

Review Essay

"Plowing Up a Storm: The History of Midwestern Farm Activism," documentary film, Nebraska Educational Television Network, 1985.

The scene is all too familiar: a farm foreclosure sale, this time in Nicodemus, Kansas. As the camera pans the crowd a visible sentiment stirs, not one of resignation and fear, but one of anger and organization. Young and old alike sing "we shall not be moved," as a row of riot-equipped sheriff's deputies look on nervously. Through a loudspeaker the sheriff, flanked by a banker, attempts to open the sale only to find his voice suddenly drowned in chants of "no sale, no sale." Buttons and banners of the American Agriculture Movement and the North American Farm Alliance dot the crowd.

Within moments film transports its audience across time to other eras of farm protest in the Midwest. The film is "Plowing Up a Storm," a documentary on the "history of midwestern farm activism," first aired on some public television channels in the summer of 1985. The grim and timely opening recalls that once again midwestern farmers face seasons of discontent. For the film's creators the connection between past and present is direct and meaningful. The lessons and spirit of previous generations of struggle are palpable; they communicate the empowering message, that we are not the first. If it is not quite accurate to say, as the film's narrator Richard Reeves does, that farmers face the same problems as they have in the past, it is certainly correct to suggest, as the film repeatedly does, that powerless people have shown the capacity time and again to rise up in protest over the conditions that threaten their livelihoods. Meridel LeSueur, a Minnesota writer in the Populist tradition, says it most directly early in the film, "our history has been dismembered . . . we have to re-member it."

"Plowing Up a Storm" surveys more than a century of farm protest in the space of ninety minutes. To its credit and that of the historians involved in the project the focus is on four important and coherently presented episodes: the formation of the Patrons of Husbandry (Grange) in the 1870s, the Farmers' Alliance and Populist movements of the late 1880s and early 1890s, the Non-Partisan League in North Dakota from 1915 through 1920, and the farm holiday movement of the early 1930s. The film moves through what could be complex and obtuse his-

torical material with a remarkably engaging and visually appealing pace. While the film inevitably simplifies certain historical issues and leaves other essential questions inadequately addressed, it is, despite its broad reach, largely faithful to the historical record. It includes interviews with contemporary farmers and farm activists interspersed with narration over photographs, posters, and historical artifacts. The filmmakers judiciously mixed in reenactments in accurately restored historical settings to give a touch of intimacy and real life. For the twentieth century, film footage of the Non-Partisan League and farm strikes add graphic and dramatic detail. The most haunting and powerful images are the 1930s Farm Security Administration photographs of destitute and desperate farm families. The filmmakers understood the power of these images and allowed them to speak unadorned. Richard Reeves's narration provides essential linkage between episodes of farm protest and between interviews. Visually the film's strengths lie in its mix of media; skill in selection and editing prevent these contrasting images from detracting from each other. The music—largely folk songs of farm protest—works nicely with the visual material.

In a society dominated by visual imagery, historians must take account of attempts to reach the public through films and television with historically significant material. More important, historians must engage this medium directly—as the historians in this film have done—and insist on high standards of historical research and interpretation in its historical productions. Television dramatizations during the past decade—"Roots," "The Adams Chronicles," the George Washington series—as well as more traditional documentaries—"Rosie the Riveter," "Harlan County," the Molders of Troy—suggest that a wide audience exists for such material. One of the central issues for historians is: can an account of the past be at once accurate and visually engaging? Can film (and especially television) present subjects with adequate complexity and interpretive subtlety where historians cannot be certain that the audience will read for a deeper and more thorough understanding?

Three aspects of this particular film project deserve special scrutiny. Each in turn raises larger questions with which historians, public funding agencies, and filmmakers must deal. First, as a historical record and interpretation of its subject—midwestern farm protest—how successful is this film? While it may be inappropriate to apply the same standards of criticism that we would apply to a scholarly monograph on the subject, a critical evaluation of the film's treatment of its subject matter is necessary to its potential consideration for instructive purposes. Second, as a vehicle for popular education on a timely and controversial subject, how successful is the film? What audience did the film's

creators envision? With what audience is it likely to be most effective? Third, what lessons on the collaboration of historians and filmmakers does the particular project teach? What advantages and disadvantages does the medium hold for the presentation of historical subjects?

Most historians begin evaluating any historical work by assessing its accuracy and the legitimacy of its interpretation. While film imposes peculiar stylistic constraints on historians, if they choose to work in this medium they must do so without sacrificing their faithfulness to the history they portray. How good is "Plowing Up a Storm" as history? Evaluation of a particular segment—the treatment of nineteenth-century farm protest movements and populism in particular—may answer this question. No episode of farm protest has received more intensive study or more varied interpretations from historians. We know a great deal about populism. The nineteenth century poses special problems, however, for the film producer because of its fragmentary and visually static record.

