

# Dorothea Lange: Capturing the Reality of the Great Depression and New Deal Era

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VanDemark, Laura H., "Dorothea Lange: Capturing the Reality of the Great Depression and New Deal Era" (2017). *MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference*. 1.

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# Dorothea Lange: Capturing the Reality of the Great Depression and New Deal Era

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HIST 395

Dr. Hyser

Fall, 2016

Everyone views history through their own lens, but Dorothea Lange captured history through unique lens, a camera lens. Hired by the Farm Security Administration, Lange captured the struggles of migrant farmers and others during the Great Depression and New Deal era. Lange photographed Americans in their homes and on their farms to show how the environmental conditions of extreme drought, a severe economic depression, and lack of government support caused unacceptable living conditions. The Farm Security Administration utilized her photographs to lobby for more funding for resettlement camps and for aid to migrant farmers. Dorothea Lange's groundbreaking approach to documentary photography allowed the reality of the American people's struggles of the Great Depression and New Deal era to touch viewers on a national scale.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a general overview of the conditions during the Great Depression and the impact of the New Deal, see David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); David F. Burg, *The Great Depression* (New York: Facts on File, 2005); Basil Rauch, *History of the New Deal, 1933-1938* (New York: New York Creative Press, Inc., 1944); Donald Worster, *DustBowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); John Arthur Garraty *The Great Depression: An Inquiry into the Causes, Course, and Consequences of the Worldwide Depression as Seen by Contemporaries and in the Light of History* (New York: Anchor and Double Day, 1987). One book that explains how the New Deal helped famers is Theodore Saloutos, *The American farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982). Two books to understand how photography was used to capture the conditions of the Dust Bowl and results of the New Deal are Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly Brannan, *Documenting America, 1935-43* (Berkeley: University of California Press and Library of Congress, 1988) and William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). For books more specifically addressing the FSA and Dorothea Lange's involvement, read Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2006); Linda Gordon, "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist," *The Journal of American History* 93 No. 3 (December 2006): 698-727. See chapter 9 for more detail on the FSA and the dilemmas of art in John Raeburn, *In A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006). Melissa A. McEuen, *Seeing America: Women Photographers between the Wars* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), especially chapter 2 examines Lange's approach to portrait photography. Important primary sources include Dorothea Lange and Anne Whiston Sprin, *Daring to Look* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) which includes notes from Lange's field notebooks; and Dorothea Lange, *Dorothea Lange The Critical Years* (Madrid, Spain: La Fabrica Editorial, 2009) provides a collection of images; Dorothea Lange and Linda Gordon, *Aperture Masters of Photography: Dorothea Lange* (New York: Aperture, 2014). For an interview with Lange see Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard K. Doud, May 22, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 25, 2016, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-dorothea-lange-1175>.

The stock market crash of 1929, often seen as the start of the Great Depression, was a key cause of the economic collapse but it is also important to look at the situation before the Great Depression. The situation in the 1920's also contributed to the deplorable conditions of the 1930s. Prohibition, women challenging social norms, racial tensions due to the increasing presence of the Ku Klux Klan on a national scale, and labor struggles for better wages and hours caused economic and social problems in the 1920s. The post-World War I decline in production hit farmers the hardest as government imposed war time price-controls on crops were removed and European farms were again able to produce their own food supply. The wide gap between rich and poor, increased industrial production, and rising personal debt were unsustainable and ultimately led to the stock market crash on October 29, 1929. President Hoover did not believe that the Great Depression would last and refused to provide any government assistance to individuals affected by the collapse. He believed in trickle-down economics and did not believe it was the responsibility of the government to help individuals. One of the populations hit hardest were farmers. In the 1920s and 1930s, one quarter of the US population lived on farms and faced issues such as overproduction, low prices for crops, and high taxes. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal targeted farmers in order to provide support and stabilize the United States food supply.<sup>2</sup>

Increased production for the war as well as improper cultivation and planting methods resulted in the Dust Bowl, a term used to describe the severe drought in the 1930's. The drought and dust storms affected much of the Great Plains and dust storms even affected some of the major cities. While the impact was widespread, no group was hit harder than the farmers. These

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<sup>2</sup> "The Great Depression: Surviving the Dust Bowl," PBS, last modified 2013, accessed October 3, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-great-depression/>.

conditions led to the need for the government programs to help farmers move to more prosperous lands not affected by drought as well as to learn how to farm sustainably in order to prevent depleting the land of nutrients.<sup>3</sup>

A program President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented to counteract the Great Depression, was the Resettlement Administration, which would eventually become the Farm Security Administration as part of the New Deal enacted shortly after his inauguration in 1933.

The Resettlement Administration sought to resolve tenant farming and share cropping issues which often left the land unable to support crops. These types of farming led to poor treatment of the land because farmers did not own the land and were paid based on how much they produced, resulting in unsustainable farming methods in order to make enough money to survive. As a solution, government programs encouraged farmers to buy their own land, with the support of the government, in hopes that they would treat their land better. Programs under the Resettlement Administration included low-interest loans in order to help farmers buy land, soil conservation, and resettlement projects with communal farms and camps for migrant workers. The Resettlement Administration was later adapted to become the Farm Security Administration and shifted its focus. It helped farmers create sustainable farming plans, demonstrate correct usage of agricultural equipment, and promoted co-ops with other farmers to share supplies, shared ownership of livestock and machinery.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Garraty, 110-112.

