



The Wolfsonian

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Grass, to Wheat, to Sand: The Dust Bowl Disaster

The Great Plains, a grassy landscape stretching from the Texas Panhandle to the Canadian Rockies, was once inhabited by millions of buffalo and 30 indigenous societies. Starting in the late 1800s, settlers lured by railroad real estate agents transformed the terrain into farmland. In the 1920s, wheat prices plummeted, speculative farmers abandoned unplanted fields, and heavily mortgaged homesteaders plowed more grassland to keep creditors at bay. Then came crisis in the 1930s—overfarming and drought pushed the region to the brink, and fierce dust storms blew away over a billion tons of topsoil, leaving desert dunes.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933, his administration launched New Deal programs to restore land, introduce sustainable farming, and aid struggling farmers. *Grass, to Wheat, to Sand* examines the Dust Bowl disaster and these recovery efforts highlighting the delicate balance between cultivating and exploiting the land.

Curated by Florida International University history students Amal Albaladejo, Valentina Berrio, Dwayne Krier, George Lee, Sophia Medina, and Carlos Manuel Bleiker Morcillo under the guidance of FIU adjunct professor Dr. Francis Xavier Luca, Wolfsonian chief librarian and curator of library collections.

Buffalo, Indians, and Trains on the Plains

The transcontinental railroad helped transform the Great Plains from grassland to commercial wheat farms. Bringing thousands of sport hunters, soldiers, and homesteaders to the region starting in the 1860s, the railroad's "Iron Horse" quickly drove expansion on a massive scale. Within decades, the buffalo were nearly extinct, and many of the nomadic native peoples were forced onto reservations.

After the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl exposed the folly of farming in a drought-prone region, railroad companies and nature enthusiasts published idealized and romanticized images of the grasslands, buffalo herds, and Plains Indian hunters. Such illustrations were designed to inspire nostalgia for the "paradise lost" and to inject renewed interest in the region as an exotic tourist destination.



Schedule, *Travel by the Chicago & Atlantic Ry.: The Atlantic Route*, May 1887

Chicago & Atlantic Railway, Chicago, publisher
J. M. W. Jones Stationery & Printing Co., printer
The Wolfsonian-FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection,
XX1990.477



Print, *The Man with the Hoe*, 1902

William Henry Jackson (American, 1843–1942),
photographer
Detroit Photographic Co., printer
Photochrom
The Wolfsonian-FIU, Gift of Howard Gottlieb,
XC2009.07.1.3

To encourage land sales, railroad companies hired photographer William Henry Jackson to take promotional photographs along various routes. Here, Jackson portrays a Hopi farmer clutching a simple hoe in a cornfield, perhaps to encourage Euro-American farmers to imagine what they could reap with more "sophisticated" equipment.

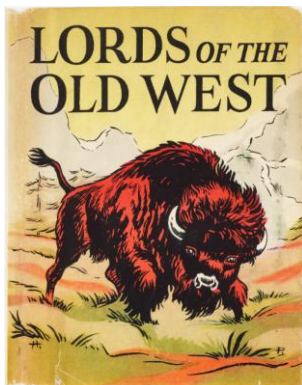


Print, ***Singing in The Clouds***, from ***The Blackfeet Indian Educational Portfolio***, c. 1940

Winold Reiss (American, b. Germany, 1886–1953),
illustrator

Great Northern Railway Co., St. Paul, Minnesota, publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara
Helena Palacio Luca, XC2017.05.3.7.9

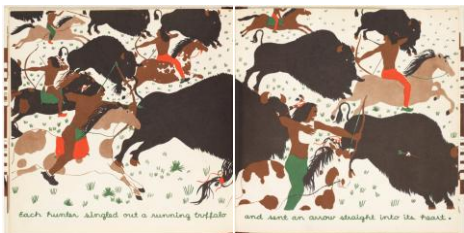
German-born artist Winold Reiss sought to authentically depict people of the Blackfeet Nation. His sponsor, the Great Northern Railway Company, reproduced the portraits as promotional prints to encourage travel to Glacier National Park.



Children's book, ***Lords of the Old West***, 1942

Herbert Palmer (American, 1881–1970), illustrator
Irwin Sharpin (American, 1911–1981) and Wilbur T. Gracey
(American, 1877–?), authors

Albert & Whitman Co., Chicago, publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Christopher DeNoon Collection
for the Study of New Deal Culture, XC2010.09.7.48



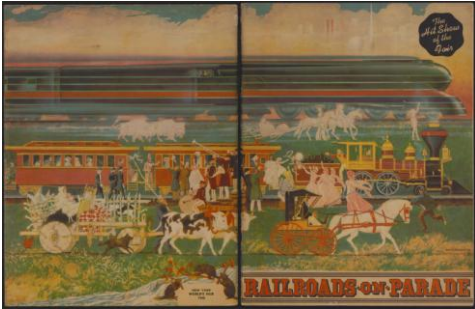
Children's book, ***Whistling-Two-Teeth and the Forty-nine Buffalos***, 1939

Naomi Averill (American, 1905–?), author & illustrator
Grossett & Dunlap Co., New York City, publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection,
WC2012.04.6

Children's books like *Whistling-Two-Teeth and the Forty-Nine Buffalos* and *Lords of the Old West* portrayed a romanticized vision of the grasslands while advocating for conservation projects of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. In the wake of the manmade ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl, such works sought to educate young readers about ecology and conservation.

