

## Script of *The River*

**F**rom as far East as New York,  
Down from the turkey ridges of the Alleghenies  
Down from Minnesota, twenty five hundred miles,  
The Mississippi River runs to the Gulf.  
Carrying every drop of water, that flows down two-thirds the continent.  
Carrying every brook and rill, rivulet and creek,  
Carrying all the rivers that run down two-thirds the continent,  
The Mississippi runs to the Gulf of Mexico.

**D**own the Yellowstone, the Milk, the White and Cheyenne;  
The Cannonball, the Musselshell, the James and the Sioux;  
Down the Judith, the Grand, the Osage, and the Platte,  
The Skunk, the Salt, the Black and Minnesota;  
Down the Rock, the Illinois, and the Kankakee  
The Allegheny, the Monongahela, Kanawha, and Muskingum;  
Down the Miami, the Wabash, the Licking and the Green  
The Cumberland, the Kentucky, and the Tennessee;  
Down the Ouachita, the Wichita, the Red, and Yazoo.

**D**own the Missouri three thousand miles from the Rockies;  
Down the Ohio a thousand miles from the Alleghenies;  
Down the Arkansas fifteen hundred miles from the Great Divide;  
Down the Red, a thousand miles from Texas;  
Down the great Valley, twenty~five hundred miles  
From Minnesota  
Carrying every rivulet and brook, creek and rill,  
Carrying all the rivers that run down two-thirds the continent -  
The Mississippi runs to the Gulf.

**N**ew Orleans to Baton Rouge,  
Baton Rouge to Natchez,  
Natchez to Vicksburg,  
Vicksburg to Memphis,  
Memphis to Cairo -  
We built a dyke a thousand miles long,  
Men and mules, mules and mud;  
Mules and mud a thousand miles up the Mississippi.  
A century before we bought the great Western River  
The Spanish and the French built dykes to keep the Mississippi out of New  
Orleans at flood stage.

**I**n forty years we continued the levee the entire length of the great alluvial Delta,  
That mud plain that extends from the Gulf of Mexico clear to the mouth of the Ohio.

**T**he ancient valley built up for centuries by the old river spilling her floods across the bottom  
of the continent -

A mud delta of forty thousand square miles.

Men and mules, mules and mud -

New Orleans to Baton Rouge,

Natchez to Vicksburg,

Memphis to Cairo -

A thousand miles up the river.

**W**e rolled a million bales down the river for Liverpool and Leeds ...

**1**860: we rolled four million bales down the river;

**R**olled them off Alabama,

**R**olled them off Mississippi,

**R**olled them off Louisiana,

**R**olled them down the river!

**W**e fought a war.

**W**e fought a war and kept the west bank of the river free of slavery forever.

**B**ut we left the old South impoverished and stricken.

**D**oubly stricken, because, beyond the tragedy of war,  
Already the frenzied cotton cultivation of a quarter of a century had taken toll of the land.

**W**e mined the soil for cotton until it would yield no more, and then moved west.

**W**e fought a war, but there was a tragedy –  
The tragedy of land twice impoverished.

**B**lack spruce and Norway pine,  
Douglas fir and Red cedar,  
Scarlet oak and Shagbark hickory,  
Hemlock and aspen -  
There was lumber in the North.

**T**he war impoverished the old South, the railroads killed the steamboats.  
But there was lumber in the North.  
Heads up!  
Lumber on the upper river.

**H**eads up!  
Lumber enough to cover all Europe.  
Down from Minnesota and Wisconsin.  
Down to St. Paul;  
Down to St. Louis and St. Joe -  
Lumber for the new continent of the West.  
Lumber for the new mills.

**T**here was lumber in the North and coal in the hills.  
Iron and coal down the Monongahela.  
Iron and coal down the Allegheny.  
Iron and coal down the Ohio.  
Down to Pittsburgh,  
Down to Wheeling,  
Iron and coal for the steel mills,  
for the railroad driving West and South,  
for the new cities of the Great Valley

**W**e built new machinery and cleared new land in the West.

**T**en million bales down to the Gulf -  
Cotton for the spools of England and France.

**F**ifteen million bales down to the Gulf -

**C**otton for the spools of Italy and Germany.

**W**e built a hundred cities and a thousand towns;  
St. Paul and Minneapolis,  
Davenport and Keokuk,  
Moline and Quincy,

Cincinnati and St. Louis,  
Omaha and Kansas City  
Across to the Rockies and down from Minnesota,  
Twenty-five hundred miles to New Orleans,  
We built a new continent.

