



# **"This Great Nation Will Endure" Photographs of the Great Depression**

September 12, 2004 - July 17, 2005

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum

**Cover:**

Mother and baby of family on the road, Tulelake, Siskiyou County, California.

Dorothea Lange, September 1939

FSAFDRL 049

**“This Great Nation Will Endure”  
Photographs of the Great Depression**

**September 12, 2004 - July 17, 2005  
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum  
Hyde Park, New York**

Sponsored by the  
Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute  
with additional funding provided by  
The Dyson Foundation  
and the Wallace Genetic Foundation



Janet Ross, *Portrait of William J. vanden Heuvel*, oil on canvas, 2004.

The Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum dedicates its new special gallery to Ambassador William J. vanden Heuvel. So named, the gallery serves as perpetual public recognition of Ambassador vanden Heuvel's outstanding leadership in the construction of the Henry A. Wallace Center and the renovation of the Roosevelt Library and Museum. A new portrait by Janet Ross hangs at the entrance to the William J. vanden Heuvel Gallery.

# Forward

With *“This Great Nation Will Endure”*: Photographs of the Great Depression, we dedicate our new gallery for special exhibitions to the co-chairman of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, William J. vanden Heuvel. We think this topic is particularly appropriate as the dedicatory exhibit because it speaks directly to Ambassador vanden Heuvel’s deep personal admiration for Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, which is rooted in his own family’s struggles in Rochester, New York in the early 1930s.

It is also fitting that this exhibit celebrates the photographic work of the “Historical Section” of the Farm Security Administration, part of the New Deal Department of Agriculture. Our new visitor and education center, which opened to the public in November 2003, is named for Henry A. Wallace, who served in the Roosevelt administration as secretary of agriculture (1933-40), vice president (1941-45), and secretary of commerce (1945).

We are grateful to the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute for funding this exhibition through the special endowment that the Board established to support exhibitions in the William J. vanden Heuvel Gallery. Additional support was generously provided by the Wallace Genetic Foundation and The Dyson Foundation.

I hope you enjoy the exhibit and the new gallery. Most of all, I hope that as you spend time here in our museum, you find yourself inspired—as I always am—by the American spirit of fearlessness, endurance, and optimism of the Roosevelt era.



Cynthia M. Koch  
Director  
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum

# **“This Great Nation Will Endure”**

## **Photographs of the Great Depression**

For those born after the 1930s, the Great Depression is something that can be visualized only through photography and film. Certain images have come to define our view of that uncertain time: an anxious migrant mother with her three small children; a farmer and his sons struggling through a dust storm; a family of sharecroppers gathered outside their spartan home. Reproduced repeatedly in books and films, these photographs are icons of an era.

Remarkably, many of these familiar images were created by one small government agency established by Franklin Roosevelt: the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Between 1935 and 1943, FSA photographers produced nearly eighty thousand pictures of life in Depression-era America. This remains the largest documentary photography project of a people ever undertaken.

Founded to document rural poverty, the FSA photo unit later expanded to include small town and urban subjects. Its rich files contain everything from sharecroppers and migrant workers to miners, schoolchildren, tenement dwellers, church members, factory workers, small merchants and fairgoers.

This exhibition features nearly two hundred FSA photographs. Each provides a unique window into the varied lives of Depression-era Americans. Together, they affirm FDR’s determined



President Roosevelt visits a farmer who is receiving a drought relief grant, Mandan, North Dakota.

Arthur Rothstein, August 1936

FSAFDRL 001

# The Great Plains and the Southwest

The most enduring image of rural America during the Great Depression is one of dust and human migration. This image was formed in the nation's heartland, where the people of the Great Plains and Southwest suffered both natural and economic disasters during the 1930s.

Decades of intensive farming and inattention to soil conservation had left this region ecologically vulnerable. A long drought that began in the early 1930s triggered a disaster. The winds that sweep across the plains carried away its dry, depleted topsoil in enormous "dust storms." Dramatic and frightening, the dust storms turned day into night as they destroyed farms. The hardest hit area—covering parts of Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle—was nicknamed the "Dust Bowl."

FSA photographers recorded the hardships that drought, economic depression and low crop prices created throughout the Great Plains and Southwest. They documented the plight of farm families forced to abandon the land and join the ranks of migrant workers toiling for low wages on distant commercial farms. The migrant flow out of the region included people from cities and small towns and farm laborers who'd been replaced by motorized farm machinery.