Rebranding the Great Plains as America's "Breadbasket"

To encourage homesteaders, railway companies rebranded the region—once scorned the "Great American Desert"—as an ideal location for wheat cultivation. Following the drastic drop in wheat prices post-1919, farmers made up for financial losses by increasing production, introducing industrial farming techniques and equipment, and plowing up grasslands ill-suited to cultivating one crop. Drought and disaster loomed.



Program, ***Book of the Pageant, Railroads on Parade***, 1940
William A. Mackay (American, 1878–1939), cover illustrator
Eastern Railroad Presidents Conference, New York City, publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, 84.2.13

Printed for the 1939 New York World's Fair, this program cover illustrates the "magnificent progress of rail transport." Native peoples on horseback and wild buffalo are depicted as faint, ghostly images overshadowed by coaches, covered wagons, early steam-engine trains, and streamlined locomotives. This visual narrative reflects the ideology of Manifest Destiny, a 19th-century belief that Anglo-American settlers were destined to conquer the continent, which was often used to justify the displacement and oppression of Indigenous peoples.

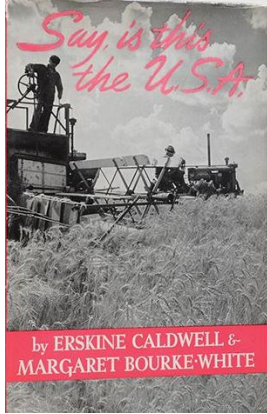


Advertising cards, ***Threshing by Steam*** and ***Quaker Oats Train Crossing the Rockies***, 1893

Hugh Bolton Jones (American, 1848–1927) and Francis Coates Jones (American, 1857–1932), illustrators
Armstrong & Co., Chicago, lithographers
American Cereal Company, Chicago, publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, 85.19.85.7



These two cards produced by the American Cereal Company for distribution at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition highlighted the transport and new steam-engine threshing and reaping technologies that made farming in the Great Plains profitable.

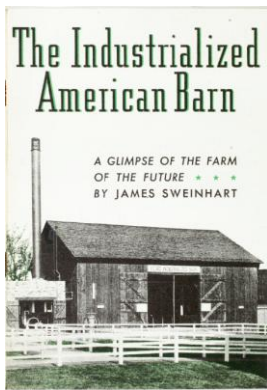


Book cover, **Say, Is This the U.S.A.**, 1941
 Margaret Bourke-White (American, 1904–1971),
 photographer
 Erskine Caldwell (American, 1903–1987), author
 Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, New York City, publisher
 The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection,
 XC2004.02.8

The dust jacket photograph captures an idyllic image of man and machine harmoniously creating the bountiful harvests. Images like this helped shape public perception of the Great Plains as ideally suited for wheat cultivation.



Magazine, **Rural Progress Magazine**, 1934
 Maurice V. Reynolds, Chicago, publisher
 The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara
 Helena Palacio Luca, XC2014.03.13



Pamphlet, **The Industrialized American Barn: A Thought for the Farmer to Work With**, c. 1933
 Arthur Percy Chew (American, b. England, 1887–1967)
 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., publisher
 The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of James and Martha Sweeny,
 XC2017.01.2.27

While farm produce prices declined sharply, farmers attending the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition were encouraged to buy tractors and adopt industrial methods to increase production.

Dusters and Disaster

By the 1930s, most of the original 300 million acres of windswept grasslands had been plowed under and planted with grain. Industrial farming and overproduction, combined with the Plains' natural drought cycle, brought disaster. Called "dusters" or "black blizzards," dust storms suffocated cattle, transformed farms into desert dunes, and caused dust pneumonia, leading to high death rates in farming communities.

Photographers commissioned by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Farm Security Administration (FSA) documented the disaster while artists rendered prints and paintings. Together, their work inspired empathy for displaced refugees and rallied support for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), the Resettlement Administration (RA), and other New Deal solutions to the storms.



