

# DOCUMENTING AMERICA, 1935–1943

EDITED BY CARL FLEISCHHAUER AND BEVERLY W. BRANNAN

ESSAYS BY LAWRENCE W. LEVINE AND ALAN TRACHTENBERG

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS   Berkeley · Los Angeles · London  
in association with the Library of Congress

University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California  
University of California Press, Ltd., London, England  
© 1988 by  
The Regents of the University of California  
Printed in the United States of America  
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Documenting America,  
1935–1943/edited by Carl Fleischhauer and  
Beverly W. Brannan; essays by Lawrence W. Levine and  
Alan Trachtenberg.

p. cm.—(Approaches to American culture)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-520-06220-5 (alk. paper).

ISBN 0-520-06221-3 (pbk.)

1. United States—History—1933–1945—Pictorial  
works. 2. United States—Social conditions—  
1933–1945—Pictorial works. 3. Photography,  
Documentary—United States—History—20th century.  
I. Fleischhauer, Carl. II. Brannan, Beverly W.,  
1946– III. Levine, Lawrence W. IV. Trachtenberg,  
Alan. V. Series.

E806.D616 1988

973.917—dc19

87-24598

CIP

The authors gratefully acknowledge permission to re-  
produce the following images in this book:

Figure 12 (page 22): Courtesy of the Walker Evans estate.  
Figures 14, 19, 20, and 21 (pages 25 and 47): Copyright  
1938 by Archibald MacLeish. Copyright renewed 1966 by  
Archibald MacLeish. Reprinted by permission of  
Houghton Mifflin Company.

Figure 17 (page 36): LIFE © 1937 Time Inc. Reprinted  
with permission.

Figure 28 (page 67): Courtesy of Paul Appel, publisher,  
Mt. Vernon, N.Y. 10553.

Support for the publication of this book and the mount-  
ing of an associated exhibition was provided by the fol-  
lowing members of the National Association of  
Photographic Manufacturers: Eastman Kodak Company,  
GTE Products Corporation, Ilford Incorporated, and  
Schoeller Technical Papers, Incorporated.

The publishers wish to acknowledge with gratitude the  
contribution provided from the Art Book Fund of the  
Associates of the University of California Press, which  
is supported by a major gift of the Ahmanson Foundation.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IN THE 1930s AND 1940s

LAWRENCE W. LEVINE

We are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours. Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons' conditions or ideals.

*William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings"*<sup>1</sup>

One of the more elusive and difficult historical truths is that even in the midst of disaster life goes on and human beings find ways not merely of adapting to the forces that buffet them but often of rising above their circumstances and participating actively in the shaping of their lives. Only relatively recently have historians begun to comprehend the implications of Ralph Ellison's important questions concerning the history of Afro-Americans in the United States: "Can a people . . . live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs, why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?"<sup>2</sup> Even amid the extreme conditions of the Holocaust's concentration camps, human beings clung to life, to each other, to those creative acts that made it possible to preserve some semblance of their culture, their dignity, their sanity.

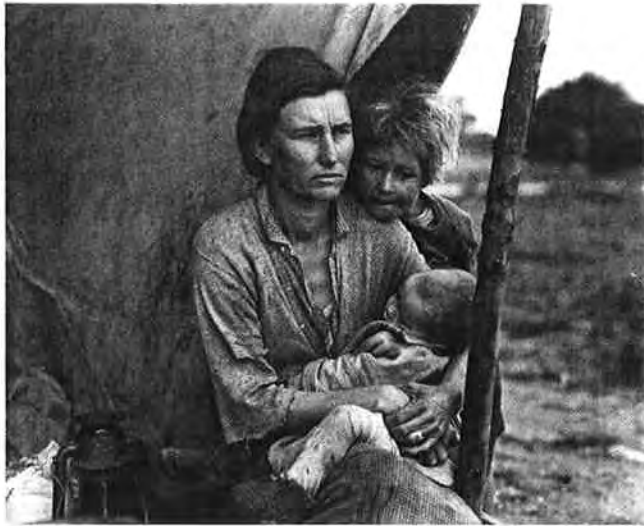
To say these things is not to minimize the importance or the impact of such phenomena as slavery, persecution, and economic travail. It is simply to assert that human beings are not wholly molded by their immediate experiences; they are the bearers of a culture which is not static and unbending but continually in a state of process, perennially the product of interaction between the past and the present. From the rarified perspective of power and decision making, which historians tend to chronicle and analyze most frequently, it is perhaps too easy to forget that all people, not just the movers and the shakers, bring something complex and enduring to their experiences and that they retain the capacity of affecting events as well as being affected by them, of changing the present as well as being changed by it, of acting as well as being acted upon.



