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Laura VanDemark
James Madison University

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DOROTHEA LANGE

Capturing the Reality of the Great Depression and the New Deal Era

Laura VanDemark



ABSTRACT

Dorothea Lange created some of America's most enduring and influential images as she documented the reality of the Great Depression in the 1930s and early 40s for the Farm Security Administration. Featured in government publications, printed on postage stamps, and used by social activists, Lange's photographs helped define the era and the emerging field of photojournalism. This paper examines Lange's motives and process as she tried to capture her subjects' most intimate moments without exploiting their lives. It draws on Lange's field notebooks and interviews and surveys the existing body of scholarship to assess how Lange's life impacted her work and how her work impacted both documentary photography and America's historical memory.

Everyone views history through a different lens, but Dorothea Lange created history through her camera lens. One of the most prominent and influential photographers for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), 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 FSA used 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 during the Great Depression and New Deal era to touch viewers on a national scale.¹

Born Dorothea Nutzhorn in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895, Lange explored the streets of New York City as a child 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 wounds. She suffered a permanent

limp from polio and faced later health problems due to the disease: Lange's only self-portrait depicted her twisted foot, a result of the polio that challenged her as a photographer.²



This self-portrait is untitled, but Lange used it as part of a photography class she taught in 1957 to demonstrate creative self-portraits that represented a person's struggles.

From 1914–1917, Lange attended the New York Training School for Teachers, and, in 1915, decided she wanted to be a photographer. Rather than attend 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,”³ 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.⁴

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 developed a more modern approach to portrait photography, making her subjects more relaxed with natural poses and no props.⁵

Lange's solo photography career began in San Francisco, where she set up a modest portrait studio. During this time,

1 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 1930s* (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 farmers 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 W. 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 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 Spirn, *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, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-dorothea-lange-11757#overview>.

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

3 “Pictorialism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified December 16, 2010, accessed November 12, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pictorialism>.

4 Charles Hagen, *American Photographers of the Great Depression*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 1; Mora and Brannan, 9, 14.

5 Hagen, Biography Section; Mora and Brannan, 13; “Pictorialism.”

she decided that a career in photography 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 learning the business as a photographer. Lange's involvement with government initiatives happened by chance when Paul Schuster Taylor, an economics professor at the University of California at Berkeley with a specialty in farm labor conditions in the United States, 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. Aside from Taylor's influence, Lange's switch to documentary photography was caused by two major factors: photographing paying patrons left her bored, and the Great Depression allowed photographers to visually document the economic downturn and its impact on the American people.⁶

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 increasing number of women working outside the home challenged social gender norms, and social tensions rose as the Ku Klux Klan returned to national attention. Additionally, Prohibition and widespread labor struggles for better wages and hours caused major economic changes in the 1920s. The post-World War I decline in production hit farmers the hardest as government-imposed wartime 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 Herbert Hoover did not believe that the Great Depression would last. A proponent of trickle-down economics, he also did not see it as the responsibility of the government to provide financial help to populations hit hardest by the collapse, often farmers and sharecroppers. 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. Increased crop production for World War I along with improper cultivation and planting methods resulted in the Dust Bowl, a term used to describe the severe drought in the

1930s. The drought and dust storms affected much of the Great Plains and some major cities. While the impact was widespread, no group was hit harder than farmers. These conditions led to the need for 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.⁷ President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal focused on farmers in order to provide support and stabilize the US food supply.⁸



A Young Farmer, Resettled on the Bosque Farms in New Mexico, Valencia County, New Mexico. 1935.

Lange's desire to capture this social unrest led to her first photographic publication in *Survey Graphic*, a social welfare periodical. In September 1936, *Survey Graphic* published an article written by Taylor, accompanied by Lange's photographs in an effort to draw awareness to conditions of migrant farmers. The article and photographs titled "From the Ground Up" outlined the efforts of the Resettlement Agency and argued for three US government actions that could solve the problem: constructing camps for migrant workers, resettling farmers to cooperative farms, and radically reforming land practices. 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, barren fields.

