern plains communities. This is a considerably different tone, and a different reaction, than the one note of overwhelmed panic that sounds throughout the documentary.<sup>5</sup>

The way in which the producer used oral histories is not my only concern about sources; I am going to make a small quibble about the choice of a really engaging, but highly unusual, female voice to do much of the narration, in the person of Caroline Henderson. The filmmakers relied heavily on her letters to tell the day-to-day story of life in the Oklahoma Panhandle. While highly articulate and interesting, she was, in no way, the typical Dust Bowl resident. Although she was farm born and raised, she also graduated from Mount Holyoke College at a time when most farm girls, at best, had an eighth-grade education. Although she lived on a farm as a married woman, she continued at times to teach in area schools, home schooled her own daughter in subjects such as German and Latin, and had prepared her to attend high school by the age of nine. She made a number of choices that made her more of an observer of the local community than a participant. In addition to her teaching, she also worked as a professional writer, seeing her articles published in a wide variety of magazines, including the *Atlantic Monthly*. She began study for a master's degree in literature at age fifty-two. In the introduction to an edition of her letters, editor Alvin O. Turner commented, "she remained true to her

educational ideals by focusing on personal enrichment rather than practical goals." Henderson was certainly a keen observer, and an eloquent writer, but she was not the voice of the usual Dust Bowl farmwoman. I would argue that there are very few voices of average Dust Bowl residents in the documentary, and the age of many of the interviewees makes their recollections of the decade problematic at best.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the majority of the time in the documentary is spent on stories of despair and heartache and stories of hitting the road to evade the clouds of dust. It leaves the impression that there was no escaping the terrible conditions at any time. In one of his recorded segments, Eagen comments that Dust Bowl children were stranded by conditions, unable to go out to play, leaving the impression that they languished indoors for most of a decade. What he fails to mention is that the sun came out between dust storms, and that the dust only blew at certain times of the year, leaving plenty of time for even Dust Bowl children to get out into the sunshine. These uncorrected misperceptions may leave viewers wondering if anyone stayed at all and how those who stayed possibly could have endured the years of drought and dust storms. These are very big questions to leave blowing in the wind. Their answers, however, do not fit the larger tone of the documentary. Most people stayed. Although the levels of persistence varied from place to place, the majority of the population found the wherewithal to remain on the southern plains. The residents of towns fared better than those in the open country and non-farmers better than farmers. Landowners often stayed, while larger numbers of tenants left for greener pastures. In southwestern Kansas, the part of the Dust Bowl with which I am the most familiar, 75 percent of the population remained to the end of the decade.<sup>7</sup>

If the majority of the region's residents stayed, which they did, it behooves the teller of the tale to spend a substantial amount of time on the mechanisms that made survival possible.

What did people eat when they could not grow gardens and could barely afford food? In what did they dress their children when they sent them to school? How did they pay their mortgages or the rent? What did local governments or charitable organizations do for the many poor in Dust Bowl communities? None of these questions even receives a nod in the documentary. We do receive some information about New Deal agricultural measures, but not enough to know how the programs affected the average farm family, struggling to keep their land. These may not be the kind of questions that make for gripping television, but they certainly are the kind of questions that listeners ask after hearing about the experience of the 1930s.

I want to end my discussion with the story of my favorite Dust Bowl diarist, Mary Knackstedt Dyck, as a contrast to the Burns narrative. She and her husband, Henry, lived on a farm in Hamilton County, Kansas. She, unlike Caroline Henderson, was a more typical southern plains farmwoman. She was raised on a farm, had married a farmer, and had been through decades of struggle with the local environment before the dust storms of the 1930s hit. She was minimally educated, the mother of three surviving adult children, and about the only thing that distinguished her from the rest of the region's farmwomen was her diary writing, a daily activity spanning at least twenty years. Mary and her family experienced many ups and downs over the course of the Dust Bowl years. Their crops failed, the Dyck children migrated in and out of the community looking for work, and the dust and heat drove her to distraction at times. She experienced some pretty strong emotions when the umpteenth dust storm of the month dirtied her house and destroyed her plans. The overriding tone of her writing, however, was not fear, desperation, or hopelessness. Instead, it was endurance, and even stoicism, in the face of the decade's conditions.<sup>8</sup>

The summer of 1937 was very hot, and the dust often blew. On June 30 Dyck wrote, "well good old June has brought a number of Duststorms hartships and sorrows, but now in

good old hot July we must see the sunny side of life & be cheerful." On the first of July, she carried on in the same vein, seeing both the bad and the good in the new month. Her husband, Henry, got up at 2:00 am so he could get into the fields before it was too hot to work and while the winds were relatively calm. She rose at 4:00 am to milk, feed the calf, and mix bread before breakfast. It was a busy cleaning day; she wrote, "cleans the Cupboard Washes the windows and all glass Doors." More than likely, she was clearing away dust that had blown into her house in June. Observation of the environment, as usual, found a place in her daily narrative. "Mocking birds are very lively to day are singing the most beautiful Songs this morning. they seem to enjoy this cloudy weather. There seem to be mostly a dozen of them. How enjoyable they are. Flies are a big pest are stinging like pins sticking. While Birds are singing Meerily." This was a typical day and a typical entry. In Dyck's world, life went on. When the dust blew, she hunkered down with her diary and wrote. When the temperature soared, she began her days as early as 2:00 am, so she could coax the otherwise too warm cream into butter. The men sometimes worked all night, listing their fields against the ravages of the wind. When the drought destroyed her garden, she bought bushels of fruit and vegetables from farms in Colorado for canning. Sprinklings of rain and dustings of snow were cause for rejoicing. Family time, too, was time for rejoicing. Life went on.<sup>9</sup>

What I am asking for is a presentation of history with nuance and context. Families in the midst of the Dust Bowl continued to live their lives despite drought, depression, and blowing dirt. They were members of families and communities. They worked and played. Adults brought to their experience of those years memories of other times, both good and bad. Children relied on the adults in their lives to make difficult circumstances livable. A number of factors shaped the memories individuals carried away from those years: their age at the decade's outset, how their family made its living, the community resources upon which they could, or could not, call

when they needed aid, just to name a few. Many came away from that decade with positive memories of family and community interaction that were just as strong as their memories of hard times. This is because the frame within which survivors' lives were lived did not consist solely of environmental distress and the tragedies wrought by Dust Bowl conditions.