1–6. *Migrant Mother*. These six images of thirty-two-year-old Florence Thompson and her children were made by Dorothea Lange in a migrant labor camp in Nipomo, California, March 1936. Figure 1 (top left) is from Paul S. Taylor, “Migrant Mother: 1936,” in *American West* 7, no. 3 (May 1970): 44.

The suffering of Depression America never approached the prolonged anguish of centuries of slavery or the intense horrors of the Holocaust, but that has not prevented us from searching for perfect victims during the 1930s as well as on the plantations and in the concentration camps. The images are familiar: Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” (lower right), one of the most widely reproduced and familiar photographs in our history, with its gaunt, haunted—and haunting—central figure and its frightened, helpless children, immediately captured the imagination of the Depression generation and has come to represent that generation to its descendants.<sup>3</sup> This appears to have been the sixth and final photograph Lange took of Florence Thompson and several of her daughters on a rainy March afternoon in 1936. In an earlier photograph in the series (lower left) Lange utilized not only people but things—a battered trunk and an empty pie plate—to symbolize homelessness and poverty.<sup>4</sup> Many of the other widely reproduced photographs by Lange and her colleagues were similar to “Migrant Mother” in subject matter and intent. For all of the undeniable power of these images, William Stott has commented upon how little of these people we actually see: “They come to us only in images meant to break our heart. They come helpless, guiltless as children and, though helpless, yet still unvanquished by the implacable wrath of nature—flood, drought and the indifference of their society. They come, Pare Lorentz said, ‘group after group of wretched human beings, starkly asking for so little, and wondering what they will get.’ Never are they vicious, never depraved, never responsible for their misery. And this, of course, was intentional.”<sup>5</sup>

Although images like these were and are among the best-known representations of the Depression, for some students of the thirties the very existence of other images, the very fact that the Resettlement Administration (RA) and Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers did not adhere inexorably to the victimization model, is troubling. Maurice Berger, the curator of a re-



cent exhibit of RA and FSA photographs at the Hunter College Art Gallery in New York City, for example, is uncomfortable with Arthur Rothstein's photo of a farmhand in Goldendale, Washington, in 1936 or Lange's photo of the wife and children of a tobacco sharecropper in Person County, North Carolina, in July 1939 (figures 7, 8). Utilizing the technique of shooting from below, "an angle that traditionally signifies stature and esteem," Rothstein, Berger charges, created a "metaphor of stability . . . a respect for hard labor and the dignity of toil." Lange's photo "similarly ignores the devastation [of the Depression]. Not only do the robust mother and son smile, but the children appear clean, well-fed, and neatly dressed." Images like this result in "weakening the effect of the depictions of abject poverty, racial unrest, crime, disease, and despair." The photos that most commend themselves to Berger are those of the faceless and the helpless. In his "Farmer sampling wheat in Central Ohio, Summer 1938" (figure 9), Ben Shahn "shoots the filthy and ragged farmer from above (a common device in his FSA work), short-circuiting metaphors of dignity. Bent over and completely anonymous, the farmer is captured from a perspective that underlines his position on the economic ladder." John Vachon's "Sick child, Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, January 1941" (figure 10) is even more effective: "Nestled in a heap of rags, old clothing and filth, the girl is too ill to respond to the photographer's intrusion; in the midst of detritus and decay, she lies unprotected. The viewer is left gasping at the utter desperation and perilousness of her condition. 'I cannot help her,' one thinks, 'but neither can she help herself.' . . . It is through trauma that the unstaged photograph manipulates most effectively."<sup>6</sup>

Photographic images, like statistics, do not lie, but like statistics the truths they communicate are elusive and incomplete. The statistical chaos that prevailed in the early years of the Depression concerning such fundamental matters as the number of men and women out of work confused contemporaries and continues to