"Plowing Up a Storm" introduces the history of farm protest with a brief (five minute) introduction to the Grange and the fight for railroad regulation in the 1870s. Two themes are of importance throughout the film. First, agricultural settlement required capital, and the growing need for capital produced debt. Debt led to farm failure when prices fell. Second, the great lesson of the Grange, despite its professed nonpartisanship, was that farmers, when organized, were a political power. This section alone reveals the strength and weakness of history as presented in the film. It presents a few central ideas powerfully and persuasively, but in the process it simplifies the story, leaves important aspects of the historical context undeveloped, and inadequately addresses the explanations for why specific movements failed.

The farm crisis hit farmers in the Midwest *before* the onset of the general economic panic in 1873. The crisis was a product of *twin* pressures. Expanding worldwide production of cash grains and the opening of vast new North American areas to grain production precipitated an erosion of prices. At the same time farmers faced rising costs and unprecedented levels of indebtedness associated with the early stages of farm-making and with the high levels of capital investment in new technologies needed for larger scale production. In this context, farmers sought relief from those costs that they or the government could control—transportation and marketing. They fought for railroad rate regulation and they organized cooperatives. Just as the film inadequately develops the economic context of the farm crisis and these organized responses, it also falls short on the political strategy that farmers devised and the success they achieved. Farmers did not organize in a political vacuum. In states like Iowa they were effectively oper-

ating within a one-party system. Nonpartisanship under such conditions was simply a strategy for maintaining an effective, independent *political* presence within the existing political universe. Like most mass political movements, the Grange appealed to a diverse constituency, in this case eastern Iowa commercial interests, who also found themselves beset by railroad rate discrimination. It was not so much the issue of nonpartisanship that split the Grange (as the film suggests), but rather the effective political intervention of the railroads and the presence of divergent economic interests that would not stay in political harness as conditions changed.

Similar problems beset the film's discussion of populism, although the treatment is more complex and reflects the larger volume of recent scholarship. The film pays its respects to the groundbreaking work of the Farmers' Alliance, noting along the way that the Alliance "was more inclined to take over the government to win its goals." Actually, much of the Alliance organizing focused on the collective farmer-initiated formation of cooperatives and only in 1889 did a coherent political strategy emerge. Here the distinction between the western and southern alliances is crucial. Populism was a diverse coalition that even embraced for a time some segments of the industrial working class. The commitment to "take over the government" was most evident in the southern Alliance and its commitment to an ambitious subtreasury plan. That plan itself was an extension of its collective self-help strategy.

The heart of the film's treatment of populism is a case study of Custer County, Nebraska. Historian Robert Cherny, whose own study of Nebraska populism provides a solid foundation for this section of the film, effectively presents the Populist world in a "typical Populist county." He conveys the feeling of a vital and aggressive movement as reflected in the local press and in parades by farmers down main street. The Populists' Omaha Platform takes on new meaning in this context. In the few minutes that the film can devote to the subject, populism comes alive. The film then announces, however, that populism expired, that the "pops" were co-opted, that William Jennings Bryan was the handmaiden in this process, and that the issue of free silver was the tool. Here the promising analysis of populism's rise falls flat. The film gives a textbook view but no real understanding of the movement's collapse. As so often happens in such historical enterprises (whether written or visual) a celebratory account of a movement's rise abandons the analysis of its collapse. Yet if there are lessons in the experience of previous farm-protest movements—and clearly the filmmakers believe there are—then it is in the rigorous analysis of their collapse that historians could mine real value.

Similar strengths and weaknesses characterize the film's last two episodes on the Nonpartisan League and the farm strikes of the 1930s. Clearly, the strongest segment of the film, in terms of historical context and interpretation, is the organization of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, although the conditions that explain the appearance and demise of the League deserve more analysis. Both segments employ a richer array of visual material and more oral testimony of participants and firsthand observers than historical analysis. The film mentions the agricultural depression of the 1920s but without any discussion of the absence of farm protest of the nineteenth-century variety. Vigorous though the farm strikes of the 1930s were, they were also shortlived. As one observer noted, "a year after FDR, the holiday association evaporated." This, too, is a critical point and deserves further elaboration.

The historical sections of "Plowing Up a Storm" are, in a sense, a prelude to discussion and debate on the current farm crisis. The last section of the film presents a wide range of views on the present crisis. The message, powerfully presented, is that farmers face their worst crisis yet; indeed the future of farming as a family enterprise may be at stake and, with it, a way of life of inestimable value to American society. Government is now inextricably bound up with the farm economy, either as a source of security and fairness or of instability and inequity. Curiously, the deficit and a military juggernaut do not figure specifically in the comments presented. One commentator, David Ostendorf of Rural America, argues that farmers face "the same old problems—corporations, greedy lenders," and that they should look back at previous movements to understand "what went right or wrong." Clearly, this is the film's central purpose.

As a historical account of past farm protest movements, the film is largely accurate but incomplete. We get a clearer sense of what went right than of what went wrong. The character and limitations of the medium and the nature of its audience, however, give it a different purpose and create a different standard by which to measure it than the purposes and standards of historical monographs. A film, like an exhibit, works best at what learning theorists call affective learning. That is, it does a better job of engaging our emotions, of influencing how we relate to a subject, and of raising our general level of interest in that subject, than of presenting a detailed and complex account of it. A documentary provides a starting point in the learning process, one that affirms the importance and relevance of its subject. We cannot possibly absorb the cascade of images and ideas in detail; we cannot stop the film while our minds organize and reorganize the last moment's material before going on to the next set of images. When the sweep is broad,

as it is in this film, the task of synthesis is that much more herculean. To select the right episodes, to distill the central themes, and to avoid inaccuracy is the most that historians can ask of each other working in this medium. Keeping these standards in mind, the film is a resounding success. It works affectively. It gives dignity to its subjects and persuades us that their history and their current crisis is something about which to be concerned and informed.

