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Journal Title: Today : an independent national weekly

Interlibrary Loan

Volume: 4 **Issue:** 9
Month/Year: Jun 22 1935
Pages: 3-

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ILLiad TN: 998435

Article Author: TUGWELL, REXFORD

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No More Frontiers

BY REXFORD G. TUGWELL

Under Secretary of Agriculture

Ruthless profit-motive exploitation of farm and forest have taken their toll of our land. With no new areas to turn to, we face a serious problem of conservation

FOR three hundred years we have been wasting our heritage in riotous farming. The limitless free lands of the virgin continent which our pioneer ancestors found awaiting them when they set foot on this soil have limits now. The traditions and practices of careful agriculture which had been instilled into the English yeomen and European peasants by generations of experience were neglected here and the kind of agriculture which successively injured the fertility of New England and of the Piedmont area was too often adopted.

The essence of this form of agriculture was that a man did not expect to spend more than twenty years in farming any one piece of land. A farmer would marry and beget sons. When the children came 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. No man expected a piece of ground to support his family for more than a generation, and even the best soil cannot stand such exploitation for more than two generations.

It is a matter of record with us that some of the most fertile land of early America is now waste, covered with scrubby second growth, dotted with abandoned farms, inhabited by a dwindling population which supports life by exploiting the tourist trade and selling antiques to "summer people". In other words, the typical American system of farming from the very first has been ruinously *extensive* as distinguished from the slow, laborious and conservative *intensive* farming which characterizes old-world agriculture. It is a further fact worth noting that many of our racial and agrarian difficulties in the Far West and in New England itself have arisen through the competition of recent immigrants who deliberately adopted intensive methods of agriculture and

made the land pay where the native American farmer could not. A technical crisis in our agriculture occurred about a century ago when the invention of the mechanical reaper placed a premium on extensive farming in the prairie regions, where the old-style hand-farming of the early pioneers was impracticable. This followed the earlier invention of the cotton gin which set a premium on extensive cotton culture. As a result, the early habits of our ancestors received the most powerful reinforcement from industry and science, and America became the land of agricultural mass production even before it adopted industrial mass production. The Homestead Act of 1862 signed the death warrant of the prudent use of our land resources.

This agricultural mass production of wheat, corn, meat, tobacco—the great staples which support human life in the temperate zone—was possible only on the basis of extensive farming—mechanical farming—semi-industrial agriculture which, operating in the realm of competitive profit and the credit mechanism, placed a premium on the rapid exploitation of land, with little thought of the future. Thirty years ago we glimpsed the first fruits of this process, as a result of the reckless deforestation practiced by the lumber barons. Under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, a beginning was made at national conservation and the Forest Service was established to protect the remains of our once boundless timber lands.

Unbridled Waste of the War

The immense demands of the European belligerents during the opening years of the World War and our own military necessities after we became a belligerent in that war checked this policy of conservation and reversed it. We were told that wheat would win the war; the prairies were plowed up far beyond the limits of economic productivity in response to abnormally high wheat prices. The power of skyrocketing prices based on an uneconomic demand to devastate a continent has rarely been better illustrated than in the result.