**B**lack spruce and Norway pine,  
Douglas fir and Red cedar,  
Scarlet oak and Shagbark hickory.  
We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns -  
But at what a cost!  
We cut the top off Minnesota and sent it down the river.  
We cut the top off Wisconsin and sent it down the river.  
We left the mountains and the hills slashed and burned,  
And moved on.

**T**he water comes downhill, spring and fall;  
Down from the cut-over mountains,  
Down from the plowed-off slopes,  
Down every brook and rill, rivulet and creek,  
Carrying every drop of water that flows down two-thirds the continent  
1903 and 1907,  
1913 and 1922,  
1927,  
1936,  
1937!

**D**own from Pennsylvania and Ohio,  
Kentucky and West Virginia,  
Missouri and Illinois,  
Down from North Carolina and Tennessee -  
Down the Judith, the Grand, the Osage, and the Platte,  
The Rock, the Salt, the Black and Minnesota,  
Down the Monongahela, the Allegheny, Kanawha and Muskingum,  
The Miami, the Wabash, the Licking and the Green,  
Down the White, the Wolfe, and the Cache,  
Down the Kaw and Kaskaskia, the Red and Yazoo,  
Down the Cumberland, Kentucky and the Tennessee -  
Down to the Mississippi.  
New Orleans to Baton Rouge -  
Baton Rouge to Natchez -  
Natchez to Vicksburg -  
Vicksburg to Memphis -  
Memphis to Cairo -  
A thousand miles down the levee the long vigil starts.

Thirty-eight feet at Baton Rouge  
River rising  
Helena: river rising.  
Memphis: river rising.  
Cairo: river rising.  
A thousand miles to go,  
A thousand miles of levee to hold -

**C**oastguard patrol needed at Paducah!  
Coastguard patrol needed at Paducah!

**2**00 boats - wanted at Hickman!  
200 boats - wanted at Hickman!

**L**evee patrol: men to Blytheville!  
Levee patrol: men to Blytheville!

**2**000 men wanted at Cairo!  
2000 men wanted at Cairo!

**A** hundred thousand men to fight the old river.

**W**e sent armies down the river to help the engineers  
Fight a battle on a two thousand mile front:  
The Army and the Navy,  
The Coast Guard and the Marine Corp,  
The CCC and the WPA  
The Red Cross and the Health Service  
They fought night and day to hold the old river off the valley.  
Food and water needed at Louisville: 500 dead, 5000 ill;  
Food and water needed at Cincinnati;  
Food and water and shelter and clothing needed for 750,000 flood victims;

**F**ood and medicine needed at Lawrenceburg;

**3**5,000 homeless in Evansville;

**F**ood and medicine needed in Aurora;

**F**ood and medicine and shelter and clothing for 750,000 down in the valley.

**L**ast time we held the levees  
But the old river claimed her valley.  
She backed into Tennessee and Arkansas  
And Missouri and Illinois.  
She left stock drowned, houses torn loose,  
Farms ruined.

**1**903 and 1907.  
1913 and 1922.  
1927.  
1936.  
1937!

**W**e built a hundred cities and a thousand towns -  
But at what a cost!

**S**pring and fall the water comes down, and for years the old river has taken a toll from the  
Valley more terrible than ever she does in flood times.  
Year in, year out, the water comes down  
From a thousand hillsides, washing the top off the Valley.  
For fifty years we dug for cotton and moved West when the land gave out.  
For fifty years we plowed for corn, and moved on when the land gave out.  
Corn and wheat; wheat and cotton-we planted and plowed with no thought for the future -  
And four hundred million tons of top soil,  
Four hundred million tons of our most valuable natural resource have been washed into the  
Gulf of Mexico every year.