This is where I want to end my discussion, and it brings me back to that day in February, when a group of people watched the rough cut of *The Dust Bowl*. I thought then, and I continue to think now, that the piece is overwrought. It is meant to evoke strong emotions and to be a tearjerker, and this it does very well. The documentary is good entertainment and good television. But is it good history? In my opinion, no. It is far too flat and uncomplicated to be good history. It was a hard decade, and people suffered, but the world did not end. People continued living their lives on the southern plains, and continued to think of it as home. Men and women married, even if in lower numbers than in pre-Depression years, and they had children, also in lower numbers than before the Depression hit. But this was true all over the United States, not just in the Dust Bowl. They got up in the morning, ate breakfast, and went about their business. Some days, clouds of dust obscured the sky, but other days were sunny. Life went on, a fact that is unfortunately indiscernible from Burns's *The Dust Bowl*.<sup>10</sup>

## **Ken Burns's *The Dust Bowl* and the Limitations of Historical Documentary Film**

### **GEOFF CUNFER**

The PBS documentary film, *The Dust Bow*, provides a rich, evocative representation of one of twentieth century America's defining events. In two episodes spanning nearly four hours, the film revolves around the life and experiences of a couple dozen individuals and their families

who suffered through the Dust Bowl, survived, and persisted. Although drought, crop failures, and dust storms plagued the broad grassland from Texas and New Mexico to the Canadian prairies, this film focuses narrowly on the seventy-five mile radius around Boise City in Oklahoma's panhandle. There, in "No Man's Land," viewers relive the trials, suffering, and heroic perseverance of poor families who struggled through a national crisis. **[GC: Please provide a citation for "No Man's Land"]** The Dust Bowl experience has mythic power in American history, and this film reinforces the core moral lessons most of us have already internalized. Americans already know the basic outline of the story, presented by voice-over narration in the first few minutes of Episode I:

It was the worst man-made ecological disaster in American history, when the irresistible promise of easy money and the heedless action of thousands of farmers, encouraged by their government, resulted in a collective tragedy that nearly swept away the breadbasket of the nation.<sup>11</sup>

The morality tale follows a well-worn chronology: greedy farmers plowed up unfit land; nature pushed back with drought, crop failure, and severe soil erosion; poor people suffered; and the federal government came to the rescue with innovative land-use reforms, saving the region from utter destruction after a decade of disaster. All the standard components of the story have their place in this lengthy documentary. Viewers learn about the "Great Plow-Up" of the 1920s, revisit year-by-year events such as drought, depression, and dust storms that wracked the region, and then follow Okies who gave up and trekked to California, desperate for work or merely food. At the end, New Deal government agencies brought jobs, land-use reform, subsidies, and, ultimately, hope and salvation. This film does not challenge the standard historical narrative and interpretation of the Dust Bowl nor does it teach us anything new about

the 1930s. It contains little historical nuance and no revisionism. It also does not question what moral lessons we should take from this historical event; those lessons appear crystal clear and beyond doubt.

While the filmmakers chose not to challenge historical interpretations, they achieved their core objective: to bring the Dust Bowl experience vividly to life. Relying on a variety of primary sources, the film is factually accurate and powerfully emotive. Its greatest contribution and central storytelling device is a series of survivor interviews with elderly people who reminisce about their childhood experience on the southern plains in the 1930s. As with all Burns documentaries, the visuals are rich, compelling, and powerful. Striking still photographs and film footage present a time and place easily recognizable to most viewers. Images dominate, interspersed with survivor interviews and only occasional "talking head" academic historians and journalists. Tying the entire package together, from beginning to end, are the eloquent letters of Henderson, an Oklahoma homesteader who had the good grace to write with care about life on a southern plains farm throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Henderson's account began in 1908 when she took up farming. It continued through the heady years of the 1920s, shifted from optimism to despair in the 1930s, and persisted into the 1960s. Her clear, thoughtful prose, read by a talented voice actor, forms the connective tissue that knits together the entire film.<sup>12</sup>

While the source selection is appropriate and the chronological facts accurate, professional historians will note that there is little critical evaluation of primary sources, which is essential to appropriate historical interpretation. Historians know that all primary sources must be evaluated for accuracy, relevance, authority, bias, and intended audience. This film takes its primary sources at face value, as simple fact, rather than as personal, and possibly biased,

representations of fact. Neither the imagery, nor the interviewees, nor the textual sources are subject to critical evaluation, and it is here that the film's weakness emerges.<sup>13</sup>

The most enduring impressions come from the imagery, the historical photographs and video clips that occupy the vast majority of screen time. A coffee table book that accompanies the film provides adequate citations for the photographs, naming the archive that holds each. However, nowhere in the documentary or in the book do the filmmakers critique the images themselves. Who were the photographers and what were their goals, biases, and political interests? The film acknowledges that some of the photographers were employed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and states that they had a simple mandate: to capture the raw emotion of suffering people. In fact, historians know that the mandate of this talented photographic corps, designated by its leader, Roy Stryker, as the "Historical Section," was rather different. Stryker sent photographers into the field with detailed shooting scripts mandating that they capture (or in some cases create) particular and specific images:

we suggest the following things to look for: foreclosure notices, more sale signs posted on buildings. I don't suppose it is possible, but it would be very interesting if these sales could be tied up with the drought. I do hope you have the good luck to be on hand when some family is packing up, ready to leave for parts more moist.