<sup>4</sup> "Great Depression and World War II 1929-1945: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal 1933-1945," Library of Congress, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/newdeal/>.; Charles Hagen, *American Photographers of the Great Depression*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 2. The New Deal sought to improve the poor living conditions of American citizens through public works programs, often referred to as the "Alphabet Soup", which drastically increased the role of the United States government in the everyday lives of Americans.

A part of the Resettlement Administration, the Historical Section oversaw documentary photography, starting in 1935. It moved under the Farm Security Administration after its creation in 1937. The Historical Section intended to use photography “not just to record facts, but to make a difference”. Farm Security Administration staffer, Edwin Rosskam explained “Everyone one of us had been hired not just for talents he possessed, but for his commitment, his compassionate view of the hard life so many people were struggling against”. Roy Stryker, the director of the Historical Section, hired photographers with varying backgrounds and training in order to draw on all photography styles to represent the conditions of the time. Given little instruction from the government, Stryker decided on a before and after strategy where photographers would be sent to Resettlement Agency worksites in order to visually represent the impact of the public works projects.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most prominent and influential photographers for the Farm Security Administration, Dorothea Lange, was born Dorothea Nutzhorn in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1895. As a child, she explored the streets of New York City and observed the great divide between the poor people on the street and the wealthy individuals in the arts and entertainment industry. Two formative events in her childhood include her contraction of polio in 1902 and the separation of her parents, which resulted in her permanently cutting ties with her father. These events left her with both physical and emotional consequences. She suffered a permanent limp from polio and faced later health problems because of the disease. Lange’s only self-portrait depicted her

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<sup>5</sup> Hagen, 1; Mora and Brannan, 9, 14.

twisted foot, a result of polio and something that challenged her as a photographer as it limited movement. Lange also harbored considerable resentment towards her father.<sup>6</sup>

From 1914-17 Lange attended New York Training School for Teachers and in 1915 decided she wanted to be a photographer. Rather than attending college, Lange obtained a job at the studio of Arnold Genthe, a famous portrait photographer, who gave her a camera to develop her own skills. From 1917-1918, Lange studied pictorialism at the Clarence White School of Photography in New York City and went on to photograph modern dancers in California. Pictorialism, defined as “an approach to photography that emphasizes beauty of subject matter, tonality, and composition rather than the documentation of reality”, is a stark contrast to Lange’s later work as a documentary photographer emphasizing reality. In 1918, she moved to San Francisco, acquired a job at a photographic studio, and eventually found an investor to help her set up her own studio. Her studio supported her and her husband Maynard Dixon, a famous painter, and their three children for 15 years as she photographed wealthy Bay area arts patrons. During these years, she abandoned the more formal pictorialist style and created a more modern approach to portrait photography, making her subjects more relaxed with natural poses and no props.<sup>7</sup>

As the Great Depression hit, Lange photographed the poor in the streets, those waiting in long lines for relief supplies, and clashes between the poor and police. These experiences



This self-portrait is untitled but Lange used it as part of a photography class she was teaching in the 1957 in order to demonstrate creative self-portraits that represented a person’s struggles.

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2009), 2-6.

<sup>7</sup> Hagen, Biography Section; Mora and Brannan, 13.; “Pictorialism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified December 16, 2010, accessed November 12, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pictorialism>.

sparked her interest in documentary photography outside the confines of a portrait studio. Lange's involvement with the government initiatives happened by chance, as Paul Schuster Taylor, an economics professor at University of California at Berkeley with a specialty in farm labor conditions in the US, came to one of Lange's gallery openings and left amazed by her work. He offered her a job as a photographer for the California State Emergency Relief Administration, which began her career as a documentary photographer. Lange divorced Dixon and spent the rest of her life with Taylor, who provided her the economic freedom to leave her studio and take government jobs alongside freelance work. Taylor also helped her get the job with the Farm Security Administration where she worked consistently from 1935-37 and sporadically from 1937-1942.<sup>8</sup>

Lange's work for the Farm Security Administration included the majority of her most well-known photographs. These photographs provided a valued historical record of conditions at the time, but also a demonstration of the incredible advancement of the field of documentary photography. In order to understand Lange's work, it is important to have a sense of her process and motives when she went on an assignment for the Farm Security Administration.

For historians, Lange's field journals alongside her photographs provide rich primary sources when studying her work, but they provide important information on how Lange conducted herself as a professional photographer. Lange placed high importance on maintaining detailed field journals, as she believed "the words that come direct from the people are the greatest. They are the words I wrote down in my notebook twenty-five years ago with great excitement". Lange's incredible attention to detail made her photographs truly represent the time,

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon, *Aperture: Masters of Photography*, introduction; Hagen, biography section.



place, and people as she spent weeks rewriting her field notes and captions to represent the imaged just right. Lange believed “a photographer should be above all, a promoter of consequences” and she used her captions to document what the photograph showed but also to argue its importance. Her desire to have her photographs demonstrate consequences was central to the function of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration as they worked to document the consequences of poor farming habits and unfortunate environmental conditions.<sup>9</sup>

At times Roy Stryker, director of the Historical Section, censored her captions to make them more politically correct or shortened them for publishing reasons. The “Old Negro- the kind planters like. He hoes, picks cotton, and is full of good humor” was published only after removing “The kind planters like” in order to avoid the heated tensions between whites and African Americans. Lange resented the fact that many of her captions were changed; however, because she was working for the government, they were property of the Farm Security Administration to publish and distribute as they saw fit. Lange and Stryker often argued over the Farm Security Administration’s use and portrayal of her images but in the end, Stryker had the authority to do what he wanted with her photographs. Stryker maintained the integrity of most of her images and worked to make sure they were telling the full story, which was the purpose of the Historical Section. They wished to tell stories of conditions through photographs, and that was exactly what Lange accomplished.<sup>10</sup>

In order to understand her impact as a Farm Security Administration photographer, it is important to study her early work to see the shift from a traditional pictorialist style to a more

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<sup>9</sup>Dorothea Lange quoted in Elizabeth Partridge, *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013), 62); Partridge, 24.; Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 256.