7. Above: Farmhand near Goldendale, Washington, July 1936. Arthur Rothstein.



8. Right: The wife and children of a tobacco sharecropper on their front porch, Person County, North Carolina, July 1939. Dorothea Lange.

frustrate historians. As late as 1936 Roosevelt's chief welfare adviser, Harry Hopkins, conceded that his information on unemployment was not "adequate," and whether there were eight million or eleven million jobless depended on whose figures were consulted. Rather than being used as tools for understanding the nature of the economic devastation, unemployment figures became partisan weapons, manipulated to protect or assault political leaders, to defend or alter national and local policies. President Hoover ruthlessly slashed the latest unemployment figures that reached his desk, eliminating those workers he decided were only temporarily jobless and those he deemed not seriously bent on finding work. Hoover was a classic example of how ideology can mold facts to fit expectations. In the midst of figures that told of growing unemployment, privation, and the inability of local governments and agencies to cope with the crisis, Hoover could tell a delegation that came to him in June 1930 requesting immediate expansion of federally sponsored public works, "Gentlemen, you have come sixty days too late. The depression is over." He could insist incessantly that "our people have been protected from hunger and cold" and that "nobody is actually starving." He could proclaim that "the hoboes, for example, are better fed than they have ever been." And he could maintain, even years later, that the ubiquitous apple sellers who had quickly become a feature of city street corners represented not the unemployed but rather those who had "left their jobs for the more profitable one of selling apples."<sup>7</sup>

To this day, estimates of the number of unemployed during the Depression's nadir in 1933 differ, ranging from thirteen to sixteen million, though statistics provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Committee on Economic Security make it clear that by March of that year at least one out of every four American workers was jobless and that only about one-quarter of those were receiving



9. Above: Farmer sampling wheat in Central Ohio, Summer 1938. Ben Shahn.

10. Right: Sick child, Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, January 1941. John Vachon.

any relief, most of it grossly inadequate. But even these stark facts tell us too little. By 1933 the practice euphemistically referred to as work-sharing was widespread as employer after employer converted their workers into part-time employees. Thus while unemployment may have been the most widely dreaded condition, it was only the most extreme of the problems American workers faced. We may never know precisely how many of those who were working during the Depression had their hours—and pay—drastically reduced, but these figures indicating the number of full-time workers employed by the United States Steel Corporation are instructive:

1929: 224,980	1931: 56,619
1930: 211,055	1932: 18,938

On April 1, 1933, United States Steel employed not one full-time worker.<sup>8</sup>

By themselves statistics can never tell us enough; they have to be accompanied by other kinds of materials to assume their full meaning. We have focused so completely on the plight of the unemployed that we have forgotten the often desperate situation of the three out of four workers who still had employment of some sort. What did it mean to work in the midst of a severe economic crisis when losing one's job could mean disaster? How did this threat affect one's behavior and orientation? In 1939 Anna Novak spoke of her experiences in the Chicago meat-packing houses when she began to work there eight years earlier:

We used to have to buy the foremen presents, you know. On all the holidays, Christmas, Easter, Holy Week, Good Friday, you'd see the men coming to work with hip pockets bulging and take the

foremen off in corners, handing over their half pints. They sure would lay for you if you forgot their whiskey, too. Your job wasn't worth much if you didn't observe the holiday "customs." The women had to bring 'em bottles, just the same as the men. You could get along swell if you let the boss slap you on the behind and feel you up. God, I hate that stuff, you don't know! I'd rather work *any* place but in the stockyards just for that reason alone. I tried to get out a couple of times. Went to work for Container Corp. [Box factory near the yards.] Used to swing a hammer on those big wooden boxes. Look at my hands, now. [Her hands are misshapen; blunted, thickened fingers and calloused at every joint.] My husband wouldn't let me keep on there, it got to be too much for me to handle. I had to have work so I went back to the yards.<sup>9</sup>

It was not unusual testimony. Workers found themselves forced to accept the conditions that prevailed at their place of work: "In '34 they had me going like a clock 10 and 12 hours a day. I used to get home so tired I'd just sit down at the table and cry like a baby," Mary Siporin remembered in the closing years of the decade. "I mean there's a conditioning here by the Depression," a garbage worker told interviewers, many years later. "I'm what I call a security cat. I don't dare switch [jobs]. 'Cause I got too much whiskers on it, seniority."<sup>10</sup> Even this testimony gives us an incomplete picture; it does not explain the thousands of workers in the rubber, automobile, and steel industries who jeopardized everything in 1936 and 1937 to strike for their right to help determine the conditions of their employment. For some workers, at least, the route to greater security seemed to be not through accommodation and resignation but through militancy and organization.