The photographers added heavy-handed interpretive captions to their images designed to highlight the need for, and success of, New Deal programs. For example, consider Dorothea Lange's caption for a photo she shot near "No Man's Land" in May 1935: "Fence corner and outbuilding being buried by dust. Misuse of lands is the chief cause of results such as this. Mills, New Mexico." The FSA photographic oeuvre is artistically exceptional, and Burns made good use of it. But nowhere in the film does the audience learn about the political goals of the

photographers featured nor of the creative techniques they used to advance the government's agenda. Likewise, the filmmakers are rather fast and loose in their use of film clips. In many places they intersperse scenes from *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, as if it were primary footage, rather than a storyboarded film produced by the FSA as political advocacy (some might say propaganda). Clips from this Pare Lorentz movie appear repeatedly in the documentary, uninterpreted and interwoven in a way that suggests it is a primary source. What will appear to most viewers as, "just the facts" imagery goes un-deconstructed in this film.<sup>14</sup>

The heart of the film is the survivor interviews. Twenty-six individuals appear, making it a rich oral history addition to existing memoirs. It is clear that Burns and Dayton wanted these personal stories to anchor the film. In a later interview Burns says, "We wanted to make a film, but we didn't know whether we actually could, whether there would be any survivors, or enough survivors to give this kind of broad narrative that we do in fact have." The experiences reported are wide-ranging, deeply felt, and, at times, heartbreaking. Their stories are compelling and believable and put a human face onto history like no other source can. The interviews are the greatest strength of the film, but once again the filmmakers sidestep their responsibility to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of the interviewees' statements. A historian would quickly note that this testimony comes some seventy-five years after the event. Possible biases, embellishments, or errors remain unexamined by the filmmakers. Worse, they make no distinction between reported fact and expressed interpretation of the past. These elderly informants report events as viewed through the eyes of children. When these informants describe how they felt watching their parents struggle to put food on the table, for example, or what it was like to have a sibling die of dust pneumonia, the authority of their personal experience is powerful and convincing. When, on the other hand, those same informants explain what caused the Dust Bowl, their authority disappears. Now they are reporting events

that happened before their own birth and to which they were not eyewitnesses. And yet Burns and Dayton mix these comments into the film without nuance, without critique, and without comment. Thus Episode II opens with a strong interpretive statement by a Dust Bowl survivor that explains the cause of the disaster and the moral we should take from it:

We made so much money at raising wheat in the late twenties that we broke everything out to raise more wheat, and then the climate changed and the Depression came along and the wheat wasn't worth much, but we still had the land broken out. We were just too selfish and we were trying to make money and get rich quick off of the wheat and it didn't work out.

Despite his use of the personal "we," this man was not a participant in the "Great Plow-Up" of the 1920s, and his statements about that time should carry less weight; instead they serve as the introductory narrative for Episode II. Thus, with both images and oral histories the documentary is a hodgepodge of accurate, convincing, and evocative detail, subtly interspersed with biased, subjective, and interested statements. The filmmakers make little distinction between the two types of evidence.<sup>15</sup>

The final component of the film, if a minimal one, is video testimony by professional historians and journalists with expertise in the history of the Dust Bowl. The most prominent chroniclers of this history are represented, including Donald Worster, Egan, Hurt, and Riney-Kehrberg. These are the obvious choices, given their strong publication record on the topic, and their statements in the film reflect what they have written over the past thirty years. Alternative interpretations of the causes of the dust storms, including arguments put forward by James Malin and myself, do not appear in this film. Dust storms happened for thousands of years in the Great Plains, long before the arrival of Euro-American immigrants and their plows. Severe, extensive, and long-lasting dust storms are well documented before sod-busting, and in the

1930s they occurred in areas dominated by native grassland as well as plowed crops. I have argued that the timing and location of dust storms might be better explained by drought than by land use, yet this interpretation of the Dust Bowl is absent in the film. Asked why this was the case, screenwriter Duncan responded that while he had read these alternate interpretations, he ultimately decided to dismiss them in favor of a strong, unified narrative. Further, he and Burns wanted the film to highlight one type of historical evidence, namely personal interviews, and "not just statistics and explication. . . . A film is not an encyclopedia. . . . Writing a newspaper story and a novel are different things. Making a historical documentary and a history textbook are different things." These responses raise significant questions about the role of documentary film in historical discourse. Can documentaries accommodate disagreement among scholars? Is documentary film capable of handling primary evidence with nuance and sophistication? Can documentary film accommodate complexity, or must it hew to a simple, straightforward, and easily understandable narrative? Judging solely by *The Dust Bowl*, the answer to these questions would appear to be "no."<sup>16</sup>

Is this film appropriate for use in an undergraduate history course? It is tempting, because the film does such a good job of making life in the 1930s real by presenting the experiences of common people. And the details of the story are accurate and well supported with documentary evidence; the basic chronology of events is correct. Yet, the interpretive moralizing, especially at the beginning of each of the two episodes, is so heavy-handed and simplistic that many students will take such statements at face value, as will, no doubt, millions of PBS viewers. The bottom line is that this film, while artistically attractive, does not meet the standards of historical scholarship that we normally expect from secondary historical sources. If this film were a book, I would not assign it to my students. However, as Duncan points out, it is not a book, is it?