<sup>10</sup> Lange quoted in Partridge, 24.; Linda Gordon, interview by Steve Inskeep, NPR, April 28, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126289455>.

cutting-edge documentary photography style. Lange's photography career began in San Francisco where she set up a modest portrait studio. She considered these years as a time where she had to figure out if a photography career was suitable to provide for her family. With two young children, she defied the social norms for women at the time and was determined to be independent and earn money. Lange built a small but successful portrait business and worked hard to keep her studio in a relatively expensive part of San Francisco while still



“White Angel Breadline”  
San Francisco, California,  
1933

learning the business as a photographer. Lange's switch to documentary photography resulted from two major factors; photographing people who paid her left her bored and the Great Depression drastically changed living conditions, which really opened the field for photographers to visually document the economic downturn and its impact on the American people. At the start of the Great Depression, Lange moved her studio to downtown San Francisco in order to start venturing into documentary photography and move beyond the walls of her studio.<sup>11</sup>

Lange's most popular image of San Francisco during the Great Depression, entitled “White Angel Breadline” was taken in 1933. In regards to this image, Lange stated, “I can only say I knew I was looking at something” when seeing the despair. She did not know immediately that this photograph would become an iconic image of the efforts, such as bread lines to relieve famine, to counteract the conditions of the Great Depression. However, Lange did believe that

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<sup>11</sup>Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

this picture “did not take anything away from anyone: their privacy, their dignity or their wholeness”. Her focus on maintaining the man’s privacy, dignity, and wholeness can be seen throughout her career as a documentary photographer as she worked to represent their lives authentically.<sup>12</sup>

Lange’s work set the tone for future documentary photographers, as she valued not just the message an image portrayed but how the person in her photograph was represented. She did not look to exploit the situations her subjects were in in order to demonstrate the conditions in a more dramatic manner. These characteristics are seen throughout her field journals and photographs as she continued to strive to capture an event, person, or landscape authentically.

Documenting life in the world outside her studio allowed Lange to do something unique, she captured people in their world, not hers. This type of photography defied her classical portrait training and the photography norms of the time. Lange explained this new form of photography posed its own difficulties as “there was no such thing as photo-journalism” and most historians believe photo-journalism emerged out of the work of Farm Security Administration photographers work during the Great Depression. In order to capture conditions appropriately, Lange spent time shadowing agricultural researchers to understand some of the policies of the Resettlement Agency and eventually the work of the Farm Security Administration.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lange interview by Suzanne B. Riess. 1968, University of California Bancroft Library: Regional Oral History Office, accessed September 15, 2016, [http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/narrators/lange\\_dorothea.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/narrators/lange_dorothea.html); interview by Richard Doud.

<sup>13</sup> Partridge, 52.; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.



“Man Beside Wheelbarrow”  
San Francisco, California, 1934

Images such as “Man Beside Wheelbarrow”, taken in 1934, in San Francisco is considered one of her earliest works in documentary photography and embodies her desire to illustrate the lives of the unemployed people as a result of the Great Depression. Lange would never have been able to create the same impact if she had asked this man to come into her studio because of the importance of the setting, the overturned wheelbarrow was symbolic of the ruin that the

country experienced. Lange expressed the significance of this image as “a picture of a man in his world- In this case, a man with his head down, back against the wall, with his livelihood, like the wheelbarrow, overturned”. While many of her famous photographs, “Man Beside Wheelbarrow” included, are considered portraits, the setting plays an important role in conveying the story of the subject. Lange’s ability to capture a person’s essence in a still image was one of the reasons her work had such an impact on those who viewed them. She explained, “five years earlier I would have thought it enough to take a picture of a man, no more. But now I wanted to take a picture of a man as he stood in the world”.<sup>14</sup>

Lange captured the struggles of women in her photograph “Mending Stocking.” Her photograph is incredibly intimate despite the fact only the woman’s legs and feet appear. The need to save money by making do with that you already had, key to the Great Depression, was exemplified in this seemingly simple composition. The mended runs in the stockings symbolized the role of women in trying to keep families from falling apart



“Mending Stockings”  
San Francisco, CA  
1934

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<sup>14</sup>Partridge, 52.

at a time when providing for a family continued to be increasingly challenging. As a woman herself, Lange understood the struggles of these women, as she had to make difficult decisions between her family and her career.<sup>15</sup>

Early street photographs of San Francisco and Lange's desire to capture the social unrest of the era led to her first photographic publication in *Survey Graphic*. In September 1936, *Survey Graphic*, a social welfare periodical, published an article written by Paul Taylor accompanied by Lange's photographs in an effort to draw awareness to conditions of migrant farmers. The article and photographs, "From the Ground Up", outlined the efforts of the Resettlement Agency and argued for three United States government actions that could solve the problem: constructing camps for migrant workers, resettling farmers to cooperative farms, and radically reformed land practices. This photo essay set standards for future government publications as it did not solely document the social issues of the time, but attempted to illustrate how government program were or could improve condition<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>"The Great Depression: Creating Narrative through Photography," PBS LearningMedia, last modified 2016, accessed November 21, 2016  
<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/lang14.soc.ushist.docphot/documenting-the-great-depression-creating-narrative-through-photography/>

<sup>16</sup>Cara A. Finnegan, "Social Engineering, Visual Politics, and the New Deal: FSA Photography in Survey Graphic," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (January 2000): 333-62.; Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange, "From the Ground Up," *Survey Graphic* 25, no. 9 (September 1936): 526.



“Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother with seven children. February 1936”  
Nipomo, California  
\*Often referred to as “Migrant Mother” as that was the title of the collection.

The photographs ranged from intimate portraits, such as the famous *Migrant Mother*, to *A young farmer, resettled on the Bosque Farms in New Mexico* and showed scenes of farmers posing with their equipment in dry and barren fields. Lange’s six images, accompanied by descriptive captions with identity, occupation, age, and ethnicity sought to illustrate the ideas that Taylor discussed it: put faces to the statistics of government programs in New Mexico and California. Another photograph, *The demonstration gardens of the*



“A young farmer, resettled on the Bosque Farms in New Mexico”  
1935

*El Monte Subsistence Homesteads in California* captured an effort

to encourage sustainable farming efforts. In the time immediately following the Great Depression, images demonstrating government efforts to improve farming conditions were a key strategy used to regain the trust of the people.<sup>17</sup>



“The demonstration gardens of the El Monte Subsistence Homesteads in California”  
El Monte, California 1935

<sup>17</sup> Finnegan, 348.

For Dorothea Lange, *Survey Graphic* provided an important opportunity for name recognition as a new documentary photographer. The magazine was also for the beginning of government usage of photography to document, promote, and improve public works projects organized by the Resettlement Administration and eventually the Farm Security Administration. Taylor's *Survey Graphic* article directly resulted in Lange's employment with the Farm Security Administration as it caught the eye of Roy Stryker, soon to be director of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration.<sup>18</sup>

Lange's strong desire to tell the story of the people she photographed set her apart from other photographers. She believed this could be accomplished only by talking to them and hearing their stories. As Lange expanded her documentary photography coverage, she noted that the people in the city were unwilling to talk but those in migrant camps were much more willing to share their lives with Lange. She explained, "The people in the city were silent people...but in the migrant camps, there were always talkers It gives us a chance to meet on common ground — something a good photographer like myself must find if he's going to do good work." Much of Lange's later work, especially assignments for the Farm Security Administration, focused on revealing conditions in the migrant camps.<sup>19</sup>

Lange's photography process fit well with Roy Stryker and the goals of Farm Security Administration photographers. The FSA photographers aimed to "annex the emergent prestige and authority of professional photojournalism to the already established 'scientific' reliability of experts in social science" in order to counter the view of photography as an art that could be easily manipulated. In order to gain federal funding, Stryker knew that he could not focus on the

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<sup>18</sup> Finnegan, 348

<sup>19</sup> Lange quoted in Partridge, 58.

art aspect of photography but rather its ability to provide visual evidence. The view that these images served as evidence in a federal investigation of the New Deal programs meant that the photographers had special procedures to follow when taking pictures. Farm Security Administration photographers never took names to protect the identity of the subject and were also not allowed to send the person a copy of the image. The photographers had no control over how, when, where, or how often a photograph was published because it was legally federal government property and could be used as they wished.<sup>20</sup>



“Daughter of Migrant Tennessee Coal Miner Living in American River Camp”  
Sacramento, California 1936

Lange’s work for the Farm Security Administration centered in California where she photographed migrant farmer communities. Much of the Farm Security Administration legislation worked to help migrant farmers find prosperous land where they could practice better farming techniques in order to avoid having to move again.

One of Lange’s earliest assignments took her to Sacramento California where she photographed a

migrant’s daughter whose family had been relocated from Tennessee to the American River Camp in California. While the focus of the photograph is on the young woman’s face, the background provides context for her expression as the camps provided migrants with the bare minimum.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 240, 242.

<sup>21</sup> Mora and Brannan, 29.



Many families experienced similar necessary relocations which Lange captured in her photograph “Family walking on highway, five children...”<sup>22</sup> The family pictured started in Idabel, Oklahoma and were walking to Krebs, Oklahoma because the father became sick with pneumonia and lost his farm. Lange labeled the picture: “Unable to get work on Work Projects Administration and refused county relief in county of fifteen years residence because of temporary residence in another county after his illness.” The father had few other options but to move his family in hopes of better luck somewhere else. Lange’s composition of this



“Family walking on highway, five children...”  
Pittsburg County, Oklahoma  
June 1938

image, and the depth of field allowing viewers to see the family walking in a line, draws emphasis to how far they have walked, as the straight road appears endless. Additionally, by capturing the whole family in the frame, Lange highlighted their very few possessions and the forced relocation in hopes of finding food and jobs.<sup>23</sup>

“Daughter of Migrant Tennessee Coal Miner Living in American River Camp” and “Family walking on highway, five children” illustrated the need for Farm Security Administration programs. The migrant daughter lived in a camp of people that needed to be relocated and the family with five children needed a place to farm and were not able to take advantage of the public works projects of the New Deal. These images supported Farm Security

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<sup>22</sup> Lange’s original full title “Family walking on highway, five children Started from Idabel, Oklahoma. Bound for Krebs, Oklahoma. Pittsburg County, Oklahoma. In 1936 the father farmed on thirds and fourths at Eagleton, McCurtain County, Oklahoma. Was taken sick with pneumonia and lost farm. Unable to get work on Work Projects Administration and refused county relief in county of fifteen years residence because of temporary residence in another county after his illness”.