Magazine cover, "**The Vague, Roaming 'Dust Bowl,'**" from *The New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 1936
The Wolfsonian-FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2023.09.1

This cover designer humanized the Dust Bowl crisis by inserting an image of a farmer into a photograph of a black blizzard. The illustration accompanies an article by Hugh Hammond Bennett, who in 1935 addressed Congress about the pressing need to deal with the "national menace" of soil erosion. Bennett timed his testimony to a dust storm's arrival in Washington, D.C. Congress quickly passed the Soil Conservation Act into law, and Bennett served as chief of the newly authorized Soil Conservation Service (SCS).



Photograph, **Snow Fence Catches Dust**, 1935
Associated Press Photo, Chicago, photographer
The Wolfsonian-FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca, in
Memory of Vincent J. Luca, Sr., XC2021.10.1.188



Magazine spread, "***The U.S. Dust Bowl: Its Artist Is a Texan Portraying 'Man's Mistakes,'***" from *Life*, June 21, 1937

Alexandre Hogue (American, 1898–1994), illustrator
The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2023.09.9

Numerous artists made prints and paintings in response to the Dust Bowl. *Life* magazine chose the work of a regional artist to illustrate the manmade ecological disaster's dire consequences.



Postcard, ***One of South Dakota's Black Blizzards***, c. 1934

Rosebud Photo Co., Gregory, South Dakota, photographer

The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca and Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2021.10.2.30



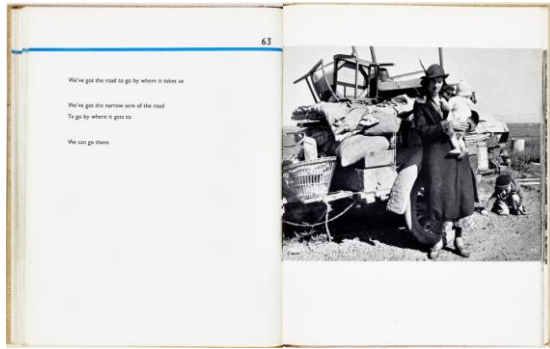
Postcards, ***Approaching Dust Storm in Middle West***, 1935

Frank Durnell Conard (American, 1884–1966), photographer

The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2023.06.18, .22



Photographers provided visual evidence of frightening black blizzards, which swept frequently across the Plains in the mid-1930s. Reproduced across newspapers, magazines, and postcards, these images helped Americans beyond the affected region recognize the need for bold action.



Book spread, ***Mother and Child of a Missouri Family Stopped by Tire Trouble on U.S. Highway 99***, from ***Land of the Free***, 1938

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965), photographer
 Archibald MacLeish (American, 1892–1982), author
 Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York City,
 publisher
 The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca &
 Clara Helen Palacio Luca, XC2011.03.6

Pairing poetry with illustrations by Resettlement Administration (RA) photographers, Archibald MacLeish created a portrait of the period, which some referred to as the “Dirty Thirties.” Such photographers documented the pitiable conditions of some of the nearly 2.5 million people forced to flee the Dust Bowl region.



Clipping, ***Air Borne Destruction Can Come in Industry, Too!***, 1942

The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca &
 Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2023.06.8

Many of President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs were geared toward conserving top soil, which significantly reduced the frequency and intensity of the black blizzards. This advertisement played on people’s recollections of the dust storms to sell filters as a solution to industrial pollutants.

Resettlement and Recovery

The Roosevelt Administration responded to the crisis in the Great Plains by introducing various federal programs. Abandoned lands deemed unfit for cultivation were seeded with drought-resistant grasses. The Resettlement Administration (RA) set up relief camps in California for Dust Bowl refugees, while Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers documented the ecological and human disaster. In addition, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollees and Soil Erosion Service (SES) and Soil Conservation Service (SCS) workers planted millions of trees as windbreaks and encouraged farmers to adopt new cover crops, contour plowing, and terracing techniques. Three years after Roosevelt signed the Soil Conservation Act into law in April 1935, soil erosion had dropped 65%.



Pamphlets, ***Farm Finance: What Is a Sound System?*** and ***Soil Conservation: Who Gains By It?***, 1937

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gifts of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara
Helena Palacio Luca, XC2022.01.1.8, .4

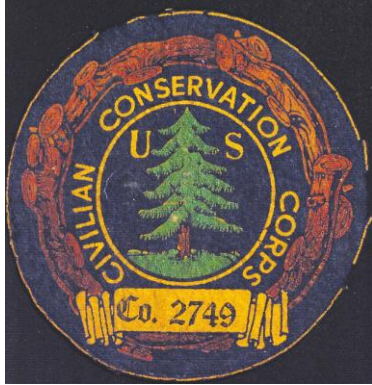
These pamphlets provided facts for discussions concerning Roosevelt’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) farm policies. Photomontages depict the human costs of doing nothing to stem the tide of farm foreclosures and encouraged farmers to conserve the soil.