## **The Dust Bowl as Documentary**

### **R. DOUGLAS HURT**

Documentary films, like historical monographs, have a point of view, an interpretation of the past built on evidence and with questions asked and answered. Filmmakers, like historians who work in print, are entitled to their interpretation based on the evidence, which we might call facts. Neither is entitled to create their own facts or exclude pertinent information that would influence their conclusions. Both must maintain focus.

The Dust Bowl documentary is a case in point. It begins with a thesis that farmers in the southern Great Plains caused the Dust Bowl, or as Burns and Dayton put it, the greatest manmade ecological disaster in history. Then, they divert to the real story that they want to tell, that is, the plight of the people who suffered from black blizzards and eked out a life on a barren and forbidding landscape, all documented with wonderful interviews with people who, as children, lived through the Dust Bowl years. Scattered here and there are several on-camera experts who are skilled with the use of sound bites. Sometimes their comments are informative, but on occasion they are without factual support, that is, evidence. Moreover, these comments belie the ideological intent of the filmmakers who primarily want to blame farmers for the Dust Bowl. The filmmakers should have done what they do best, that is, base the documentary on the social and economic effects of the Dust Bowl on the people but emphasize drought as the primary cause. When one alleged expert, for example, tells viewers on camera, and in the concurrently published book, that farmers killed the land and that the wind blows in the southern Great Plains at the rate of sixty to seventy miles an hour for half the year, proving that

the land should have remained in grass, the unknowledgeable observer can easily believe such statements as a matter of history rather than sensationalism and pandering to the camera. Anyone who knows about the agricultural history of the Great Plains recognizes that statements such as this lack verifiable evidence. They are false and misleading. The monthly records of the Weather Bureau will not sustain such verbal license, nor can anyone, like me, who was raised in the region support such claims based on experience. The truth is the truth, and statements that are not are not. These and other similar comments are ideological polemics intended to generate an emotional response to statements offered as historical facts for the purpose of gaining the viewers' attention. Sound bites when espoused as knowledge can leave mental impressions that provide powerful, but superficial, even incorrect, explanations for complex historical events. More important, the filmmakers made a conscious decision to use ideological, incorrect, and often uninformed information to argue their point that farmers were responsible for the Dust Bowl. By doing so they degraded what, in many respects, is an admirable documentary. Put differently, they lost their focus and neglected the evidence.

I am not arguing that agricultural expansion in the southern Great Plains did not contribute to the Dust Bowl. It did, and I have written extensively about it. Nevertheless, had it not been for the drought there would not have been a Dust Bowl, the likes of which we have seen in this documentary. The filmmakers primarily, but not entirely, ignored James Malin's research, which traced the history of dust storms in the region, some quite severe, during the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Rather, by ignoring drought as the essential cause, the filmmakers could easily blame farmers for creating the Dust Bowl. Farmers did plow about six million acres that should have been left in grass of the 97 million-acre wind erosion area. Before 1931, however, annual precipitation supported wheat production on those and other newly plowed lands in the

Southern Great Plains. The vegetative cover of wheat gave protection to the soil and kept it from blowing. The situation changed in 1931 when annual precipitation averages began to decline across the region. By 1932 drought prevented good stands of soil-holding wheat and, with the soil exposed, the wind easily lifted it into the air. As the drought worsened through 1936, the vegetative cover declined on the pasturelands and where other crops had been planted, and the dust storms worsened. In 1937 moisture increases helped allay the most severe wind erosion conditions experienced in the region. By 1938 the drought had broken in many areas and, by 1940, normal precipitation, based on long-term averages calculated by the Weather Bureau, along with relatively light spring winds and improved soil conservation, essentially ended the Dust Bowl conditions.<sup>18</sup>

Let me use Kansas as an example where, between 1932 and 1937, farmers in the southwestern portion of the state, that is, the Dust Bowl region, experienced crop failure or extremely low wheat yields. Here, the average annual precipitation ranges from sixteen to twenty inches. This area had experienced drought during the years from 1860-1863, 1874-1876, 1878-1880, 1887-1890, 1893-1895, 1910-1914, 1916-1918, and 1931-1937, with the period from 1934 to 1937 being the most severe, with the possible exception of 1893. Between 1920 and 1930 the number of farms in this twenty-five-county area increased from 14,272 to 16,267 while the percentage of land in farms increased to 81 percent. In 1920 farmers seeded 13.6 percent and in 1931 38 percent of this land in wheat. Much of this expansion resulted from plowing native grass. Wheat acreage increased 250 percent. Higher-than-average annual precipitation boosted yields to an average of eleven bushels per acre during the 1920s, and the price of one dollar per bushel made wheat farming profitable. At this price per bushel, these were not submarginal wheat lands. Had the price been ten cents per bushel, farmers would have considered these lands submarginal.<sup>19</sup>

The severe drought of 1931-1937 did not "kill" the soil as the filmmakers would have us believe, but it did kill the wheat, which left the friable, loamy soil exposed to the wind and, as it had in the past, it blew, often severely. With the drought came a host of government agencies that provided subsistence funds, working capital, and conservation expertise to help farmers continue their operations and use the techniques that would help hold soil moisture and promote vegetative re-covering of barren lands, even during drought conditions.<sup>20</sup>

