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1-1-2009

Review of "This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal." By Sarah T. Phillips

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Cannon, Brian C., "Review of "This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal." By Sarah T. Phillips" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly.* Paper 1155.
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This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal. By Sarah T. Phillips. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xi + 289 pp. Photographs, plates, notes, index. $79.00 cloth, $23.99 paper.

In this sophisticated reinterpretation, Sarah T. Phillips traces the history and impact of New Deal conservation policy. She argues persuasively that rural conservation programs deserve a prominent place in New Deal historiography because they significantly shaped the New Deal state and because they were integral to the New Deal's campaign for economic recovery. Her work is sufficiently broad and innovative to invite criticism at multiple points on evidentiary grounds, but the book is consistently engaging.

Phillips shows that during the 1920s, eastern land use planners and politicians, along with progressives in the USDA, advocated planned and coordinated use of natural resources, scientific farming, and soil and water conservation as ways of enhancing rural Americans' standard of living. America's openness to change during the Depression offered these reformers the chance to implement their ideas through programs that included the Tennessee Valley Authority, submarginal land retirement, and rural resettlement. After Plains residents balked at the notion that their land was submarginal, though, New Dealers moderated their approach and emphasized rehabilitation in place.

Phillips's portrayal of this scenario is essentially correct. While some Plains residents opposed land purchase programs, however, the idea that they did so largely due to regional pride is disputable. Dissatisfaction with the programs' administration caused much of the criticism. Moreover, the idea that planners subsequently substituted rehabilitation in place for large-scale land purchase as part of a "reorientation in conservation strategy" is problematic. The resettlement program was scaled back, but the New Deal did not retreat from its purchase of submarginal land in the face of criticism: roughly 40 percent of the submarginal land

purchases were carried out between fiscal years 1938 and 1940.

Phillips skillfully uses the congressional career of Lyndon Johnson to illustrate how conservation programs, broadly defined, helped to create a loyal constituency for the New Deal. She shows that Johnson raided the pork barrel to secure appropriations for agriculture, dams, and roads in the Texas hill country and that those programs mattered to his constituents. But she may overstate her case that "commitments to agricultural improvement" made Johnson's reputation and defined his political niche in his district.

Phillips argues that the rural New Deal ultimately pushed tenants and black farmers out of agriculture. This argument has generally been applied to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, but Phillips contends that it also fits conservation programs. New Deal conservation made farming more efficient and productive; hence fewer farms were necessary. The argument is logical, but the evidence presented is largely circumstantial. Compared to other forces, how significantly did contour plowing, pasture improvement, rural electrification, and check dams affect rural depopulation?

In a fascinating chapter, Phillips charts the shift in government policy from retaining the farm population to encouraging industrialization and outmigration of marginal farmers. She ably describes ideological divides within the USDA and contradictions between the New Deal objectives of efficiency and sustainability that ultimately doomed agrarian liberals' campaign for conservation and small farms.

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