**A**nd poor land makes poor people.  
Poor people make poor land.  
For a quarter of a century we have been forcing more and more farmers into tenancy.  
Today forty percent of all the farmers in the great Valley are tenants.

**T**en percent are share croppers,  
Down on their knees in the valley,  
A share of the crop their only security,  
No home, no land of their own,

**A**imless, footloose, and impoverished,  
Unable to eat even from the land because their cash crop is their only livelihood.

**C**redit at the store is their only reserve.

**A**nd a generation growing up with no new land in the West-  
**A** generation whose people knew King's Mountain and Shiloh;  
**A** generation whose people knew Fremont and Custer;  
**B**ut a generation facing a life of dirt and poverty,  
**D**isease and drudgery;  
**G**rowing up without proper food, medical care or schooling,  
**"I**ll-clad, ill-housed, and ill-fed"-  
**A**nd in the greatest river valley in the world.

#### EPILOGUE

**T**here is no such thing as an ideal river in Nature,  
But the Mississippi is out of joint.  
Dust blowing in the West - floods raging in the East -  
We have seen these problems growing to horrible extremes.

**W**hen first we found the great valley it was forty percent forested.  
Today, for every hundred acres of forests we found, we have ten left.  
Today five percent of the entire valley is ruined forever by agricultural use!  
Twenty-five percent of the topsoil has been shoved by the old river into the Gulf of Mexico.  
Today two out of five farmers in the valley are tenant farmers –  
Ten percent of them share croppers,  
Living in a state of squalor unknown to the poorest peasant in Europe.  
And we are forcing thirty-thousand more into tenancy and cropping every year.  
Flood control of the Mississippi means control in the great Delta that must carry all the water  
brought down from two-thirds the continent  
And control of the Delta means control of the little rivers,  
The great arms running down from the uplands.  
And the old river can be controlled.  
We had the power to take the valley apart - we have the power to put it together again.

**I**n 1933 we started, down on the Tennessee River,  
When our Congress created the Tennessee Valley Authority,

Commissioned to develop navigation, flood control, agriculture, and industry  
in the valley:

A valley that carries more rainfall than any other in the country;

The valley through which the Tennessee used to roar down to Paducah in flood times

With more water than any other tributary of the Ohio.

**U**p on the Clinch, at the head of the river, we built Norris Dam,

A great barrier to hold water in flood times

And to release water down the river for navigation in low water season.

**N**ext came Wheeler, first in a series of great barriers

That will transform the old Tennessee into a link of fresh water pools locked

And dammed, regulated and controlled,

Down six hundred fifty miles to Paducah.

**B**ut you cannot plan for water unless you plan for land:

For the cut –

over mountains –

the eroded hills –

the gullied fields

That pour their waters unchecked down to the river.

**T**he CCC, working with the forest service and agricultural experts,

Have started to put the worn fields and hillsides back together;

Black walnut and pine for the worn out fields,

And the gullied hillsides;

Black walnut and pine for new forest preserves,

Roots for the cut-over and burned-over hillsides;

Roots to hold the water in the ground.

**S**oil conservation men have worked out crop systems with the farmers of the Valley -  
crops to conserve and enrich the topsoil.

**T**oday a million acres of land in the Tennessee Valley are being tilled scientifically.

**B**ut you cannot plan for water and land unless you plan for people.

Down in the Valley, the Farm Security Administration has built

A model agricultural community.

Living in homes they themselves built,

Paying for them on long term rates

The homesteaders will have a chance to share in the wealth of the Valley.

**M**ore important,  
The Farm Security Administration has lent thousands of dollars to farmers in the Valley,  
Farmers who were caught by years of depression and in need of only a stake to be self sufficient.

**B**ut where there is water there is power.

**W**here there's water for flood control and water for navigation, there's water for power –

**P**ower for the farmers of the Valley.

**P**ower for the villages and cities and factories of the Valley.

**W**est Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama.

**P**ower to give a new Tennessee Valley to a new generation.

**P**ower enough to make the river work!

*Reaping the Golden Harvest: Pare Lorentz (Poet and Filmmaker).*  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/lorentz/riverscript1.html>.