Thus while the dreary statistics of unemployment, suicide, malnutrition, and sickness are central to any understanding of the time, they, together with the haunting photographic images of blasted farms, faces, and hopes, leave us unprepared for other truths of life in the Great Depression. Following a lecture in which I mentioned the tens of millions of Americans who attended movies weekly in the 1930s, a student confessed that he had had no inkling that people continued to do such "normal" things. He knew that films were made during the thirties, but the images of that decade, struck so deeply into his consciousness, made it difficult for him to accept the fact that people actually could break away from their suffering long enough to attend and respond to movies. Similarly, we are not prepared to see the symbolic victims we have become familiar with do anything but appear appropriately despairing, to suffer—with admirable dignity perhaps—but to suffer nonetheless. Life, and human beings, however, are rarely that one-dimensional. The first two pictures Lange took of the Thompson family, although aesthetically less arresting than the final two, embody truths no less important. Here, in the midst of the starkest poverty, we see smiling children and a dreamy adolescent (see figures 1 and 2, top of p. 16).

Truths crowd out truths; realities impinge on realities; images confuse as well as enlighten, interfere as well as communicate, clash





11. Floyd Burroughs (George Gudger), Hale County, Alabama, 1936. Walker Evans.

as well as complement. Neither in photographs nor in life is reality composed of a series of either/or images. In their account of three sharecropper families, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), James Agee and Walker Evans included many photos of the Burroughs family,\* including their widely reproduced shot of an unshaven, tired, anxious Floyd Burroughs in a tattered work shirt (figure 11). They chose not to use a picture that Floyd Burroughs had requested they take of him, his arms thrown confidently around the shoulders of his smiling wife and sister-in-law, with his children posed in front, everyone looking clean and contented in their best clothing (figure 12). It was a classic family pose but not one congenial to the purposes of the book from which it was excluded. As William Stott has put it, "This George Gudger needs no one's pity"; nor did his family, which showed their ability to be "this clean without running water or sanitary facilities, this decently dressed on

\* Following the mode of the period, Agee and Evans changed the names of the families they depicted in their book. Thus the Burroughs family was renamed the Gudgers, and Floyd Burroughs became George Gudger.



12. The Burroughs family (the Gudgers and Emma), Hale County, Alabama, 1936.

little money, this self-respecting in economic servitude, this gentle despite their hardships.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that Burroughs, who seems to have had no objections to the other photographs that were taken, wanted himself and his family pictured in this light as well, is an important part of the reality of the thirties that we can ignore only at great cost to our understanding of the self-images and the aspirations of people like the Burroughs.<sup>12</sup>

That the photographs from Stryker's section are filled with these tensions and ambiguities is a clue to their essential soundness as guides for the historian. The argument that only those photographs that depict unrelieved suffering and exploitation can be trusted as accurate portrayals and have anything to say to us has at its core a concept which ultimately subverts the struggle for historical understanding: the notion that things must be one way or the other, and therefore that it is impossible to maintain any semblance of dignity or self-worth or independence in the face of poverty and exploitation. If photographs tell us that people do have this capacity, we must deny our eyes and convince ourselves that we are examining manipulated icons. If our ears tell us that even in the midst of desolation people can sing songs of transcendence and joy, we must insist that such songs are mere anodynes in the mouths of deluded singers. The urge, whether conscious or not, to deprive people without power of any determination over their destiny, of any pleasure in their lives, of any dignity in their existence, knows no single part of the political spectrum; it affects radicals and reactionaries, liberals and conservatives, alike. The only culture the poor are supposed to have is the culture of poverty: worn faces and torn clothing, dirty skin and dead eyes, ramshackle shelters and

disorganized lives. Any forms of contentment or self-respect, even cleanliness itself, have no place in this totality.