<sup>23</sup> Mora and Brannan, 27.

Administration programs to help migrant workers and served as visual evidence that even with work projects, funding for the Farm Security Administration needed to continue. They also provided important contrast to the conditions in the cities during the Great Depression and illustrated the need for differing government response as needs greatly varied.

Like the migrant farmers, sharecroppers across the United States also faced similar issues as conditions did not allow for sustainable crop yields to support their families. Sharecroppers in the South were hit particularly hard. Lange captured the hardships in her series of photographs taken in Person County, North Carolina July, 1935. Known for incredibly detailed field notes, Lange provided an entire typed page of photograph characteristics that described the environmental state of the land as well the sharecroppers account of how the owner treated him and his family [Appendix A].<sup>24</sup>



“Tobacco barns on the Stone Place”  
Person County, North Carolina  
July 15, 1939

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<sup>24</sup> Dorothea Lange and Anne Whiston Sprin, 114-17.



“Young sharecropper and his first child”  
 Person County, North Carolina  
 July 15, 1939

Her field notes demonstrate her commitment to authentically representing the lives of those she photographed. The sharecroppers pictured in this series told Lange their stories and she included direct quotes and specific information about the farming methods in her notes. These details were not only important to the context of the photograph but also for the records of the Farm Security Administration as the sharecropper explained the changes put in place by government work to prevent erosion.

Lange noted that erosion remained an issue and can be seen in her photographs of the fields. The sharecropper stated that they were allowed to plant all that they wanted, one of the main reasons for infertile land as nutrients did not have time to return to the soil when the field were in constant use. Farm Security Administration initiatives, such as encouraging crop rotation and education about erosion prevention, targeted sharecroppers. These initiatives worked to prevent the conditions similar to those of the Dust Bowl in the West.<sup>25</sup>



“Negro sharecropper’s house.”  
 Person County, North Carolina  
 July 15, 1939

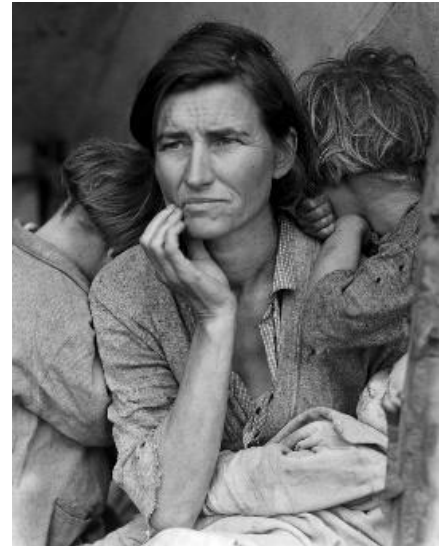
Lange also discussed the sharecroppers’ living conditions. She notes many had a twenty-minute walk to get water and no “privy”

<sup>25</sup> Lange, “General Caption no. 19” see Appendix A

anywhere nearby. To accompany the photograph of the sharecropper's house she described the "lean-to with kitchen stove pipe, stuffed through side of wall and capped off with tobacco flue to keep smoke from blowing back into house."<sup>26</sup>

While Lange's work photographing migrant farmers and sharecroppers provided important documentation for the Farm Security Administration, no image captured the attention of America quite like *Migrant Mother*.<sup>27</sup> This iconic image is often viewed as a symbol of the suffering of residents in the West during the Great Depression. Despite its continued popularity, most do not know this image belongs to a series of photos Lange took in early 1936. At the time, Lange did not know the identity of the woman but it was later discovered that she was Florence Owens Thompson, a 32-year old woman doing everything possible to continue to feed her children.<sup>28</sup>

In an interview for *Popular Photography*, Lange recalled her experience with Florence Owen Thompson. Lange "saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet.... There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to



"Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother with seven children. February 1936"  
Nipomo, California  
\*Often referred to as "Migrant Mother"

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<sup>26</sup> See Appendix A for Lange's field notes on the sharecropper series; Dorothea Lange and Anne Whiston Sprin, 114-17; Lange, "General Caption no. 19".

<sup>27</sup> Lange's title for this image is "Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother with seven children. February 1936" but I will refer to it as "Migrant Mother" for the sake of length and clarity. Much controversy surrounds this image as the identity of the "Migrant Mother" has led to criticism of Lange's depiction of her. However, the issues historians have raised were not apparent to Lange and she believed she was photographing a white, migrant mother.