Drought brought change, but not less farming or emphasis on wheat production. I am not saying that some submarginal lands were not returned to grass. In 1938 the federal government targeted six hundred thousand acres, or approximately 10 percent, of the cropland for grassland restoration in the twenty-five-county area of southwestern Kansas. But, from 1931 to 1937, the average size of farms increased from nine hundred seventeen to one thousand eleven acres, with the large-scale farmers planting more cropland. In a six-county area in the heart of the Dust Bowl, the acreage seeded to wheat was larger in 1937 than from 1932 to 1936. Although the average wheat acreage seeded per farm declined from 544 acres in 1931 to 450 acres in 1936 due to drought, in 1937 the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), other government payments, and improved soil moisture conditions increased the average wheat planting to five hundred three acres. Put differently, the drought severely reduced wheat yields, dropping averages from 23 bushels per acre in 1931 to 3.4 bushels per acre in 1934, but it did not stop farmers from planting wheat.<sup>21</sup>

Agricultural Adjustment payments prevented large reductions in wheat acreage, because government payments encouraged farmers to plant this crop. The AAA, then, prevented more land from being covered with natural vegetation or weeds, particularly Russian thistle that would have given increased protection to lands otherwise exposed to wind erosion during drought conditions. Equally important, AAA checks and other programmatic funding helped

farmers endure the drought so they could return to profitable wheat farming. During the Dust Bowl years, the drought also encouraged farmers to shift from corn to sorghum production and to reduce their cattle herds. In fact, production-control payments increased the demand for farmland. In Kansas, for example, 71.3 percent of wheat farmers received federal payments. The large-scale farmers in this group often used AAA payments to acquire land from small-scale farmers who could not earn enough income to remain on the land. In 1931 nearly 77 percent of the Kansas Dust Bowl had been seeded in cropland. By 1937 that acreage had declined to 65 percent in cropland. It probably would have been lower but AAA payments gave farmers the ability to finance their wheat operations.<sup>22</sup>

By 1937 Dust Bowl farmers knew that it was better to leave weeds on the ground than to plant wheat in dry soil, but spotty rains along with AAA and other government payments gave them hope, as even the filmmakers show with panoramas of sprawling wheat fields near the end of the documentary. By 1938 heavy snow, light precipitation, and lower wind velocities enabled some Dust Bowl farmers to raise wheat even if they needed another three inches of precipitation for comfort. With the drought broken, the wheat grew and held the soil better than at any time since 1932.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, farmers plowed lands that should have remained in grass. But, had precipitation continued at average amounts, wheat crops would have covered the ground as they do across much of that area today, and the wind erosion condition that created the Dust Bowl would not have occurred with the severity experienced during the 1930s. Without question, farmers also put too many cattle on their pasturelands, and large areas of grasslands became overgrazed and subject to wind erosion. Overgrazing continued from necessity for several years until livestock raisers could sell their surplus cattle and until appropriate soil conservation measures enabled the land to store moisture to help the pasturelands better

withstand drought. Reseeding, terraces, and contour furrows and ridges made a difference in helping restore wind-eroded, plowed lands to grass lands and slowing blowing soil.<sup>24</sup>

In fall 1937 improved precipitation encouraged Colorado farmers to increase their wheat acreage by 25 percent, and Oklahoma farmers planted about 50 percent of their pre-Dust Bowl wheat crops. Growing plants, crop residues, and weeds along with rough tillage techniques helped protect the land. Technology helped create the Dust Bowl, and it also helped put the soil to rest. As the drought mitigated across the Dust Bowl, Kansas provides another example. There, the land in farms increased from 46.9 million acres in 1930 to 48 million acres in 1940. Dust Bowl and drought-area farmers had not killed the soil.<sup>25</sup>

So, my point is that, while the documentary told a compelling story about the Dust Bowl by using riveting interviews with many people who experienced it (and make no mistake, the Dust Bowl years left an indelible scar; even the recollection of it today easily brings tears to the eyes of those who remember it), the documentary used agricultural expansion as the primary cause rather than as a contributor to the creation of the Dust Bowl. By using sound bites to tell viewers that farmers primarily were responsible for it and that the dust storms drove people crazy en masse, the filmmakers disregarded the evidence in favor of an ideological argument that focused on exploitation by ruthless, capitalist farmers who allegedly created the worst ecological disaster in history. They largely ignored drought as the major causation. Had they reversed their emphasis, the documentary would have greater veracity.

## **Dust Differences: Recent Interpretations of the Dust Bowl in Film**

**JULIE COURTWRIGHT**

In November 2012 *The Dust Bowl*, aired on PBS accompanied by press releases, major promotion by the network, and, perhaps most importantly, the Burns name, to attract viewers. While Burns's interpretation of the 1930s on the southern Great Plains received the most attention, both by the press and by a nationwide audience, another documentary, largely on the same topic, debuted a month prior. *Dust Bowl: Harvesting the High Plains*, a film directed by Jay Kriss, was based on a 1998 book by historian Craig Miner.<sup>26</sup>

One widely known and the other initially only regionally distributed (although *Harvesting* is scheduled to air nationally, distributed by American Public Television, in fall 2013), the two films demonstrate a truth: given the same historical subject, no two people/filmmakers (or historians either, for that matter) will tell the same story. The near simultaneous release of *Dust Bowl* and *Harvesting the High Plains* presents an opportunity to compare and contrast their interpretation of the 1930s drought and dust event on the Great Plains. Looking at the films together, it is apparent what each of them, separately, does well and also illustrates the flaws of each. The differences between the films are significant. Sources, intent, resources, politics, and emphasis--all are in sharp contrast to the other. As the credits roll, however, *Harvesting the High Plains*, while certainly not perfect, and burdened by the lack of the familiar Burns name, a lower budget, limited distribution, and a less eye-catching appearance, is the better film and the better interpretation of the Dust Bowl.