It is hardly a new position. This is what the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim had in mind when he argued that the German concentration camps infantilized their victims, whose wills became almost totally linked with those of their "significant others"—the guards/gods. It is the plantation universe sketched by the historian Stanley Elkins and populated with black slaves whose condition turned them into "Sambos" with no wills of their own and a fantasy life "limited to catfish and watermelons."<sup>13</sup> Here we have a closed universe whose inhabitants act according to a predetermined script. The poor and the weak, who were treated like ciphers by the more powerful during their lives, would hardly be surprised to find themselves being treated like ciphers by scholars long after their deaths. But both they and we deserve better. Historians have the same obligations to their dead subjects that anthropologists have to their living ones. They must recognize their humanity, search for their points of view, respect their complexity. The dictum that "God is in the details" has particular relevance for historians. It is precisely the details that these photographs help us to recover.

This volume is filled with truths that have been too often crowded out, realities that have been too easily blurred, images that have been too frequently lost by the simple repetition of a single dimension, by the sustained search for the ideal. The photograph is beguiling because it seems to be the quintessential objective document—reality in black and white—and thus makes a greater claim on our credulity than other types of documents. We know that newspaper reports, magazine articles, autobiographies, congressional testimony, and political speeches are all imperfect sources, deeply affected by the views and circumstances of the reporters, writers, and politicians who create them. We have even begun to learn the truth of the old saw that while figures may not lie, liars figure, and thus that even hard statistics, so solid and reliable in appearance, have to be subjected to the most rigorous of tests. But what of photographic records? While we may dismiss ideal types, we continue, sometimes in spite of ourselves, to search for ideal sources, and what could recommend themselves better than photographic records, which appear to come to us not as the figments of someone's imagination but as the objective artifacts of demonstrable reality? The truth, of course, as Halla Beloff has written, is that "like the computer, the camera is an instrument of human intelligence."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the images it creates are also the products of human intelligence, like all of the other sources historians utilize, and the photograph has to be read with the same care and thoughtfulness we have learned to apply to written sources. With photographs, as with other types of historical materials, a simple change in context can drastically alter the meaning of an "objective" image. This is well demonstrated by what occurred when the figure of the plantation owner in Dorothea Lange's "Plantation owner, Clarksdale, Mississippi, June 1936" (figure 13) was used by itself two years later in Archibald MacLeish's book *The Land of the Free* (1938), accompanied by a page of MacLeish's verse (figure 14).

That MacLeish could use the white man for purposes that



13. Plantation owner, Clarksdale, Mississippi, June 1936. Lange's husband, Paul Taylor, is just visible at the left. Dorothea Lange.

seem quite divergent from those implicit in the original photograph underlines the essential ambiguity present in Lange's picture to begin with: it captured the image of a man who exemplified the exploitative, racist, undemocratic features of southern plantation life even while he also doubtless represented many of the qualities that built the type of individualistic freedom that has characterized America throughout so much of its history. It is not that Lange and MacLeish necessarily distorted the image they were utilizing but that they had their hooks into different aspects of that image. The importance of photography as a source is precisely this: it can freeze conflicting realities, ambiguities, paradoxes, so that we can see them, examine them, recognize the larger, more complex, and often less palatable truths they direct us to.

Photographs, then, are a source that needs to be interpreted and supplemented by other evidence. They are incomplete, as historical sources always are. They have been collected and filtered through other hands, as historical sources always have been. They are filled with contradictions and paradoxes, as the most valuable historical sources frequently are. In short, they behave much like other sources historians depend on. What differs is less the uniqueness of photographic materials than our tendency to see photographs as more "real" than other sources and our relative inexperience in using them historically. We have to learn the truth of Alan Sekula's observation that "the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning."<sup>15</sup>

As creators the photographers represented in this volume helped to mold the period in which they lived, but we must remember that they were the creatures as well as the creators of their culture and never stood wholly apart from it. They were not coolly

We told ourselves we were free because we were free.  
 We were free because we were that kind.  
 We were Americans  
 All you needed for freedom was being American.  
 All you needed for freedom was grit in your craw  
 And the gall to get out on a limb and crow before sunup.  
 Those that hadn't it hadn't it.  
 "Have the elder races halted?  
 Do they droop and end their lessons wearied over there beyond the seas?  
 We take up the task eternal and the burden and the lesson —  
 Pioneers O Pioneers."