<sup>28</sup> "Exploring Contexts: Migrant Mother," Library of Congress: American Memory, Prints and Photographs Division, accessed October 10, 2016, [https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awpnp6/migrant\\_mother.html](https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awpnp6/migrant_mother.html); Lange did not know the name of her subject because it was FSA policy to not take names in order to protect identity.

know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it". Other images in the collection show the lean-to tent and are captioned with details about her search for food and the necessity of selling items such as the tires on the car to make money for food. Lange also reported that once she had photographed this family, she left the camp because she had captured "the essence of her assignment".<sup>29</sup>

This image, printed in various government publications, pictured on US postage stamps, and used by social activist groups is often the single image Americans associate with the Great Depression. The popularity of this image is most commonly attributed to Lange's focus on how the image appears from an artistic perspective as well as the emotion it portrays and the raw anxiety seen on Thompson's face. Her expression represents the fears of many Americans during the Great Depression. The popularity of this image frustrated Lange as she had no control over its use. In an interview with San Francisco radio station KQED, Lange expressed her frustrations that "Migrant Mother no longer belongs to me. It's all over! Why is that? I would like to put up a fine print of it, and along with it, one or two others that were made about the same time of the same subject: this is what it came out of". Similar to some of her other images, Lange believed that the Farm Security Administration's use of her photograph decontextualized the situation and did not accurately represent the living conditions of Florence Owen Thompson.<sup>30</sup>

Scholar Linda Gordon believes that "[Lange] was exquisitely sensitive to embodied emotion, but she also probably felt the complexity of Thompson's anxiety because it was hers, as well." Lange knew what it was like to make sacrifices for her children. This image remains

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<sup>29</sup>Lange quoted on "Exploring Contexts: Migrant Mother".

<sup>30</sup> Lange quoted in Partridge, 83.

famous because Lange's photograph represents the struggle of a population much larger than just the "migrant mother."<sup>31</sup>

Lange believed that the success and impact of her images were not a result of her talent but rather the power of a camera. As Lange observed: "The camera is a great teacher, and the more people who use it the more aware they become of the possibilities of the visual world. You look into everything, not only what it *looks* like but what it *feels* like. On that sort of attention great photographers will be made, and the best of the photographers have it once in a while". Her focus on the visual aesthetics of an image and the feeling the scene creates in viewers made her a truly ground breaking documentary photographer. Lange's unique ability to capture the essence of a human being in a still photograph provided America with authentic images conveying the hardships of the Great Depression and New Deal Era supported by her detailed field notes documenting conditions.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 239.

<sup>32</sup> Partridge, 41.

Appendix A

1495

North Carolina

GENERAL CAPTION NO. 19

*Lange*

DATE: July 5, 1938

LOCATION: Route 501, Person county

MAP CODE: Person 18

SUBJECT: Hill side farm, facing road, showing owner's house and outbuildings and tobacco field. Share cropper's farm ~~is~~ on other side of small hill.

Notes: Owner's house: general view of hillside farm opposite Tucks Service Station, shows home, outbuildings and tobacco field beyond. The fields show erosion. The owner usually makes according to the man at the filling station about 800 pounds to the acre which is a small yield for Person County. Better yields run from 900 to 1200 pounds.

Other side of hill; this side has been terraced - the sharecropper said before the government erosion work began, not tended now. In background is a sweet potato patch with a negro man chopping. Could hear the sound of the hoe on the small rocks in the soil. Up the hill is the log and frame house the family live in. Steep rocky drive up hill from highway to owner's house and passed it along a single track to negro house in background. Negro sharecropper's house: shows different aspects of house, chimney, lean-to with kitchen stovepipe, stuffed through side of wall and ~~is~~ capped off with joint of tobacco flue to keep smoke from blowing back into house, flower garden in front protected by a slender fence of lathes, young negro couple and baby. Note guano sacks washed and drying on a line in back. The man was shy of having his photograph made but finally held the baby in front of the house for one picture. They have just moved here this year - "They treat us better here than where we did live;" did not know ~~what~~ how many acres ~~of~~ he had, tobacco, corn, a potato patch "and such". He said they did not measure up the land this year - everybody did last year when they were out down in acreage, but this year everybody planted all they wanted to. The woman had been through seventh grade, the husband not much education. She would not let us take photographs of interior - "Ain't cleaned up in ever so long - too big a mess." No privy in sight, had to get water from "the spring" so far away that the man was gone about 20 minutes to get a bucket of water. Note disc harrow standing rusted in the field. House in background of this photograph is the pack house with log "ordering house" adjoining it.

Refer to negatives:

- 19871C ✓
- 19874C ✓
- 19893C ✓
- 19896C ✓
- 20200E ✓
- 20249E ✓
- 20258C ✓
- ~~20264E~~
- 20264E ✓

Lange's field notes from her series of Person County, North Carolina sharecroppers.

## Image Credits

Untitled Self Portrait of Foot. *Dorothea Lange Collection*. Oakland Museum of California. Accessed November 17, 2016.

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“Young sharecropper and his first child.” *Contexts: Dorothea Lange and the Art of a Caption*. Accessed November 6, 2016. <https://contexts.org/articles/dorothea-lange/>.



“Negro sharecropper’s house.” Contexts: *Dorothea Lange and the Art of a Caption*. Accessed November 21, 2016. <https://contexts.org/articles/dorothea-lange/>.

“Tobacco barns on the Stone Place.” Contexts: *Dorothea Lange and the Art of a Caption*. Accessed November 6, 2016. <https://contexts.org/articles/dorothea-lange/>.

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### Primary Sources:

Lange, Dorothea. Interview by Richard K. Doud. May 22, 1964. Smithsonian Archives of American Art. New York, NY.

With an audio length of almost two hours and 23 pages of transcribed conversation, Doud's interview is an important source for understanding Lange's reflection on her earlier work. She specifically discusses her work for the FSA during the 1930's.

