

Documenting the bitter years

The Depression years of 1935–36 were ones of remarkable productivity and accomplishment for two masters of photography: **Walker Evans** and **Dorothea Lange**, under the direction of **Roy Stryker**, who was in charge of the photographic documentation of the RA/FSA (see below). In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal **Resettlement** consolidated several farm programs into the Resettlement Administration (RA). One of the primary **goals** of the RA was to take millions of acres of land that had been exhausted by deforestation, **over-farming**, and **drought** and move farm families into government-owned planned communities, including model farms and **greenbelt** towns. In 1937, the Congress passed the Farm Security **Act**, which absorbed the RA into a new organization, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which operated until 1942.



Dorothea Lange. **Drought-stricken** farmer and family near Muskogee, Oklahoma (1935)

In addition to attracting **top-notch** photographers to work for him, Stryker had a talent for getting the best out of each one. Even though he did not **concern** himself with the mechanics of **wielding** a camera, Stryker developed into a great teacher who could inspire those who came to work for him. Before sending his photographers out into the field, Stryker made sure they were well-informed about their assigned area, its people, economy and even its politics. He often gave his photographers books to read and encouraged them to look at **assignments** in new and different ways. Stryker felt that an **educated, sensitive** photographer would produce images that “would **mirror** both his understanding and his compassion”.

Both Lange and Walker, together with others, were assigned to document small-town life and to demonstrate how the federal government was attempting to **improve** the **lot** of rural communities during the Depression. Evans, **however**, worked with little concern for the ideological agenda or the suggested itineraries and instead answered a personal need to distill the essence of American life from the simple and the ordinary. His photographs of roadside architecture, rural churches, small-town barbers and cemeteries reveal a **deep** respect for the traditions of the common man and secured his reputation as America's pre-eminent documentarian. From their first appearance in magazines and books in the late 1930s, these direct, iconic images entered the public's collective consciousness and are now deeply

account: resoconto

act: legge

assignment: incarico

closer and closer: sempre più vicino

to concern: interessare

deep: profondo

draught-stricken: colpiti dalla siccità

drought: siccità

educated: colto

embedded: immerso

exposure: (qui) fotogramma

goal: scopo, fine

greenbelt: area agricola coltivata a

piante verdi

however: tuttavia

to huddle: raggomitolarsi contro qualcuno

to improve: migliorare

lot: destino

to mirror: rispecchiare

over-farming: sfruttamento eccessivo del terreno da coltivazione intensiva

Resettlement: reinserimento

sensitive: sensibile

shared: condiviso

tire: pneumatico

top-notch: eccellente, di prim'ordine

to wield: maneggiare

embedded in the nation’s shared visual history of the Depression.

The most famous photograph that has become known as “Migrant Mother” is one of a series of photographs that Dorothea Lange took of Florence Owens Thompson and her children in February or March of 1936 in Nipomo, California. In 1960, Lange gave this account of the experience:

“I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history.

She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat there with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it”. (From: *Popular Photography*, Feb. 1960).

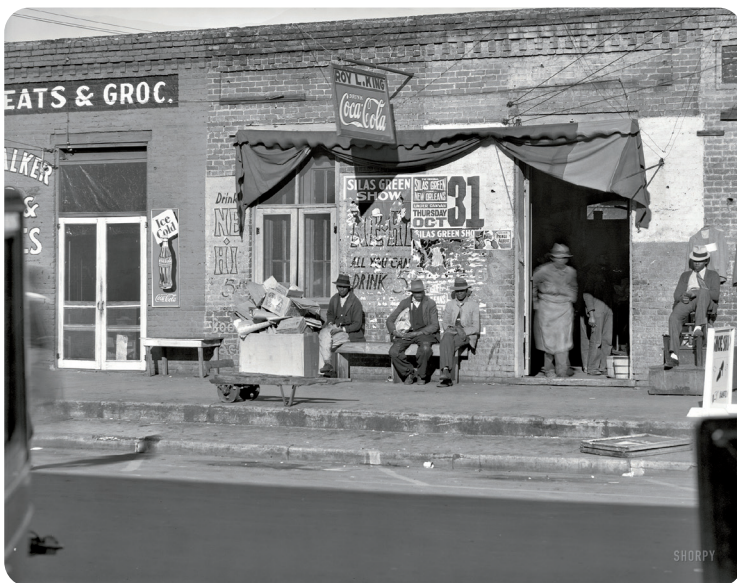
The images were made using a Graflex camera. The original negatives were 4x5” film. It is not possible to determine on the basis of the negative numbers (which were assigned later at the Resettlement Administration) the order in which the photographs were taken.

1a  Decide if the following sentences are true or false.

- a. The Resettlement Administration (RA) was an agency created during the New Deal.
- b. Stryker wasn’t interested in technicalities.
- c. Evans wanted to promote the New Deal through his work.
- d. Evans only took photos of people.
- e. Lange used a Graflex for one of her very well-known pictures.
- f. Evans and Lange’s assignment was to produce images that met the project’s goal: alerting America about the condition of the rural poor during the Depression.
- g. Stryker believed in improvisation as far as documenting the Depression was concerned.
- h. Both Evans and Lange failed to capture the despair of the time.

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1b Now correct the false sentences.



Walter Evans. *Sidewalk scene in Selma, Alabama (1935)*