Print, ***Reforestation***, for the *American Earth* series, 1935
Helen West Heller (American, 1872–1955)

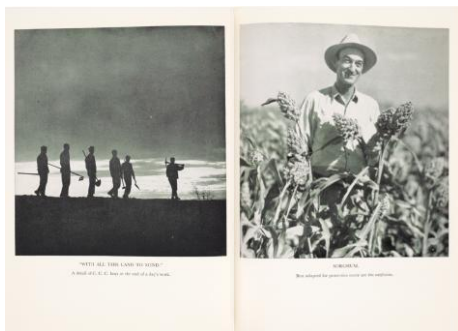
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection,
2016.27.4.2

Once President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) began supporting the arts, Helen West Heller produced at least 76 prints, paintings, and murals for the Federal Arts Project (FAP). While Republicans supported infrastructure and necessary conservation projects, New Deal opponents railed against what they considered frivolous spending on art and culture.



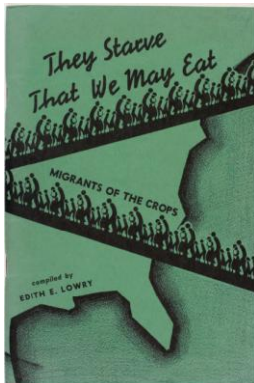
Badge, *Civilian Conservation Corps, U.S., Co. 2749*, 1938
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection,
XC2023.02.11.3

Nicknamed Roosevelt’s “Tree Army,” the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrolled millions of unemployed young men during the Depression to fight soil erosion. Over the next nine years, they planted billions of trees, built roads and bridges in state and national parks, and engaged in other conservation projects nationwide. This badge was designed for CCC enrollees sent to South Dakota’s Sand Lake Camp BF-2.



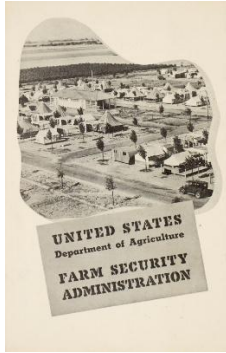
Book spread, *“With All This Land to Mend”* and *“Sorghum”*
from *To Hold This Soil*, 1938
Russell Lord (American, 1895–1964), author
U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Christopher DeNoon Collection for
the Study of New Deal Culture, XC2010.09.7.13

This publication argues that greed and ignorance destroyed much of the natural wealth of the country. Photographs illustrate how Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollees, tree-planting, and reseeding efforts were restoring the land.



Book, *Migrants of the Crops: They Starve That We May Eat*, 1940
Council of Women for Home Missions and Missionary
Education Movement, New York, publisher
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection,
WC2012.08.4.17

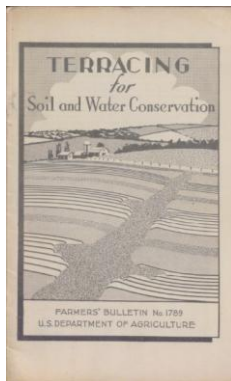
This book focuses on the plight of migrant farm workers using Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs to document the deplorable conditions endured by displaced sharecroppers and tenant farmers.



Pamphlet, ***Migrant Farm Labor: The Problem and Some Efforts to Meet It***, 1940

U.S. Farm Security Administration, Washington, D.C., publisher

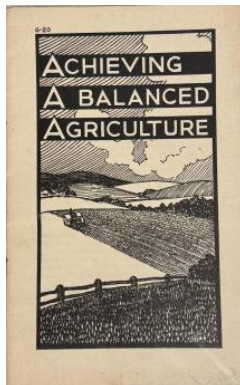
The Wolfsonian–FIU, Purchase, with funds donated by Mitchell Wolfson, Jr., XC2011.04.12.16



Pamphlet, ***Terracing for Soil and Water Conservation***, 1938

U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., printer

The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2023.09.11



Pamphlet, ***Achieving a Balanced Agriculture***, c. 1934

U.S. Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Washington, D.C., publisher

The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca & Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2023.06.3.1

The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) regularly produced pamphlets aimed at educating farmers about their programs and encouraging them to adopt new techniques to combat soil erosion. While policies had a beneficial effect on the environment, subsidies tended to benefit larger landowners and consolidated commercial farms at the expense of sharecroppers and tenant and family farmers.

Film Clips

***The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1936**

Pare Lorentz (American, 1905–1992), screenwriter and director
U.S. Resettlement Administration, Washington, D.C., distributor

***Three Faces West*, 1940**

Bernard Vorhaus (American, 1904–2000), director
Republic Pictures, Los Angeles, distributor

***Bound for Glory*, 1976**

Hal Ashby (American, 1929–1988), director Woody Guthrie (American, 1912–1967) and Robert Getchell (American, 1936–2017), screenwriters
United Artists, Los Angeles, distributor