⁷ Garraty, 110-112.

⁸ "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/>; 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 dramatically increased the role of the United States government in the everyday lives of Americans.

⁶ Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

The six images in Lange's *Survey Graphic* photo essay, accompanied by descriptive captions that included identity, occupation, age, and ethnicity of the subjects, sought to illustrate the ideas that Taylor discussed in the article. They both worked to put faces to the statistics of government programs in New Mexico and California. Another photograph, *The Demonstration Gardens of the El Monte Subsistence Homesteads in California*, captured an effort to encourage sustainable farming practices. 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.⁹



The Demonstration Gardens of the El Monte Subsistence Homesteads in California, El Monte, California. 1935.

One such effort President Roosevelt implemented to counteract the Great Depression was the Resettlement Administration, which would eventually become the FSA as part of the New Deal enacted shortly after his inauguration in 1933. The Resettlement Administration sought to resolve tenant farming and sharecropping issues which often left the land unable to support crops. Because farmers did not own the land and were paid based on how much they produced in the short term, unsustainable farming methods were used. 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 to help farmers buy land, soil conservation, and resettlement projects with communal farms and camps for migrant workers. The Resettlement Administration later shifted its focus and was adapted to become the FSA. It helped farmers create sustainable farming plans, demonstrated correct usage of agricultural equipment, and promoted co-ops with other farmers to share supplies, livestock, and machinery.¹⁰

9 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): 348.

10 "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/deppwwii/newdeal/>; Hagen, 2.

As part of the Resettlement Administration, the Historical Section oversaw documentary photography starting in 1935. It moved under the FSA after its creation in 1937. The Historical Section intended to use photography "not just to record facts, but to make a difference." FSA staffer Edwin Rosskam explained that "Every 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 FSA worksites in order to visually represent the impact of the public works projects.

For Dorothea Lange, *Survey Graphic* provided an important opportunity for name recognition as a new documentary photographer, but the magazine was also the beginning of government usage of photography to document, promote, and improve public works projects organized by the Resettlement Administration and, eventually, the FSA. The photo essay set standards for future government publications as it did not solely document the social issues of the time; it also illustrated the ability of government programs to improve farming conditions. Taylor's *Survey Graphic* article caught the eye of Roy Stryker and directly resulted in Lange's employment with the FSA. Lange worked at the FSA consistently from 1935-1937 and sporadically from 1937-1942.¹¹

Lange's photography process fit well with Roy Stryker and the goals of FSA 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"¹² in order to counter the view of photography as an art that could be easily manipulated. To gain federal funding, Stryker knew that he could not focus on the artistic aspect of photography but rather on its ability to provide visual evidence. These images served as proof in a federal investigation of the New Deal programs, which imposed special procedures for the photographers to follow in order to ensure they were objective evidence. FSA photographers never recorded names in order to protect the identity of the subjects and were not allowed to send the subjects a copy of the image. The photographers had no control over when, where, or how often a photograph was published because it was legally federal property and could be used as government officials wished.¹³

11 Gordon, *Aperture: Masters of Photography*, introduction; Hagen, biography section.

12 Dorothea Lange, interview by Suzanne B. Riess, *Regional Oral History Office*, University of California Bancroft Library, 1968, http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/narrators/lange_dorothea.html; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

13 Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 240, 242.

At times, Roy Stryker censored Lange's captions to make them politically correct or shortened them for publishing reasons. The caption "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" to avoid the heated tensions between whites and African Americans. Lange resented the fact that many of her captions were changed; however, because she worked for the government, they were property of the FSA to publish and distribute as they saw fit. Lange and Stryker often argued over the FSA's use and portrayal of her images, but, in the end, Stryker had the final say. Still, Stryker maintained the integrity of most of Lange's images and worked to make sure they told the full story, which was the purpose of the Historical Section. The Historical Section wished to tell stories of conditions through photographs, and that was exactly what Lange accomplished.¹⁴

Lange's work for the FSA included the majority of her most well-known photographs. These photographs provide a valuable 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 FSA.