Now, to be fair, *Harvesting* is not as exclusively focused on the Dust Bowl as Burns's film. Its main subject is wheat farming in western Kansas during the Dust Bowl years. This truth gives *Harvesting* an advantage from the start, as the film moves beyond a single-minded examination of the dust storms and looks at the practice of agriculture in a marginal environment. *Harvesting*, therefore, from its beginning, tells a more complex and intriguing

story than *Dust Bowl*, which focuses entirely on the emergency and not the larger agricultural experience.

*Harvesting* is about landowner and businessman Ray Garvey and farmer/manager John Kriss, who ran GK Farms, a twenty-thousand-acre wheat operation near Thomas County, Kansas, during the Dust Bowl. Accompanied, as director Jay Kriss demonstrates in the film, by their third "partner"--the land itself--Garvey and Kriss attempted to work with the soil, not against it. They were realistic about the marginal environment in which they farmed, but nevertheless attempted to make a living off of it, "hinging their fate on three little words: 'if it rains.'"<sup>27</sup>

On the surface, this description might not seem that different from *Dust Bowl*, but in reality, the two films have little in common, starting with their titles--the first indicator of contrast. One speaks of crisis, the other, agriculture. Before watching a minute of film, the intuitive viewer might sense a divergence of purpose. Another obvious difference is length. *Dust Bowl* takes four hours to tell its story. *Harvesting* does it in one hour and seven minutes. The latter is faster paced and not as repetitive. A small point, perhaps, but with regards to usability in the classroom, *Harvesting* works better and does not labor so hard to make its arguments.

A more important difference between the two films is sources. Burns's *Dust Bowl* is based on interviews--and mostly interviews with people who were children during the events they remembered and described. Although this fact likely went unnoticed by the majority of *Dust Bowl* viewers, who just heard and appreciated amazing stories, from a historian's perspective the age of the interviewees at the time of the crisis is of enormous import, as it significantly shaped their perception and understanding of historical events. *Dust Bowl* does not acknowledge the skewed experience of its interviewees, a significant faux pas of historical interpretation.

*Harvesting*, in contrast, relies on primary source letters as the historical base of its interpretation. Garvey, Kriss, and others involved in their operation exchanged upwards of ten thousand letters over the decades they were in business together. Thus the men, like Burns's interviewees, tell most of the story themselves, but from the 1930s--Garvey in Wichita and Kriss in Thomas County. The filmmakers' decision to use written primary source documents was a good one, as it gave the film the serious historical authority that *Dust Bowl*, with its strong emphasis on selected interviews, lacked. While authors of many books and films about the Dust Bowl have successfully used oral history, the time to rely heavily on that source, beyond transcriptions of previous interviews, is past, as the vast majority of people who experienced the event directly, especially as adults, have died. Future historians and filmmakers must now, therefore, turn to documents. Historians know that the closer the sources are to the actual events, and the less subject they are to bias, the better. When it comes to sources, therefore, *Harvesting* has a clear advantage over *Dust Bowl*. This advantage is one not obvious to casual viewers, but is nevertheless important--perhaps especially important in light of its influence on viewers who are unaware of the significance of source provenance and therefore unable to identify potential bias themselves. Despite its reliance on written letters rather than interviews, *Harvesting* does not suffer creatively. Both Garvey and Kriss are excellent writers, their words from the 1930s just as informative and engrossing as the more recent recollections of interviewees.

The overall purpose of each film is also strikingly different. Burns's film is heavy with environmental critique. *Harvesting* does not neglect the environmental crisis of the Dust Bowl, but looks at it through a very different lens. Garvey and Kriss ran their farm as a business. They were as efficient as possible, using and re-using older tractors to save money. Theirs is a story of partnering with the land--accepting its limitations and working within them--while *Dust Bowl*,

at least for most of the film, portrays farmers in a pitched battle with the earth. Profit, in *Harvesting*, is a good thing. It allows farmers to make a living, and Garvey and Kriss make no apologies for wanting to do so. In *Dust Bowl*, by contrast, farmers are judged for putting more wheat in the ground when last year's crop failed and judged for planting more wheat to make up for falling prices during a depression. Were these practices counterproductive, given the environmental and economic crisis of the 1930s? In the long run, looking at the national economic situation from a historical distance, the answer is yes. Can (or should) we blame individual farmers for wanting to make a living and provide for their families? I don't think so. And yet, *Dust Bowl* implies that greed, both before and during the crisis, drove many farmers' actions. There is a difference between greed and a desire to make a good living. While *Harvesting* recognizes that difference, *Dust Bowl* does not adequately make the distinction.

The cause of the Dust Bowl is yet another point at which the two films diverge. Kriss and Garvey take a very practical view of the dry 1930s. It was part of a cycle of dry and wet that happens on the plains. True, the thirties might have been a particularly difficult dry spell, but nonetheless it was still part of a normal cycle. True, the dust blew more than in previous years, doubtless, at least in part, to the plow-up and the transition to particular farming practices, but dust had always flown on the plains, and always would--again, it was part of a normal cycle. Farmers, Garvey and Kriss argued, must have a plan for the dry years. Drought is normal, and if farmers farm in a marginal area like the western Great Plains, they would need to expect it and learn how to manage within it. Drought had come before and it would come again. Compare this attitude to that in *Dust Bowl*, where there is no mention, for example, of the terrible 1890s drought on the plains. At the end of the film, there is a brief discussion of the dry time in the 1950s and warnings that the dust could fly again, but no mention of any period

prior to the 1930s. Because of this, and despite the film's claims to the contrary, the 1930s are portrayed as an anomaly and not part of a cycle.