Lange, Dorothea. Interview by Suzanne B. Riess. 1968. University of California Bancroft Library: Regional Oral History Office. Berkeley, California.

An oral history series published in 1968 conducted by Suzanne Riess over the course of the 1960s. With close to 300 pages of transcribed interview conversation, this is one of the most extensive primary sources records of her life and work.

Lange, Dorothea. Untitled Self Portrait of Foot. 1957. *Dorothea Lange Collection* Oakland Museum of California.

Lange used photograph as part of a photography class she was teaching in the 1957 to demonstrate creative self-portraits that represented a person's struggles. This illustrates the lasting effects of polio on her body.

Lange, Dorothea. "White Angel Breadline." 1933. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Lange's first experimentation with street photography in San Francisco and this image was the beginning of her interest in urban photography.

Lange, Dorothea. "Man Beside Wheelbarrow." 1934. Oakland Museum of California.

Demonstrates the despair San Francisco residents experienced as the conditions of the Great Depression worsened. At this point, Lange is transitioning to full time documentary photographer in San Francisco.

Lange, Dorothea. "Mended Stockings." 1934. Lee Gallery.

While this is not one of Lange's most famous works, it provides an important visual of the struggles of urban women during the Great Depression as they worked to hold everything together and be resourceful.

Lange, Dorothea. "Destitute peapickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California." 1936. *American Women*, Library of Congress: Memory Collection.

Lange's most famous image of a mother and her two children that became the iconic picture of the Great Depression.

- Lange, Dorothea. "A young farmer, resettled on the Bosque Farms in New Mexico." 1935. VCU Libraries: The Social Welfare History Project: *From the Ground Up*.  
Photograph depicts conditions of farmers who have resettled on new farms in New Mexico as a result of Farm Security Administration initiatives.
- Lange, Dorothea. "General Caption #19." 1939. *Contexts*.  
Field notes and caption information for a series of photographs taken of a sharecropper family in Person County, North Carolina on July 15, 1939.
- Lange, Dorothea. "Daughter of Migrant Tennessee Coal Miner Living in American River Camp." 1936. Museum of Modern Art.  
Depicts despair and helplessness of migrant families relocated to camps in order to improve conditions. Photograph taken in Sacramento, California.
- Lange, Dorothea. "Family walking on highway, five children..." 1938. Library of Congress: Prints & Photographs Online Catalog.  
Captures a migrant family walking to a new county in Oklahoma in hopes of finding some land to farm on after the father fell ill and was unable to keep his farm.
- Lange, Dorothea. "Young sharecropper and his first child." 1939. *Contexts: Dorothea Lange and the Art of a Caption*.  
Part of the series of photographs illustrating conditions of a sharecropper family in Person County, North Carolina in July 1935. This photograph depicts the father with his young daughter outside their house.
- Lange, Dorothea. "Negro sharecropper's house." 1939. *Contexts: Dorothea Lange and the Art of a Caption*.  
Part of the series of photographs illustrating conditions of a sharecropper family in Person County, North Carolina in July 1935. This photograph depicts the very basic house structure and the remoteness of their home.
- Lange, Dorothea. "Tobacco barns on the Stone Place." 1939. *Contexts: Dorothea Lange and the Art of a Caption*.  
Part of the series of photographs illustrating conditions of a sharecropper family in Person County, North Carolina in July 1935. This photograph depicts the owner's home and fields.
- Taylor, Paul and Dorothea Lange. "From the Ground Up." *Survey Graphic* 25, no. 9 (September 1936): 526.

Paul Taylor, Lange's second husband, discusses efforts of the Resettlement Administration in the West and is accompanied by Lange's photographs to provide visual documentation.

#### Secondary Sources:

Burg, David F. *The Great Depression*. New York: Facts on File, 2005.

Burg utilizes excerpts from contemporary primary sources, brief narratives, photographs, biographies, and bibliographies in order to detail events of the Great Depression. Burg intentionally provides material that would allow readers to reach their own conclusions.

"Exploring Contexts: Migrant Mother." Library of Congress: American Memory, Prints and Photographs Division. Accessed October 10, 2016.

[https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awpnp6/migrant\\_mother.html](https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awpnp6/migrant_mother.html)

This website provides both the historical context and scholarly controversy over Lange's most famous image, often referred to as "Migrant Mother". It also includes Lange's important quote about the context of that image.

Finnegan, Cara A. "Social Engineering, Visual Politics, and the New Deal: FSA Photography in *Survey Graphic*." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (January 2000): 333-62.

Finnegan's article discussed the impact of FSA photography, mainly Lange, in the publication of *Survey Graphic*. She argues that the inclusion of Lange's photos was not merely propaganda but a representation of the social implications of the New Deal.

Fleischhauer, Carl and Beverly Brannan. *Documenting America, 1935-43*. Berkeley: University of California Press and Library of Congress, 1988.

This book includes reprints of twelve Farm Security Administration photographers and includes historical context for the photographs. Authors sought to provide a comprehensive collection of photos from the eight years of the Historical Section.

Garraty, John A. *The Great Depression: An Inquiry into the Causes, Course, and Consequences of the Worldwide Depression as Seen by Contemporaries and in the Light of History*.

New York: Anchor and Double Day, 1987.

Garraty analyzes the interconnectedness of various causes of the Great Depression. His book is different from other scholarship as he compared works contemporary to the Great Depression to views of later historians more current to today.