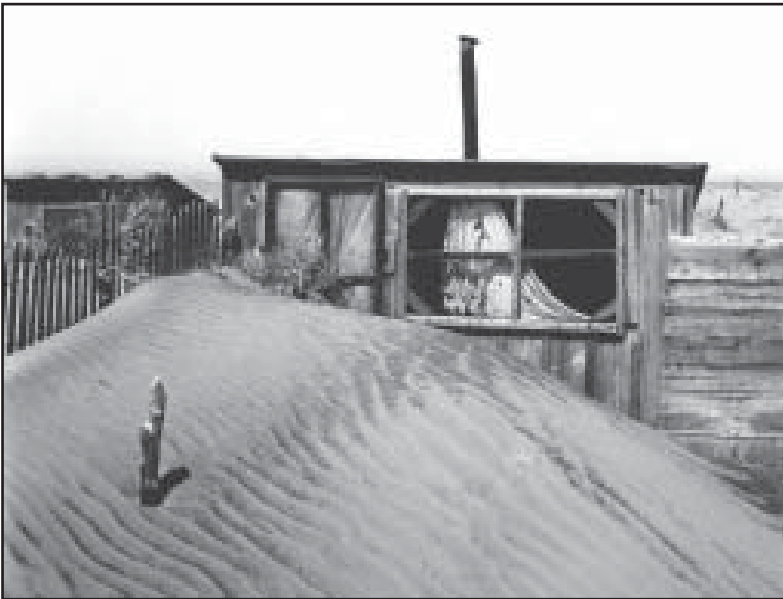


Children of agricultural day laborers camped by the roadside near Spiro, Oklahoma. There were no beds and no protection from the profusion of flies.





Transient Mexican worker's family from Texas. East Grand Forks, Minnesota.



Sand piled up in front of an outhouse on a farm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

## California and the Far West

For thousands of struggling rural people in the Great Plains and Southwest, California represented hope. During the 1910s and 1920s, some began traveling to California and other Far Western states in search of work. When the Depression hit, news of jobs picking crops on the state's large commercial farms swelled the migration. Hundreds of thousands of people packed their belongings into cars and trucks and headed west.

Most found more hardship at the end of their long journey. The new arrivals, dubbed "Oakies" or "Arkies," often struggled to find employment. Wages were low and living conditions abysmal. Many migrants were crowded into shanty towns or squalid "ditchback camps"—unsanitary housing located along irrigation ditches.

The Farm Security Administration tried to assist migrant farm workers by creating clean residential camps with running water and simple, sturdy living quarters. The camps were organized democratically and governed by the residents. They became islands of stability for migrants enduring grinding poverty and dislocation. In John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family spends time in a government-run migrant camp.



Unemployed family from the Rio Grande Valley, Texas, camped on a river bottom near Holtville, California.

Dorothea Lange, March 1937

FSAFDRL



Japanese mother and daughter, agricultural workers near Guadalupe, California.



Labor contractor's crew picking peas, Nampa, Idaho.

# The South

Long before the Great Depression, the South was marked by deep poverty. Largely rural and agricultural, it was home to millions of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In exchange for cash rent (or, for sharecroppers, a portion of the crop), they farmed the fields of large landowners.

Even in good times, life for these workers was harsh, with little hope for the future. The Depression—and, ironically, some New Deal programs—deepened their economic plight. To increase sagging crop prices, the government paid farmers to reduce production. Large landowners chose to evict thousands of sharecropper and tenant families from unplanted land. The growing use of gas-powered farm machines eliminated the need for many tenant farmers.

The region's large African American population carried the heaviest burden. In 1930 more than eighty percent of American blacks lived in the South. Jim Crow segregation laws and the legacy of slavery forced them to endure poverty, discrimination and racial violence.

FSA photographers captured the varied worlds of black and white farm workers throughout the South. They also explored the region's mill towns and cities.



Sam Nichols, tenant farmer, Boone County, Arkansas.



Untitled [Pulaski County, Arkansas].



Children in bedroom of their home, Charleston, West Virginia. Their mother has tuberculosis. Father works on WPA [Works Progress Administration].

# The Northeast and Midwest

The FSA photography unit is best known for its images of rural life in the South, the Great Plains and the West. But in thousands of images FSA photographers also created a vivid record of life in the farms, towns and cities of the Northeast and Midwest.

Agency photographers documented mining towns in Pennsylvania, slum housing in Chicago and Washington D.C. and rural life in Ohio, New England and upstate New York. They studied the lives of migrant farm workers in Michigan and the homes of packinghouse employees in New Jersey. Their work offers glimpses into everything from unemployment lines and child labor to social life and leisure activities.