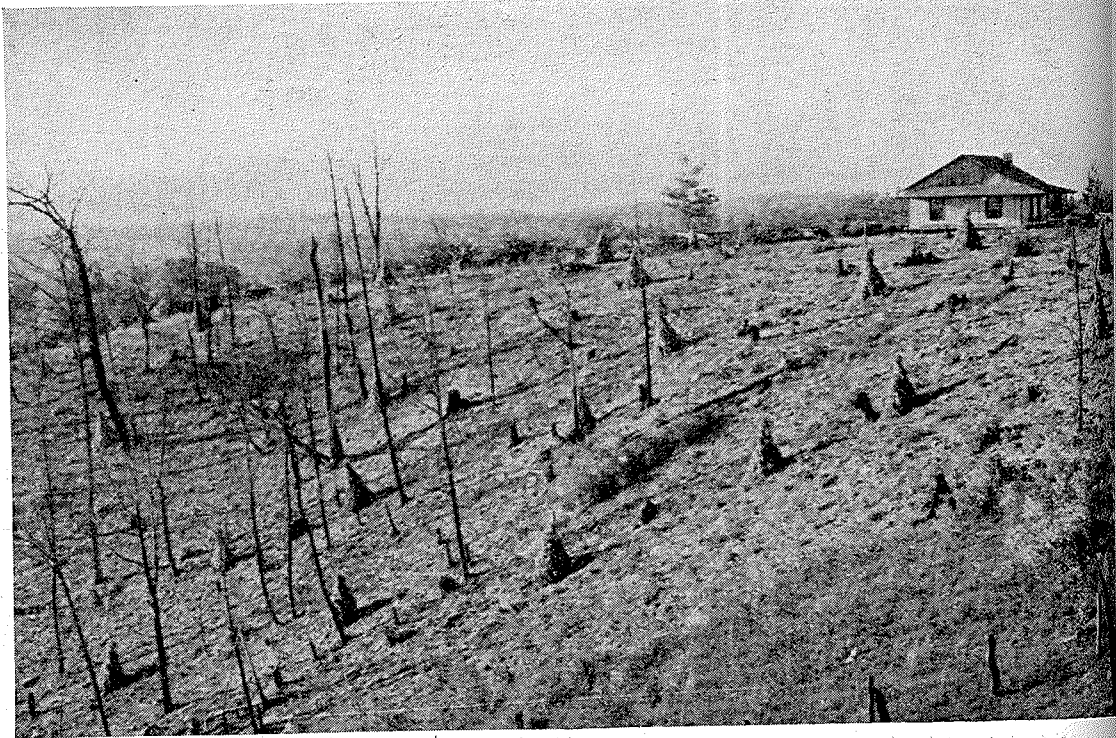
After the war, beginnings were made to check the results of overgrazing, overfarming, deforestation and soil exhaustion, but in the main the conservation policy of the post-war Administrations was represented by the alienation of the naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome and Elk Hills and by the blocking of the Muscle Shoals development—both in the name of private monetary profits, without thought of

the national consequences. Accordingly, when the present Administration came into power, it found that everything had to be done again and done more thoroughly, if we were to escape a major national catastrophe.

The dimensions of that catastrophe were already evident as early as 1931 and 1932, when dust storms began to blow away the topsoil in western Kansas and eastern Colorado. Year by year, the dust-storm area increased until the great drouth of 1934 suggested in Eastern scareheads that a large section of the inland United States might go back to desert. Nebraska, Kansas, Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and even the Dakotas and Iowa were affected by this drouth. The feed crops withered, the water courses dried up, starving cattle had to be salvaged and farm families moved by thousands from the devastated area. Emergency relief measures were adopted and millions of dollars in relief funds were diverted to this region. Still the dust storms continued, driving huge clouds of fine particles of topsoil into the air, causing artificial twilight over the great cities of the East and precipitating rains of mud over the rest of the country. Three of these storms which swept over the East represented a displacement of perhaps three hundred million tons of fertile soil from the Mississippi Valley, a quantity equivalent to 150,000 acres of good farm lands, and served to dramatize in the public mind a process which was inherent in our way of farming, or rather mining, our soil.

Some of this depletion was part of the slow geologic process by which the North American Continent is being blown Eastward and washed into the Gulf of Mexico. At some time in the far distant future, it could be prophesied, the lowlands of the lower Mississippi Valley may contain the bulk of the fertile soil of the continent—just as the valley of the lower Nile contains much of the fertile soil of Northern Africa. We can afford to await the verdicts of geology but we cannot afford to expedite them. In September, 1933, the Soil Conservation Service was established to check this process and in 1934 the Roosevelt Administration inaugurated a Land Purchase program for the retirement of submarginal acres (land unfit for farming) both as a relief measure and in order to divert them to forest or other conservationist purposes which would protect the fertile lands elsewhere. At the same time, the National Resources Board, which had been established to study the problem of the wise use of our real resources, made a special analysis of the land problem and of the Mississippi

Man-made erosion: More than fifty million acres such as these (right) have been thrown out of production by neglect and improper cultivation



Wind erosion: Some three hundred million tons of topsoil were displaced from the Mississippi Valley by three of the recent dust storms (below)



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Valley as a whole and reported some alarming facts. The Soil Conservation Service had already estimated that some three billion tons of topsoil is washed away every year, representing a loss of \$400,000,000 at present values to farmers and ranchers, and that the dust storms of the last two years had destroyed more than four million acres and had seriously injured more than sixty million additional acres. After a detailed survey early this year the Soil Conservation Service stated that of our billion and a half acres of fertile land, erosion had set in on at least a billion acres. Over fifty million acres had been blasted out of production by man-made erosion, over one hundred million acres had lost practically all of its topsoil, half a billion acres had lost between one-quarter and three-quarters of its topsoil, sixty-five million acres had been severely injured by wind erosion.