The two films also diverge politically. *Dust Bowl* adopts a pro-government perspective. The film mentions that some plains peoples opposed Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal recovery programs, but the emphasis is largely on the necessity of the programs and argues that they were instrumental for recovery. Garvey and Kriss, however, were frustrated with the AAA and other government-sponsored efforts. GK Farms, for example, had worked for soil conservation long before Roosevelt got involved. Mostly, Garvey and Kriss were wary of the government's role, the uncertainty of which interfered with long-range planning. They thought that the AAA, for example, might be discarded should Roosevelt not be re-elected. They also thought that most government programs favored the small farmers over the large. Thus, the overall political tone of *Harvesting*, fueled by Garvey and Kriss's opinions, is anti-government and anti-Roosevelt. Both *Dust Bowl* and *Harvesting* would have benefitted from further exploration of the opposite political view. That neither film is politically balanced further illustrates the polarizing nature of the 1930s Dust Bowl and Great Depression.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between the two films, however, is the depiction of the suitcase farmer. *Harvesting* is, admittedly, a revealing look at only one wheat-farming operation. But, what fascinates me is that this one operation is exactly the type that *Dust Bowl* villainizes in aggregate. Besides the wind and the dust itself, there is no greater villain in Burns's film than the suitcase farmer--the nameless, soulless businessman from the city, who buys up land, plants it, and then basically abandons it to blow on the more virtuous small-scale farmers in residence.

In *Harvesting* Garvey is, in essence, a suitcase farmer. But he bears little resemblance to the villainous figure in *Dust Bowl*. *Harvesting* does recognize the existence of what it calls

"rainbow chasers"--those in the business only for profit. But Garvey was not like that. Whereas suitcase farmers in *Dust Bowl* made little effort to conserve the land, Garvey wrote thousands of letters to Kriss, obsessing endlessly on that very topic. Despite his residence in Wichita, Garvey cared about the land, and wanted to farm it successfully. He and Kriss brainstormed methods for plowing--most notably listing--that would prepare the ground so that when rain did finally fall, the land would be in a better position to soak up the moisture. The men voluntarily entered into a lengthy fallow program, often letting the land lie every other year in an effort to store up two years' worth of moisture before planting.

Even though they farmed big (or perhaps because of it) GK Farms took risks. They experimented with new ideas, learned from nature, and built on the knowledge that they gained from their successes and failures. They were leaders in the local community, despised by some for their size and their ability to buy up abandoned land, but also pathbreakers in conservation techniques, encouraging local farmers to implement change long before the government stepped in to provide incentives. Were Garvey and Kriss in farming for profit? Absolutely. But, as Miner argued in his book, and as the film also argues, that did not mean they did not care for the land. In fact, Kriss and Garvey (in large part, admittedly, because their operation was subsidized by Garvey's financial resources) were long-term thinkers not speculators and not in farming for a quick buck. They believed that the Great Plains operated according to cycles and that farmers had to learn how to dryland farm within those cycles. Some years they profited handsomely. Other years they failed. Acceptance of that fact, planning for it, and the ability to cope with it, were of critical importance. These were not the suitcase farmers depicted in *Dust Bowl*.<sup>28</sup>

Dramatically different films on essentially the same subject, *Dust Bowl* and *Harvesting* do have some things in common. Both emphasize, for example, most 1930s plains farmers'

indifference to listing and other conservation techniques until the government stepped in and essentially forced their hands with incentives. GK Farms, however, proves there were exceptions to this rule. *Dust Bowl*, with its higher budget, is a much prettier film, showing off both the magnificence and the bleakness of the southern plains to best advantage. It is also by far the more emotional film--showcasing the terror and desperation of individual people more fully than the practical *Harvesting*. Maps in *Harvesting* date from the period--yet another nod to primary sources by the film's producers--but appear imprecise and dated to modern viewers, who may or may not understand the intended connection to the 1930s.

A more significant critique of *Harvesting* is that it more or less ignores a question raised by historians, environmental scientists, and others since the Dust Bowl began: is it acceptable to practice agriculture in a marginal environment such as the western High Plains of Kansas? While this topic is a prominent theme in Burns's *Dust Bowl*, it gets far less attention in *Harvesting*. As a postscript to the Dust Bowl years, for example, after World War II Garvey expanded his wheat farming operation into eastern Colorado, onto land that had been abandoned by less successful farmers. He did so because he believed that he and Kriss, paying careful attention to their land, the third "partner," could be successful where others had failed. Should they even try, however? That elephant in the room, addressed by numerous scholars over the years, remains largely unexplored by *Harvesting*

At first glance a narrower look at the Dust Bowl era, *Harvesting* is, in the end, more multi-dimensional than Burns's one-note, yet longer, *Dust Bowl*. The Dust Bowl crisis of the 1930s did not occur within a historical vacuum. Despite its brevity, lower budget, and focus on one large wheat-farming operation, *Harvesting* manages to illuminate a slice of Dust Bowl history while not excluding agricultural history. It is, in my comparative view, the best Dust Bowl film of 2012 and provides an alternate choice to Burns's more famous effort.

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1. Many thanks to Jon Lauck, who arranged the original panel at the Northern Great Plains History Conference and then worked closely with both authors and journal staff to facilitate publication.

*The Dust Bowl*, prod. Ken Burns (Florentine Films and WETA, 2012); Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

2. This was not my first experience with this phenomenon. When I served as a historical consultant on Steward-Gazit Productions' *Surviving the Dust Bowl*, the differences between the rough cut of the documentary and the final product were shocking. The rough cut was a nuanced, complex historical piece. After WGBH worked on the piece, it became flat, with all of the complexity removed. WGBH wanted a crowd-pleaser, consisting of interviews with elderly Dust Bowl survivors. In order to market the piece, the production company complied. *Surviving the Dust Bowl*, prod. Steward-Gazit (Burlington: WGBH Boston, 2007).

3. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 32.

4. " *The Dust Bowl: A Film By Ken Burns: Biographies*," PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/bios/> (accessed Aug. 30, 2013); Glen H. Elder Jr., *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 39, 138, 273. Thanks to the audience member who reminded me of Elder's pioneering work on childhood in the Depression.

5. In *Rooted in Dust*, I discuss my research subjects' reasons for staying in Kansas and the way in which they responded emotionally to the question of staying or going in several places. Their responses indicated a real ambivalence about the experience. It was hard, but

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they endured. Many, given their experiences in childhood and early adulthood, saw hardship as a way of life. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 140–41, 153–54, 175.

6. Caroline Henderson, *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, ed. Alvin O. Turner (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 17, 3–29. All biographical information about Henderson is drawn from Turner's introduction.

7. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 190–92.

8. Mary Knackstedt Dyck, *Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck*, ed. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).

9. Dyck, *Waiting on the Bounty*, 74.

10.

11. *Dust Bowl*.

12. Henderson, *Letters*.

13. Environmental historians weighed in on a previous Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan documentary about the National Parks. See, Mark Harvey, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," *Environmental History* 15 (Apr. 2010): 325–28; Karl Jacoby, "Ken Burns Gone Wild: Naturalizing the Nation in *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*," *Public Historian* 33 (Spring 2011): 19–23; and a collection of essays in the *George Wright Forum* 28:1, 2 (2011).

14. Duncan and Burns, *The Dust Bowl: An Illustrated History* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2012); Jon Lauck, "Dorothea Lange and the Limits of the Liberal Narrative: A Review Essay," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 45 (Summer 2012): 4–37; Geoff Cunfer, "Creating the Dust Bowl: Making History, Making Art," CD-ROM supplement, *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship*, ed. Anne Kelly Knowles (Redlands: ESRI, 2008);

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Roy Stryker to Arthur Rothstein, July 31, 1936, quoted in Bill Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descent* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 7. Many of Stryker's original shooting scripts are available in the Roy Stryker Collection, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville, Louisville, Ky. Dorothea Lange, "Fence Corner and Outbuilding being Buried by Dust. Misuse of Lands is the Chief Cause of Results such as This. Mills, New Mexico," c. May 1935, Reproduction Number LC-USF34-002769-E, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998018567/PP/> (accessed Feb. 14, 2014); *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, dir. Pare Lorentz (Resettlement Administration, 1936).

15. *Dust Bowl*.

16. For prominent chroniclers of the Dust Bowl, see, Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Egan, *Worst Hard Time*; R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981); Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*. James C. Malin, "Dust Storms: Part One, 1850-1860," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (May 1946): 129-33; Malin, "Dust Storms: Part Two, 1861-1880," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (Aug. 1946): 265-96; Malin, "Dust Storms: Part Three, 1881-1900," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (Nov. 1946): 391-413; Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Cunfer, "Scaling the Dust Bowl," in *Placing History*, 95-121. Personal communication, Jon Lauck, Jan. 3, 2013. **[GC: Is this an email? In your possession?]**

17. Hurt, *The Dust Bowl*; Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century*

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(Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011); Malin, "Dust Storms: Part One, 1850-1860";

Malin, "Dust Storms: Part Two, 1861-1880"; Malin, "Dust Storms: Part Three, 1881-1900."

18. *The Dust Bowl: Agricultural Problems and Solutions*, Editorial Reference Series No. 7 (Washington, DC: USDA, July 15, 1940), 10-28.

19. H. L. Stewart, *Changes on Wheat Farms in Southwestern Kansas, 1931-37, With Special Reference to the Influence of AAA Programs*, Farm Management Reports No. 7 (Washington, DC: USDA, June 1940), 4-6.

20. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

21. *Ibid.*, 12, 14, 21-22.

22. *Ibid.*, 24, 65; George Wise and Daniel Polley, "Land Use Survey of the Southern Great Plains: A Report. Amarillo, Tex., Apr. 1938," Table 14, General File, Drought, 1938, Soil Conservation Service, RG 114, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA); Hurt, "Prices, Payments, & Production: Kansas Wheat Farmers and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1933-1939," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 23 (Spring/Summer 2000): 72-87.

23. Roy I. Kimmell, "A Long View of the Wind Erosion Problem," *Quarterly Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture* (Mar. 1938): 86; Duncan and Burns, *Dust Bowl*, 4.

24. "Report of the Eleventh Conference of the Regional Diversity Committee on Land Use in the Southern Great Plains Area, Colorado Springs, Colo., Apr. 19-20, 1937," p. 2; "Report of the Fourteenth Conference of the Regional Advisory Committee on Land Use Practices in the Southern Great Plains Area, Amarillo, Tex., Dec. 13-14, 1937," p. 1, Drought File, General Correspondence, 1937, Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, RG 16, NARA.

25. "Report of the Fourteenth Conference," 1; Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Agriculture*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1942), 706.

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26. *Dust Bowl: Harvesting the High Plains*, dir. Jay Kriss (InSpirit Creative/Third Eye Pictures, 2012). I previously reviewed *Harvesting* see, Thomas Prasch, ed., "From Projections of the Past to Fantasies of the Future: Kansas and the Great Plains in Recent Film," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 36 (Summer 2013): 114-16. Although this current article is a comparison/contrast and not a review, some of my observations originated in the earlier review.

27. Craig Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920-1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

28. Ibid.

**<Figure 1>**

**<H>Figure 1.</H>**

"Fence Corner and Outbuilding being Buried by Dust. Misuse of Lands is the Chief Cause of Results such as This. Mills, New Mexico."

Source: Dorothea Lange, of Congress Prints & Photographs Division.