Harlem newsboy, New York, New York.



Graveyard, houses and steel mill, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.



Untitled [Migrant fruit workers from Arkansas in Berrien County,

## The Photo Project Goes to War

With the outbreak of World War II, the focus of the FSA photo project began to change. As the nation's attention turned from economic and social issues at home to the war against Germany, Italy and Japan, the photo unit reflected this shift. Roy Stryker encouraged his photographers to take more "positive" images of American life to bolster America's war effort. And while FSA photographers continued to document poverty and inequality, they were told to increase their output of photographs featuring reassuring images of American life. Pictures of defense factories, war workers and patriotic activities on the home front also began entering the FSA files.

In October 1942, the FSA photo unit became part of the new Office of War Information (OWI), created to direct America's wartime propaganda efforts. The following year the unit formally went out of existence. Director Roy Stryker left government and a few FSA photographers went to work for the OWI. They left behind a vast archive of nearly eighty thousand photographs (and 68,000 unprinted negatives).



Flag Day, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



# The Photographers



## **Roy Emerson Stryker (1893-1975)**

### **RA/FSA, 1935-1943**

Roy Stryker was a 42-year-old economics instructor at Columbia University when he accepted Rexford Tugwell's offer to direct the Resettlement Administration's new photographic unit. He stayed on when the RA became part of the Farm Security Administration in 1937. Stryker led a diverse group of photographers who pursued assignments around the country. He encouraged his staff to read about the regions and people they were photographing and often gave them "shooting scripts" describing assignment themes and subjects. A hardheaded and savvy bureaucrat, Stryker fought to preserve the photo unit's funding and keep it alive. He remained head of the unit until it was dissolved in 1943. Before resigning from government service, Stryker arranged for the preservation of the FSA photo collection at the Library of Congress.

## **Photographers featured in this exhibit:**



## **Jack Delano (1914-1997)**

### **FSA, 1940-1942**

Jack Delano emigrated from Kiev to Philadelphia as a child. While studying painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Delano took up photography and worked as a commercial photographer in his spare time. In 1939, Delano produced a photographic series on coal miners for the New Deal's Federal Arts Program. The photographs convinced Roy Stryker to hire him in 1940. An FSA assignment in Puerto Rico led to a lifelong fascination with the island. Delano moved there after World War II service in the Army Air Corps. During his eclectic career, Delano worked as a photographer, composer, creator of children's books and director of Puerto Rico's government radio and



## **Walker Evans (1903-1975)**

### **RA, 1935-1937**

Legendary photographer Walker Evans shot many of his most memorable images while working for Roy Stryker's photo unit. Born into a well-to-do Midwestern family, Evans left college to pursue an artist's life. In 1928 he turned to photography. By the mid-1930s he had exhibited his work at New York's Museum of Modern Art. He was among the first photographers hired by Stryker. Evans created his most unforgettable work in the South. During a leave from the photo unit, he and writer James Agee spent a month living with three Alabama sharecropper families. Their 1941 book about these families, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, featured photographs by Evans. Evans later worked for *Time* and *Fortune* magazines and taught at Yale University.



### **Dorothea Lange (1895-1965)**

#### **RA/FSA, 1935-1939**

Dorothea Lange was born in Hoboken, New Jersey and endured a difficult childhood. She developed an early fascination with photography and learned her craft in New York. In 1918, she moved to San Francisco and established herself as a portrait photographer. During the Great Depression, Lange abandoned studio portraiture and began documenting the lives of struggling Americans. In 1935 she joined Roy Stryker's photo unit. Though Lange's work includes many of the FSA's most memorable photographs, she had an unsettled career at the agency. She sometimes clashed with Stryker and was terminated during a budget crunch in 1939. During World War II, Lange worked for other government agencies. She later photographed for *Life* and other publications.



### **Russell Lee (1903-1986)**

#### **RA/FSA, 1936-1942**

Russell Lee was educated as a chemical engineer and didn't take up photography until his early thirties. In 1935 he purchased his first camera and began experimenting with it. After attending an exhibition of FSA photographs, Lee thought, "I ought to meet these people." With help from Ben Shahn, Lee became a member of the photo unit's staff. He worked at FSA for over six years, spending extended periods in far-flung locations. During World War II, Lee served as a photographer in the Army's Air Transport Command. He later pursued assignments in industrial photography for the government and private industry and taught photography at the University of Missouri and University of Texas.



