

The Rhetoric of the Dust Bowl

Introduction

The Dust Bowl, also referred to as the Dirty Thirties, was a time of great misfortune for those of the Great Plains during a time of economic crises for the country. To many people of the United States the Dust Bowl was one of the greatest natural disasters in U.S. history, but was the Dust Bowl true a natural disaster? Record-breaking heatwaves after an abnormally dry spring in the central United States led to trapped heat moving westward and amplifying the heat wave (Cowan et. al). All of these seem like natural occurrences, acts of God, but this alone was not what made the bread basket of American become a desert wasteland. It was the technology of the time that caused the Great Plains to blow away. The plow in particular became a symbol of westward expansion in the United States. Land that was once thought to be unusable became fertile ground for sowing seeds, and an eager population was willing to uproot their lives to make a living out of this new found opportunity. Three major factors came together to create the dust bowl, the idea of manifest destiny, limited knowledge of farming by the residents, and the economic disparity of the time. Though the Dust Bowl was man-made it has taken on a life of its own in the form of rhetoric. Rhetoric used by some for political reasons and by others for environmental conservation efforts. The Dust Bowl was made by strong rhetoric and has created its own strong rhetoric.

Making the Dust bowl

The idea of Manifest Destiny was founded on the idea that the United States were set, by divine providence, to reach from one ocean to another. This concept came to define the American outlook of westward expansion and would later become a part of American Exceptionalism. The American way of life became THE way of life and any and all others were inherently inferior. Westward expansion became a dream of many Americans and the idea of going out to the plains and making living for oneself is still prevalent today, albeit in the form of small business ownership and being your own boss mentalities (Dobson, 2013).

The moving west also became a type of new beginning for some of the more impoverished Americans. The fall out of the Civil War was still strong and left many Southerners with no money and no land. The economic and educational gap between the Northern and Southern states has narrowed but the damage done still affects the citizens of those states. General Sherman's march to the sea left much of the southern country side burnt and broken. Families that had never done anything but rural farm work were forced to move into cities to make a living (Donoghue, 2016). Many of these families found a chance for a new start in the southwestern plains.

At the same time a new demographic of freed slaves began a great migration away from the rural south. Many moved to urban areas in the north, while others chose to move westward. This led to a massive influx of uneducated farmers in a new area of the nation that was already not well understood (Black et al, 2015). These farmers were not drawn to the west just because of the opportunities it offered but were also tempted by government subsidies on farming land in the Great Plains (Cowen et al, 2017).

The Homestead Act was a Government program that was made to encourage citizens to settle the Midwest. It promised free land to those willing to move out west and farm the land. Uneducated and inexperienced farmers left with their families to head for better opportunities. Land management was still unknown to many of these migrants, first or second generation farmers that were unfamiliar with the natural flora and fauna of the region (Lee & Gill, 2015). This led to over grazing, nutrient depleted soil, and widespread erosion due to a lack of natural foliage to hold the top soil together. Mass migration and poor understanding of farming techniques made the top soil dry and loose. The wind easily pushed the dirt from the ground and began to create the famous black blizzards, this led to the massive wind storms that gave the Dust Bowl its name (Lee & Gill, 2015).

The heavy pushes by the federal government to cultivate the western plains led to the Dust Bowl. This was all to serve the purposes of Manifest Destiny. The opportunities they gave to a population still broken from war and a group newly freed from the bonds of slavery were too good to pass up (Dobson, 2013). Mass migration to a foreign area rarely ends well, and in this case it led to permanent damage to the Midwestern United States.

Political Rhetoric

The modern conservationist movement was built on the idea of limiting human influence on the natural world. Many hold to the belief that the movement was started with Teddy Roosevelt and his establishing of the national parks programs. This is partially true, the whole truth is that the conservationist movement started with farmers and government officials working together in the Great Plains (Sheflin, 2016). Farmers that moved to the Great Plains were forced to adapt to the changes caused by the poor farming techniques used to cultivate the land, and the federal government was needed to find a solution to the problem due to a starving population in the greatest economic downturn in world history.

Agricultural scientists were hired to better understand the native plant life of the Great Plains and find a way to restore the balance to the torn ecosystem. It was found that native grasses were holding the plains topsoil together and the removal and replacement of these grasses with wheat was what led to a majority of the

desertification. Better understanding of crop rotation, irrigation systems, and land management led to a more stable and less destructive form of farming (Dobson, 2013). This showed the validity of the phrase "crises breeds innovation".

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal put hundreds of thousands of men and women to work in the Great Plains to plant native foliage and help restore the land to what it once was. Though it was Teddy that created the national park it was Franklin that restored the Midwest, at least partially (Sheflin, 2016). Though permanent damage had been done to some areas much of the land regained its value over time. The acts of restoring damaged land and preventing another man made natural disaster have become corner stones of the conservationist movement, and through this the Dust Bowl has heavily influenced government environmental, agricultural, and energy policy.

The second movement to rise from the dust of the Great Plains was one that has not maintained its steam in the modern day. The workers' rights movement was heavily influenced by the migration of thousands of failed farmers from the Midwest to California for work. Laborers suffered poor working conditions, low pay, unsanitary living space, and stand offish management. This started a movement led by a new faction in the United States, The American Communist Party. The rise of communism in the United States was for the most part halted by the red scare of the 1920s, but the influence of their ideals still had an effect on the people (Dallek, 2016).

The exploitation of laborers was nothing new to the American people however this was a time of economic depression and the people that were being exploited were down and out Americans desperately trying to make a living. This labor exploitation also garnered a greater amount of attention due to the bestselling book *The Grapes of Wrath*. The book depicts the struggles of a man migrating to California in the wake of the Dust Bowl and the terrible treatment and working conditions with which he and the other migrants suffered. The Okie, the pejorative term for a dust bowl migrant, became the face of the labor rights movement heavily in part to the depiction of the characters in the bestselling book (Thompson, 2007). While not all workers are unionized pushes have been successful in adding government regulations by which managers much follow guidelines when dealing with implies. The push for labor unions has not lasted however, as manufacturing jobs are outsources to other countries and white collar work becomes the norm the working class base for the worker's rights movement has somewhat dwindled (Dallek, 2016).

Conclusion

The Dust Bowl is rhetorical in how it was made my technology and how it has shaped public opinion over the decades. It not only opened the eyes of many who doubted the impact human cultivation can have on the earth, if done improperly, it also helped build a movement for the betterment of blue collar workers. The rhetoric of Manifest

Destiny was all but stopped after the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, while in part due to the United States having reached the other end of the North American continent it was also stopped because it became difficult to say it was a divine decree when the attempt was met with so much resistance from nature. The rhetoric of the Dust Bowl lives to this day and by looking at our past we can make a more pleasant future.

References

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