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Composition

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Farm Security Administration Photography:

Documenting the Great Depression

While one quarter of the population was out of work and dust clouds were sweeping the nation, nearly two dozen photographers were traveling individually by train, car and foot. Employed by the New Deal's Farm Security Administration, they were photographing the nation's struggling rural farmers, sharecroppers, and cattlemen. Their goal was two-fold: to convince Americans of the need for programs to fight rural poverty and to take photographs that people would ponder a century later. Despite working under strict management and on a tight schedule, the photographers captured images that offer immense insight into a difficult time. The Farm Security Administration photographs illustrate the depth of poverty during the Great Depression, the need for federal government assistance, and the effects of the New Deal in alleviating rural poverty.

Dire economic circumstances brought about the Farm Security Administration. In October 1929 as the stock market crashed and a drought destroyed western crops, rising numbers of people were unemployed and living below the poverty line. Throughout the 1920s, the stock market had become America's "get rich quick" option, but now the value of stocks plunged. Unemployment immediately soared, and homelessness consequently rose. In the West, drought ravaged farmlands were soon covered by dust. Crops were destroyed and families lost their livelihoods. As a result of the failing economy, American life changed. Unemployed city

dwellers took shelter in Hoovervilles, makeshift homeless shelters, and many former farmers became migrant workers. A new era, the Great Depression, had begun. After he was elected in 1932, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt set out to improve the deteriorating economy and to relieve the economic hardship. He created the New Deal, a series of relief efforts intended to help bring about recovery in different sectors of the economy and of the nation.

In 1935 Congress passed legislation which created the Resettlement Administration, renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937 (Depression 3). The Farm Security Administration was one of the key New Deal programs established to help the rural poor. Leaders of the program believed that “government intervention could provide the cure to the nation’s agricultural ills” (Nordeman). Among its responsibilities was the task of using photography to tell the story of the Great Depression in the United States. Under the direction of Roy Stryker, head of the Historical Section, the goal of the program was “to explain rural depression to the urban poor and to herald the achievements of the New Deal in fighting poverty” (Depression 3). Stryker eventually hired a staff of twenty employees to fill several categories of photos (“Every”). There were “Hard Times” photos of struggling families, “Farming and Sharecropping” images featuring barren land, dead crops and once prospering farmers, “Land” pictures highlighting environmental factors such as erosion and poor soil conditions, and “Black Images” illustrating the plight of landless and impoverished African Americans. He was very explicit in what he thought needed to be shown to the American people. For example, in one of his letters requesting new images Stryker asked, “How do people spend their evenings-show this at varied income levels” (Akmakjian 4). These categories provided a comprehensive picture of the rural poverty of the era, particularly in the South and West.

While Stryker's main goal was to help struggling rural families, he was also looking toward the future and working to create a successful photograph collection. The photographers were told to look for "the kinds of things that a scholar 100 years from now is going to wonder about" (Akmakjian 4). Dorothea Lange was once sent to the South in search of images that showed, "the South had inadequate educational and religious facilities" (Ohrn 5). This very specific assignment was typical of Stryker's approach. It demonstrates his careful organization and his belief that the images recorded by his employees would convince the government to help the rural poor. Whenever they entered a new community, Stryker expected his employees to get to know the subjects and to understand not just what, but who, they were photographing. This technique created memorable images. Stryker's views, organization, and suggestions produced an invaluable historical record and helped many photographers achieve lasting reputations.

Two of the most influential photographers of the Great Depression were Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. Lange took some of the most iconic photographs of the Depression era while employed by the Farm Security Administration. Stryker described Lange as a "photograph investigator" (Ohrn) because she did more than just snap photos. Lange went in search of good images and had an uncanny ability to "portray her subjects as nobler than their current conditions" (Oshinsky). This ability is evident in her famous photo, "Migrant Mother," in which Florence Thompson, the mother, is described by a historian as "representing the spirit of America itself" (Oshinsky). Few photographers could have, with the same setting and subject, achieved the same effect as Lange. Walker Evans also established his reputation through his Farm Security Administration works. His images and skill nearly match Lange's, yet his style was uniquely his own. Evans wandered almost aimlessly throughout the Southwest, photographing scenes that captured his interest (Images 28), most of which were "Hard Times"

scenarios which helped make the case for New Deal assistance. One of his most memorable photos is of a struggling family entitled “Bud Fields and His Family,” an image of nearly naked farmers in their decrepit house. This photograph is not as sharp as Lange’s, but it, like “Migrant Mother,” helped “introduce Americans to America” (“Every”). Despite their different styles, Evans’ and Lange’s works were influential in guiding the New Deal’s poverty relief policies.