### **Carl Mydans (1907-2004)**

#### **RA, 1935-1936**

Carl Mydans was a print journalist before he developed a career in photography. After graduating from college in 1930, he worked as a reporter in New York City. He sometimes carried a camera on assignments. Eventually, he became a freelance photographer. In 1935 Mydans joined Roy Stryker's photo unit. During his brief time with the unit, he pursued assignments in the South and Northeast. In 1936 Mydans joined the staff of a new photo magazine—*Life*. During World War II he worked as a "photo reporter" for *Life* in Europe and Asia. Mydans later created memorable photographs of the Korean War and had a distinguished international career in photojournalism.



### **Gordon Parks (1912- )**

#### **FSA, 1942-1943**

Gordon Parks joined the photo unit during its final years and was the group's only African American photographer. The Kansas native held a series of odd jobs before becoming a photographer. He was working as a fashion photographer and beginning to gain recognition for his documentary photography when he resolved to join the FSA. A foundation grant paid for his salary. In 1943 Parks joined the Office of War Information, where he created memorable photographs of the home front during World War II. He has forged a distinguished career as a photographer, painter, author, composer and pioneering black filmmaker. He lives in New York City.

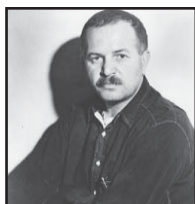


### **Arthur Rothstein (1915-1985)**

#### **RA/FSA, 1935-1940**

New York City native Arthur Rothstein first took up photography as a high school hobby. While an undergraduate at Columbia University, Rothstein met Roy Stryker, then an instructor in the economics department. Stryker invited the twenty-year-old to join him when he moved to Washington D.C. in 1935 to start the FSA photo project.

Rothstein created the project's first darkroom facility and became one of FSA's most productive photographers. In 1940 Rothstein joined the staff of *Look* magazine. After wartime service as a U.S. Army Signal Corps photographer, Rothstein returned to *Look*, where he worked until the magazine folded in 1971. He was later director of photography

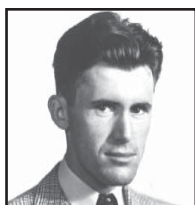


### **Ben Shahn (1898-1969)**

#### **RA/FSA, 1935-1938**

Though best remembered as a painter, muralist and graphic artist, Ben Shahn also produced extraordinary photography for the FSA. A Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, Shahn worked as a lithographer while developing his artistic talents. He took college and art classes at night and had his first one-man show in New York in 1930. Shahn's

art expressed his deeply felt social liberalism. During the 1930s he created murals and posters for New Deal agencies. Shahn took up photography as a tool "to make notes for future paintings." Yet his photographic eye was perceptive, and from 1935 to 1938 he made distinctive photographs for the photo unit. Shahn did little photography after leaving the FSA. His distinguished artistic career continued until his death in 1969.



### **John Vachon (1914-1975)**

#### **RA/FSA, 1936-1943**

John Vachon was an unemployed, 22-year-old graduate student when he applied for a messenger's job at Roy Stryker's photo unit. Vachon got the job. Several months later he borrowed a camera "just to see what I could do with it." Though he had no previous photographic experience, Vachon's natural talent convinced Stryker to give the

young man small photo assignments. The Minnesota native became one of FSA's most prolific photographers. Stryker, he recalled, "made a photographer out of me." Vachon remained with the photo unit until it was disbanded in 1943. After military service during World War II, he began a long photographic career at *Look* magazine.



### **Marion Post Wolcott (1910-1990)**

#### **FSA, 1938-1941**

The daughter of a prosperous New Jersey family, Marion Post got her first lessons in photography while studying abroad in Vienna in 1933. Later, while working as a teacher in New York, Post spent her spare time taking photographs. She began to sell pictures to magazines and eventually freelanced for the Associated Press and

*Fortune* magazine. Ultimately, she became a full-time photographer. Post joined the FSA photo unit in 1938. She photographed in the South, Northeast and West. In 1941 Post married Lee Wolcott, a federal agriculture official, and resigned from the FSA. Though she occasionally took photographs in later years, she never again devoted herself full-time

A checklist of photographs from this exhibition is available in print and online at [www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu). Museum quality prints on archival paper maybe ordered from the checklist, at the New Deal Store in the Henry A. Wallace Center, or by calling the general information number, 1-800-FDR-VISIT (1-800-337-8474).

This exhibit was conceived under the direction of Herman Eberhardt, curator, and the staff of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. It was designed and fabricated by People+Machines of New York, New York.



To become a member of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, or to make a contribution to the endowment supporting exhibitions in the William J. vanden Heuvel Gallery, please call (845) 486-1150.



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