"Great Depression and World War II 1929-1945: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal 1933-1945." Library of Congress. Accessed October 1, 2016.

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/newdeal/>

Provides a basic summary of the New Deal legislation and FDR's role in trying to bring the US out of the Great Depression. Does not offer an opinion on effectiveness but rather provide important facts.

Gordon, Linda. "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist." *The Journal of American History*, no. 93 (December 2006): 698-727.

This journal article takes a unique look at Lange's photography and discusses the motives behind Lange's work. Gordon argues that Lange was also an agricultural sociologist as she helped document the social and economic impact of agricultural labor.

Gordon, Linda. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2009.

This is the most comprehensive biography of Lange. This book was written to consolidate both Gordon and other scholar's research on Lange's life and work. Gordon appreciates Lange's photographs and believes they revealed Depression conditions.

Gordon, Linda. Interview by Steve Inskeep. April 28, 2010. NPR.

Inskeep converses with Gordon on her latest book on Dorothea Lange, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* which is a comprehensive biography of her life. Gordon specifically discusses Lange's unique characteristics as a person and photographer.

Hagen, Charles. *American Photographers of the Great Depression*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Hagen's introduction describes the formation of the Historical Section of the FSA and short biographies of the photographers are included in the back. One limitation to this book is that Hagen does not provide historical context for the images individually.

Kennedy, David M. *Freedom From Fear: The American people in Depression and War 1929-1945*. New York: University of Oxford Press, 1999.

This book provides a people oriented look at the Great Depression through World War I and the struggles these generations faced. Kennedy builds on previous scholarship and adds his interpretation to the effectiveness of the government during these years.

Lange, Dorothea and Anne Whiston Sprin. *Daring to Look*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Quick biography on Dorothea Lange and also includes primary sources with her field notes for each of the photographs featured. Whiston Sprin wanted a book on Lange to include significant amount of her field notes, which are lacking in other scholarship.

Lange, Dorothea and Linda Gordon. *Dorothea Lange: Aperture Masters of Photography*. New York: Aperture, 2014.

This book contains a brief introduction on Lange's life and work as well as collection of her most famous photographs with original captions and Gordon's commentary. Gordon argues that Lange's work is more than just documentation but true art.

Lange, Dorothea and Oliva M. Rubio and Richard K. Doud. *Dorothea Lange: The Crucial Years 1930-1946*. Madrid: La Fábrica Editorial, 2009.

Introduction includes the thoughts of museum curators who have organized shows of Lange's work. Photographs are the focus of this book as they are not accompanied by commentary but only Lange's original titles and captions.

McEuen, Melissa A. *Seeing America: Women Photographers between the Wars*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

McEuen focuses on five women photographers between World War I and World War II and analyzes how their photography illustrates their view of America. The section on Lange argues her incredibly ability to show human dignity in poor conditions.

Mora, Gilles and Beverly W. Brannan. *FSA: The American Vision*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2006.

Examines the goals of the FSA and their motives behind hiring photographers to document conditions in the West. Includes a chapter on Lange's involvement. Divided into time periods, works of famous photographers are accompanied by original captions.

Partridge, Elizabeth. *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013

Partridge begins with a brief biography of Lange and a description of her photography over time. Her most famous images are included with their original captions and titles and are also accompanied by quotes from Lange describing scenes or photographs.

"Pictorialism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Last modified December 16, 2010. Accessed November 12, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pictorialism>.

Direct quote used to give context for Lange's development in photography style from pictorialist to documentary.

Rauch, Basil. *The History of the New Deal, 1933-1938*. New York: Creative Age Press, 1944.

This book provides a unique perspective on the Great Depression as it was written soon after the depression ended. One limitation is that Rauch could not access FDR's private papers. Rauch focuses on the evolution the Roosevelt Administration's policies.

Raeburn, John. *In A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Raeburn goes beyond the typical focus of the FSA photographers' role in advancing documentary focus and studies other artists alongside FSA artists in order to set them in the context of the time period.

Saloutos, Theodore. *The American Farmer and the New Deal*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982.

This book provides important context on the conditions of American farming after the New Deal was passed. Saloutos provides an overview of the agricultural conditions while utilizing FSA records to analyze impact of New Deal programs on agriculture.

Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Stott specifically looks at the advances of photography during the 1930s and argues that new styles and approaches created documentary photography. He places these changes in the context of the conditions of the Great Depression and New Deal era.

“The Great Depression: Creating Narrative through Photography.” PBS LearningMedia. Last Modified 2016. Accessed November 21, 2016.

<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/lang14.soc.ushist.docphot/documenting-the-great-depression-creating-narrative-through-photography/>.

Website contains a short video that discussed the photograph titled “Mending Stockings”. The video also discusses her transition from portrait photography to documentary photography and includes clips of interviews with Lange.

“The Great Depression: Surviving the Dust Bowl.” PBS. Last modified 2013. Accessed October 3, 2016. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-great-depression/>

This website is an overview of conditions during the Great Depression and how the Dust Bowl impacted Americans. It emphasizes the changing role of the US government in everyday lives as Roosevelt’s New Deal programs included public works projects.

Worster, Donald. *The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Published 25 years after Worster’s first book, this book focuses on his most recent research of the Dust Bowl in both ecological and human terms. Worster specifically details human relations with the land and the connection to Dust Bowl conditions.