One of the first incidents of this economic catastrophe was the appearance of a gigantic problem of rural relief affecting a million farm families, chiefly in the West and South. While the refugees from the drouth and dust-storm areas attracted most attention, it was found that rural refugees were scattered over the entire nation, driven from the land by our own tradi-

tional, ill-considered methods of farming. It was also found that there were good and profitable farms scattered through the drouth areas and in the exhausted Piedmont and Eastern areas, where individual farmers and communities had taken advantage of scientific methods of agriculture.

These two phenomena indicated the lines along which the Resettlement Administration must proceed. The abuse of lands and the attempt to use bad or unfit lands for field crops must be stopped or we shall go the way of China and of Ancient Rome and see our lands, both good and bad, swept away in the onset of wind and water upon our soil, or their fertility exhausted by overcropping. As a by-product of this process, we shall see the rural slum areas of the nation spread and have our social life infected at the source by people of good stock but of poor preparation for life who will press upon our cities for employment and on our remaining resources for relief. The task of resettling these rural refugees under conditions which will prevent a recurrence of this present catastrophe is our fundamental purpose.

Our immediate problem at the outset, however, must be to continue to press forward with

a land utilization policy which will retire unfit lands from production and turn back to soil and tree the soil which should never have been brought under the plow or which has been destroyed by ignorant, shortsighted or greedy methods of agriculture. Much of this task can and is being done by introducing better methods of farming in those areas which are not beyond redemption. Exhaustion of soil fertility can be checked by the use of chemical fertilizers, rotation of crops and the other methods of scientific agriculture. Wind erosion can be checked by strip-farming and deep-plowing; water erosion can be checked by terracing and flood-control works. The use of tree belts, both on individual farms and in communities, as well as in the great national shelter belt which is being developed by the Forest Service from the Canadian border to the Texas Panhandle, will assist this process of protection. More important, however, is the development of a sound, national Land Use program in connection with this general resettlement and conservation problem.

In the Spring of 1934 the Administration launched a nationwide program designed to work toward the best uses for land in both its social and physical aspects. In order to carry out this program, \$25,000,000 was allocated by the Public Works Administration to the Federal Relief Administration. Subsequent additions to this sum were made by the President from other emergency funds. The Land Program, as the administrative agency for this work was known, was transferred to the Resettlement Administration by executive order on April 30, 1935, and is now incorporated in the Division of Rural Land Planning and Development.

In the year of its operation to date, the Land Program has initiated 255 projects located in forty-five states. If all these projects could be carried out as planned, it would mean the acquisition of some twenty million acres of land at a cost of approximately \$77,000,000. At this writing voluntary agreements to sell have been secured from the owners of approximately 7,600,000 acres at a cost of \$33,000,000. Four Federal agencies have been associated with the field work of this program, and in planning the ultimate development and use of the area now being acquired. They are the Land Policy Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Bureau of Biological Survey, the National Park Service and the Office of Indian Affairs.

How is this land to be used, and upon what basis is the government acquiring it? Most

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No More Frontiers

(Continued from Page 4)

the area purchased through these projects is land in farms which is too poor to make successful commercial farming possible. Other tracts are intervening areas of cut-over land and woods, marshes or pasture land, which are needed in order to block out a satisfactory area for the purpose of the project.

One of the purposes in purchasing poor lands is to correct low standards of living, exhausted public finances and depletion of natural resources, but there is a positive use in mind for each of these purchase projects. Chief among these uses are forestry, grazing, recreation, wild life and watershed protection. A recent analysis of projects showed 15,099,756 acres planned for agricultural projects; 832,298 acres for migratory waterfowl; 925,279 for recreational areas; 2,010,598 for Indian reservations.

The Northern Wisconsin project will illustrate several important features of this program. In cooperation with the University of Wisconsin, counties in the northern part of that state have worked out a plan for zoning to prevent the permanent settlement of lands which are unsuited to agricultural use. Isolated settlers in this area have long constituted a severe drain upon local finances because of the high cost of providing them with schools and roads, while on the other hand their unprofitable farming operations provide next to nothing wherewith to pay taxes. That land, wonderful for growing trees, as nature showed us long ago, should be returned to this use and added either to the Wisconsin State Forest or to Superior National Forest in this region.

The zoning program will go far to prevent an aggravation of this situation, but a further step is needed—cooperation with the counties in purchasing isolated farms lying in areas classified as unfit for agriculture, and helping the families to move into better locations. The soil of these farms is unfertile and stony, yielding poor crops, but is nevertheless excellent for forest purposes. Consequently, purchased farms will be added to existing state and national forests. Proper use will once more make of this poor land an economic asset. Immediate employment can be provided in reforestation work and in the building of resettlement farms for the families who sell their land.