Documenting life in the world outside her studio allowed Lange to capture people in their world, not hers. 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 FSA. This type of photography defied her classical portrait training and the photography norms of the time. Most historians believe "photojournalism" emerged out of the work of FSA photographers during the Great Depression. In her journals, Lange explained that this new form of photography posed its own difficulties as "there was no such thing as photojournalism."¹⁵

For historians, Lange's field journals alongside her photographs provide rich primary sources when studying her work, but they also provide important information about how Lange conducted herself as a professional photographer. Lange placed great 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."¹⁶ Lange's incredible attention to detail made her photographs

truly represent the time, place, and people as she spent weeks rewriting her field notes and captions to represent the images just right. Lange believed "a photographer should be, above all, a promoter of consequences,"¹⁷ and she used her captions to document what the photograph showed and its importance. Her desire to have her photographs demonstrate consequences was central to the function of the Historical Section of the FSA as they worked to document the consequences of poor farming habits and unfortunate environmental conditions.¹⁸

Lange's most popular image of San Francisco during the Great Depression, titled *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.¹⁹ She did not immediately know that this photograph would become an iconic image of the efforts, such as breadlines to relieve famine, to counteract the conditions of the Great Depression. However, Lange believed that this picture "did not take anything away from anyone: their privacy, their dignity, or their wholeness."²⁰ 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.



White Angel Breadline, San Francisco, California. 1933.

¹⁴ Dorothea Lange quoted in Elizabeth Partridge, *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013), 24.; Linda Gordon, interview by Steve Inskeep, NPR, April 28, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126289455>.

¹⁵ Partridge, 52.; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

¹⁶ Dorothea Lange quoted in Partridge, 62; Partridge, 24; Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 256.

¹⁷ Dorothea Lange quoted in Partridge, 62; Partridge, 24; Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 256.

¹⁸ Dorothea Lange quoted in Partridge, 62; Partridge, 24; Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 256.

¹⁹ Hagen, 1; Mora and Brannan, 9, 14.

²⁰ Dorothea Lange, interview by Suzanne B. Riess; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

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."²¹



Man Beside Wheelbarrow, San Francisco, California. 1934

Lange also captured the struggles of women in photographs like *Mending Stocking*. This photograph is incredibly intimate despite the fact that only the woman's legs and feet appear. The need to save money by making do with what one already had is exemplified in this seemingly simple composition. The mended runs in the stockings symbolize the role of women in trying to keep families from falling apart at a time when providing for a family continued to be increasingly challenging. Lange understood the struggles of these women, as she also had to make difficult decisions regarding her family and her career.²²

Lange's strong desire to tell the story of the people she photographed set her apart from other photographers. She believed her subjects' stories could be told only by talking to them and hearing their stories firsthand. As Lange



Mending Stockings, San Francisco, California. 1934.

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."²³ Much of Lange's later work, especially assignments for the FSA, focused on revealing conditions in the migrant camps.

Lange's work for the FSA was centered in California, where she photographed migrant farmer communities. Much of the FSA legislation worked to help migrant farmers find prosperous land where they could practice more sustainable 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 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.²⁴

²¹ Partridge, 52.

²² "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-depressioncreating-narrative-through-photography/>

²³ Dorothea Lange, interview by Suzanne B. Riess; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

²⁴ Mora and Brannan, 29.

Many families experienced similar necessary relocations which Lange captured in *Family Walking on Highway, Five Children . . .*.²⁵ The family pictured started in Idabel, Oklahoma, and walked 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 image, and the depth of field allowing viewers to see the family walking in a line, draws attention to how far they have walked, as the straight road appears endless. Additionally, by capturing the whole family in the frame, Lange highlighted their few possessions and forced relocation in hopes of finding food and jobs.²⁶



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



Family Walking on Highway, Five Children..., Pittsburg County, Oklahoma. 1938.