Arthur Rothstein is a less celebrated yet equally significant photographer of the era. He is known for plain, documentary images. “Fleeing the Dust Storm,” a “hallmark image of the Farm Security Administration” (Nordeman) and perhaps Rothstein’s most well known work, shows the severity of Midwestern conditions. It was images like these that shocked urban viewers and convinced them of the need for New Deal programs. Other Rothstein images illustrate the personal efforts of the Farm Security Administration staff. These photographs show government agents speaking to farmers about their land while standing on the barren soil that was typical of the Dust Bowl (Nordeman). Images like these informed the American people of the critical involvement of the Farm Security Administration staff.

Photographers let their subjects know that the images would aid officials in determining how to help the poor and struggling. The people in Farm Security Administration photographs were happy to be pictured because they hoped it would bring attention to their situation so that help might eventually come. In an era before television, photographs were helpful to policy makers in Washington, D.C. in part because they “seem[ed] to convey reality without the mediation of an artist or interpreter” (“Every”). They allowed people to see the true circumstances without bias. Lange preferred not to identify herself as a government employee because she wanted her subjects to behave naturally. When necessary however, she explained to her subjects that “people back in Washington wanted to know what their problems were so that

steps could be taken toward solving them” (Ohrn 69). Evans took a similar approach. He found that if people knew what his job was, they were welcoming and happy to help. The assistance and cooperation of subjects was vital to producing powerful images and ultimately a successful program and historical record.

In an effort to spread information about conditions in which many Americans lived, Farm Security Administration photographs were displayed in art exhibitions, magazines, and government publications. Stryker was very proud of the collection and tried desperately to get the images published. He distributed them to magazines such as *Life*, *Look* and *Survey Graphic*, all of which were popular with wealthy Americans (Cohen XXV). At times, especially when people doubted the value of New Deal programs, *Life* featured “Hard Times” images (Guimond 112). The categories, however, were not displayed evenly. Since the United States was a nation with tremendous racial prejudices, “Black Images” were rarely published. In the Farm Security Administration’s first traveling show only one of the forty photographs was a “Black Image” (Natanson 217), despite the fact that “Black Images” constituted 7% of the collection (67). Government publications also included Farm Security Administration photographs. A few were utilized in the First Annual Report and at a Capitol Hill budget meeting (Cohen xxvi). The circulation of the images in society was instrumental in the effort to secure the popular support needed to develop New Deal poverty aid programs.

As the Farm Security Administration grew and developed, its work began to have an impact. In 1937, Congress passed the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act. This act secured an \$85 million loan to assist farmers in becoming more independent (Watkins 296). Such legislation alleviated the worst of the dire conditions for people like the farmers who Lange, Evans, and Rothstein had documented. With these successes behind them, the theme and purpose of the

Farm Security Administration's photography collection changed to some extent. The goal of the program had always been to have photographs that were disheartening so that they would stimulate a response. However, with foreclosure rates stabilizing and the economy beginning to turn around, this was no longer as necessary.

Farm Security Administration photographs took on a new light in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In what some people saw as a shift toward propaganda, images appeared to be advertising the United States and its virtues. The photographers captured scenes which displayed the country as one of promise (Guimond 139). The willingness of migrant workers to work is demonstrated in hopeful images. Stryker told his photographers, "We must have at once, pictures of men, women, children who appear as if they really believe in the U.S. Get people with a little spirit. Too many in our file now paint the U.S. as an old person's home and that just about everyone is too old to work and too malnourished to care what happens" (Natnason 60). At Stryker's request, Farm Security Administration images became more optimistic. Russell Lee, another photographer, took an image of a couple in their farm house, which they had paid for with a Farm Security Loan. The message is clear; this couple is still poor, but they are slowly getting back on their feet, with help from the federal government (Nordeman). Lee's couple was just one example of many families recorded by Farm Security Administration photographers across the country. This shift to more optimistic photography reflected improvements in the economy and in the growing optimism of the people.

The efforts of the Farm Security Administration and other New Deal programs helped the United States begin the process of recovering from the Great Depression. Farmers' situations were brought to people's attention and they were rectified through increased loans as well as other means. Due to powerful photographs like "Migrant Mother," conditions in migrant labor

camps improved. Government efforts transformed many of the ditch camps and lean-to tents into relatively clean and safe shacks. The photographs captured the era and New Deal programs in action, in order to continue their legacy today (Cohen xxvi).

The Farm Security Administration performed a great service in demonstrating the depth of Depression era poverty. Parts of the collection were regulated and planned, but the realism of the images is apparent. This photographic file would not have been of such large scale without Stryker's demanding attitude and attention. People today would have little understanding of the true depth of the situation in the Great Depression without this New Deal program. These talented photographers used their skills to present their subjects with dignity while emphasizing their poor working and living conditions. The Farm Security Administration photography is of unbelievable scale and offers a valuable visual history of the depth of poverty of the Great Depression.

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