Two intended audiences for "Plowing Up a Storm" seem obvious. Farm families and communities who find themselves in the throes of the present crisis are clearly a primary audience. The film's explicit agenda is to recover and present a history of farm protest to them. On this level the film's message is direct and powerful: "we are not the first ones to have experienced these problems or to have organized to combat them." For this audience the film presents a historical account that focuses on successive episodes of movement-building and the continuities that link them. That the film neglects more direct analysis of the circumstances of failure and collapse is an understandable, but nonetheless serious, omission with respect to this audience in particular. The film may work best with a wider educated, general public. As an affective document—one that presents a few central themes powerfully and persuasively—the film could stir informed sympathy among an audience largely ignorant of farmers' present circumstances, let alone the history of their efforts to remedy those problems. With each audience, however, the film needs effective distribution to take maximum advantage of its strengths.

The film has been broadcast over national public television, particularly in Iowa and Nebraska, but many sections, where interest was presumed low, missed the film altogether. Its length, ninety minutes, appears to have consigned it to late-night viewing and a limited public television audience even in the Midwest. Hopefully the filmmakers will distribute it as a video cassette to schools, libraries, and appropriate organizations. A very handsomely produced twenty-seven page publication—with good, substantive essays by the film's chief historical consultants—was available for the original viewers. It contains discussion questions and a useful bibliography of important works on the history of farm protest.

With a film such as "Plowing Up a Storm," relying as it did on public funds for its production and deserving the widest possible audience because of its subject and high quality, questions of audience and distribution are essential to any assessment of its value. In video cassette form, or as a 16 mm film, "Plowing Up a Storm" could reach a substantial rural audience through networks of farm organizations, churches, and schools. For group showings, at meetings or

discussion groups, or as a special program in schools, its length might be less of a barrier. For its second audience—the general public—its length imposes severe handicaps, however. It does not fit the conventional one-hour documentary length for public television, though it might be broadcast on local cable access stations more easily. It also would not fit the usual length for effective classroom use—thirty to fifty minutes. Two alternatives exist for overcoming this problem. First, the filmmakers could edit the film down to a fifty-minute length; but this would almost certainly exacerbate some of the historical content problems. It could also be split into two segments for sequential viewing. Second, the filmmakers could embark on an extraordinary distribution effort that would get the film into the hands of local organizations, libraries, cable programmers, and others who could schedule local showings where length would not be as problematic.

The problem of length, although seemingly so obvious and avoidable, is central to the collaborative undertakings of filmmakers and historians, on this and other projects.¹ How can historically complex subjects presented in visually dramatic form meet audience expectations of the medium (schooled as they are in broadcast quality production), do justice to the historical record, and fit the idiosyncratic time constraints of television and schools? The easy, and perhaps the only, answer would be that they cannot. Such a conclusion would imply that powerful and popular media, which will inevitably treat historical subjects, should concoct their own history from recipes of their own choosing. Perhaps other options are possible; one is clearly a film such as this, that is effective historically but of awkward length—a victory for the historians' concern with content. Another option is a conscious attempt to reach the home-and-school video market as the primary distribution point for the documentary. This may take a different approach and type of funding. Finally, historians may have to learn to work within the medium's time constraints. A better objective might be short (twenty-to-thirty minute) documentary monographs as case studies of specific and dramatic episodes, such as Custer County, Nebraska populism. These might probe a narrow subject deeply to raise broader questions, but avoid comprehensive and time-consuming synthesis. The American Working Class History Project has undertaken such an approach in its acclaimed half-hour film on the 1877 railroad strikes—one of a series of audio-

¹See the perceptive discussion of this and other related issues in Daniel J. Walkowitz, "Visual History: The Craft of the Historian-Filmmaker," *Public Historian* 7 (Winter 1985), 53-64.

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visual case studies on the history of the American working class.

For whatever flaws it may have in content and length, "Plowing Up a Storm" is a powerful and persuasive document and a credit to those who conceived and executed it. Above all it is a credit to the generations of farm families that organized and fought to defend their way of life on the land against forces only partly within their control. The film deserves wide distribution and thoughtful viewing by farmers and nonfarmers alike.

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Editor's Note: Although the Nebraska Educational Television Network (NETV) made "Plowing Up a Storm" available to national public television (PBS) for rebroadcast, NETV has not made the film available for sale or rental to individuals and institutions. NETV needs to know what demand may exist for the award-winning documentary before it can invest in making it available. Those who would like to acquire copies of the film, or the study guide (which *is* available), should contact Steve Lenzen, NETV, P.O. Box 83111, Lincoln, Nebraska 68501.

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