Similar farm-to-forest projects are located throughout the natural forest regions of the East, South and Pacific Northwest.

In the Western plains area—for example, in the Milk River project of northern Montana—tracts purchased by the Land Development Division will be utilized for grazing. Lacking sufficient moisture for continued crop farming, the valuable topsoil has been severely damaged by the wind, while the overgrazing of other dry lands has resulted in the destruction of the native grass cover. After reseeding the land and the initiation of preventive measures against further erosion, the lands will be used for grazing under such regulations as may be necessary to prevent the destruction of cover which leads to alternate wind erosion and floods and to the silting up of irrigation works.

Land nearer the larger centers of population can be used for recreation purposes. In the French Creek area in southeastern Pennsylvania, park development has already begun under the supervision of the National Park Service. More than four million people live within fifty miles of this project, and outside of French Creek have little in the way of public outdoor recreation land. The construction of a dam to enlarge an existing pond, the building of vacation camps, picnic areas, foot trails and playgrounds will provide an invaluable asset not only to the local community but to a large portion of the heavily populated state of Pennsylvania. Similar projects to this are being established not only in the thickly settled industrial regions but in rural areas as well.

Some of the territory to be re-acquired by Federal agencies from the poor farming areas will be reforested, or reseeded for range, and added to the Indian reservations, where there is today a glaring deficiency of land. These original Americans were deeded 138,000,000 acres after we had snatched the vast majority of their holdings from them. We were not overgenerous then, but today they have only 52,000,000 acres and half of that is desert waste. For the most part, however, the land which we shall now return to the Indians will go into grazing land. They are great sheep herders, and they need more cattle and horses to enable them to go their desired agricultural and pastoral way. Others of the new Federal lands will be reseeded for regulated grazing purposes under the Taylor Grazing Act.

The entire program is a belated recognition of the fact that the United States is one of the most grievous sinners among nations in the matter of land use. When we have been so ruthless in the massacre of our forests; when we have used up 50,000,000 acres of land which was once good—virtually turned it into a waste which will never be of value to anyone again; when we have put an additional 105,000,000 acres into a condition where it has practically no topsoil at all and 513,000,000 more acres into almost as bad shape; when wind has destroyed 4,443,894 acres which should not have been exposed to its rage; when more than 200,000,000 acres of still valuable land may be in exactly as bad condition within the next fifty years unless they are protected—we can see that it is high time we had a land use program and pushed it vigorously forward. We scarcely wish to see our fertile fields reduced to 150,000,000 acres or anything approximating this small figure, for we have no wish to have our national situation reversed to the point where we shall have to import great quantities of wheat or meat as food for our people. Furthermore, we have not so much time in which to check our losses; erosion can take place in a very short while, comparatively speaking. Nature requires four centuries to build an inch of rich black loam. Under certain unfavorable conditions, wind or water can destroy or scatter that amount of topsoil in a few days.

(A second article by Mr. Tugwell will appear next week.)

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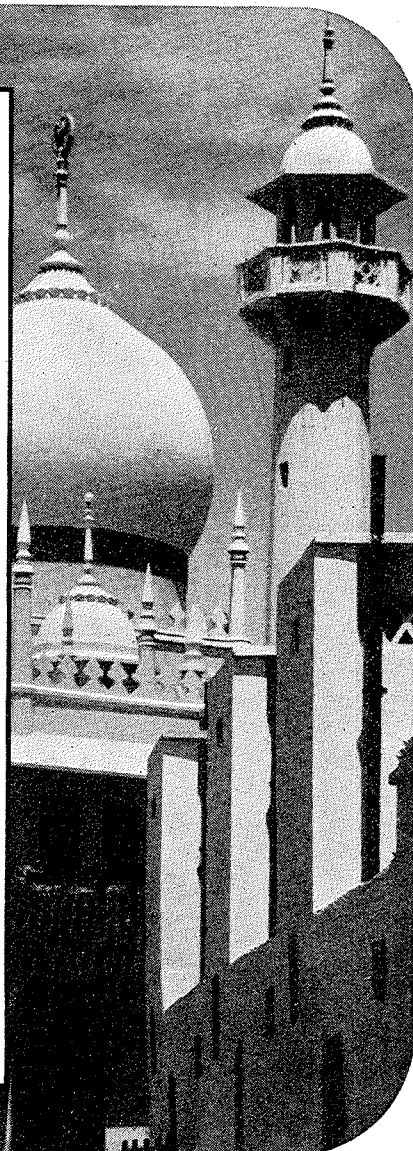
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