Daughter of Migrant Tennessee Coal Miner Living in American River Camp and *Family Walking on Highway, Five Children* illustrated the need for FSA programs. The migrant daughter in the photo 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 FSA programs to help migrant workers and served as visual evidence that even with work projects, funding for the FSA 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.

²⁵ Lange’s full title was “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.”

²⁶ Mora and Brannan, 27.



Tobacco Barns on the Stone Place, Person County, North Carolina. 1939.

Lange’s 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 served as records for the FSA as the sharecroppers explained the changes put in place by government work to prevent erosion. Lange noted that erosion remained an

²⁷ Lange and Spirn, 114-17; see Appendix.

issue that can be seen in her photographs of the fields. The sharecroppers 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 fields were in constant use. FSA initiatives, such as encouraging crop rotation and education about erosion prevention, targeted sharecroppers.

Lange also discussed the sharecroppers' living conditions. She noted that many had a 20-minute walk to get water and no "privy" (outhouse) 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 the house."²⁸



Destitute Peapickers in California; a 32 Year Old Mother with Seven Children, Nipomo, California. 1936. Often referred to as Migrant Mother.

While Lange's work photographing migrant farmers and sharecroppers provided important documentation for the FSA, no image captured the attention of America quite like *Migrant Mother*.²⁹ 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 feed her children.³⁰

In an interview for *Popular Photography*, Lange recalled her experience with Florence Owens 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 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 the family, she left the camp because she had captured "the essence of her assignment."³¹

Migrant Mother, 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 the image is most commonly attributed to Lange's focus on how it 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. *Migrant Mother's* popularity 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."³² As with some of her other images, Lange believed that the FSA's use of *Migrant Mother* decontextualized the situation and did not accurately represent the living conditions of Florence Owens Thompson.³³

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."³⁴ Lange knew what it was like to make sacrifices for her children, as her work often kept her away from home for

30 "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; Lange did not know the name of her subject because it was FSA policy to not take names in order to protect identity.

31 Dorothea Lange quoted in "Exploring Contexts: Migrant Mother."

32 Dorothea Lange, interview by Suzanne B. Riess; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

33 Dorothea Lange quoted in Partridge, 83. Historians have since criticized Lange for how she depicted Thompson, as well as for obscuring Thompson's identity as a Native American. These issues were not apparent to Lange, and she believed she was photographing a white, migrant mother.

34 Dorothea Lange, interview by Suzanne B. Riess; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

28 See Appendix A; Lange and Spirn, 114-117; Lange, "General Caption no. 19."

29 Lange's original full title for the image was "Destitute Pea Pickers in California; a 32 year old mother with seven children. February 1936."

weeks at a time. This image remains famous because Lange's photograph represents the struggle of a population much larger than just the "migrant mother."³⁵

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."³⁶

Lange's focus on the visual aesthetics of an image and the feeling the scene creates in viewers made her a truly groundbreaking documentary photographer. Her work set the tone for future documentary photographers, as she valued not just the message an image portrayed but how the people in her photograph were represented. She did not look to exploit the situations her subjects were in to demonstrate the conditions in a more dramatic manner. Coupled with her detailed field notes documenting conditions, Lange's unique ability to capture human beings' essence in still photographs convey the hardships of the Great Depression and New Deal era.

³⁵ Gordon, *Life Beyond Limits*, 239.

³⁶ Dorothea Lange, interview by Suzanne B. Riess; Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard Doud.

1495

North Carolina

GENERAL CAPTION NO. 19

DATE: July 5, 1939

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 field 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 ~~he~~ 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:

19971C ✓
 19974C ✓
 19993C ✓
 19995C ✓
 20200E ✓
 20249E ✓
 20258C ✓
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