We told ourselves we were free because we said so.

We were free because of the Battle of Bunker Hill  
 And the constitution adopted at Philadelphia



14. From Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free*.

detached observers making disinterested portraits of a people apart; they were members of a society representing a culture to itself. They were, to a greater degree than they could have been aware, taking pictures of themselves as well as of their fellow Americans. This of course makes their work particularly valuable as a source for understanding their era but should also caution us to remember the fragility of their images and the need to supplement them.

The veteran photographer Ansel Adams complained to Roy Stryker, "What you've got are not photographers. They're a bunch of sociologists with cameras."<sup>16</sup> Though Adams might have said this of many groups of photographers, his insight helps us to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of these photographs as historical sources. For such influential sociologists of the period as Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, Muncie, Indiana, was "Middletown" and its inhabitants nameless, ideal Middle Americans living and working in the prototypical Middle American setting. We learn to know them not as individuals but as representations. Similarly, from the photographers of the 1930s we have inherited the images of people with precious little additional information. Again, we come to know them as types: migrant farmers, sharecroppers, hoboes, unemployed men, desperate mothers, ragged children. In the captions to the photographs in this volume few names of those pictured are given because the photographers simply failed to supply them or provide other essential data concerning the people they were photographing. Dorothea Lange never inquired after the name of the woman whose image she made immortal (we know her as Florence Thompson because of researchers who later sought her out and interviewed her); never noted the names of the four

daughters pictured in the series; never sought to learn the whereabouts of Thompson's other three children or her husband; and, so far as we can tell, never wondered where Florence Thompson had been or where she hoped to go. "I did not ask her name or her history," Lange noted simply, as if this was the most reasonable possible action. Lange and most of her fellow photographers not only failed to record such elementary information as the names and backgrounds of their subjects, they rarely thought to collect such facts in the first place. They generally did not conceive of these details as necessary in accomplishing their goals. In Florence Thompson and her daughters Lange knew she had found precisely the ideal image she was searching for. When she completed her six shots, she slipped into her car and drove off. "I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers," she later noted. "It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment."<sup>17</sup>

The photographers were not unique. The writers employed by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), who left us a monumental collection of interviews with a wide spectrum of Americans, did collect and record their subjects' names and asked them questions that frequently elicited many of the details of their subjects' lives. But they too were specifically interested in those they interviewed as types: former slaves, stockyard workers, members of the maritime union, riders of the rails, traveling salesmen, and those details that did not directly bear upon such categories were usually neither elicited nor preserved. Sylvia Diner, a WPA interviewer collecting folk songs and lore from Yugoslavian immigrants in New York City in 1938, was annoyed when her subjects insisted upon interrupting the interviews to discuss the German conquest of Czechoslovakia, a fate which they feared lay in store for their homeland as well. The singing of folk songs ended abruptly in the Sekulich home when the oldest daughter turned on the radio and the family gathered round it to hear the latest news. "The historic ballads of long ago were obliterated in the heat of current events," Diner complained. Although she praised "the analytical powers and keen concern of these supposedly simple, backward people," the details of their political views went essentially unrecorded since they deviated from her immediate conception of the group she was interviewing.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the folklorists of the period collected songs, stories, jokes, anecdotes, proverbs from people whose individual names, histories, and circumstances they recorded so rarely or so incompletely that today we too often have the folklore without the folk, whose identities have become blurred by time—indeed, were *allowed* to become blurred by time—through the methods the folklorists of the period employed.

But there is a positive side to this as well; it was precisely from the photographers' attempts to picture their subjects not as individuals but as components of a larger context that at least part of the triumph of their photographs as historical documents derives. The demand for documentation, the hunger for authenticity, the urge to share in the experiences of others were widespread throughout the thirties. In this respect the FSA photographs were part of

a much larger world of documentary expression that included the movie newsreels, radio news programs, the Federal Theatre's documentary plays called "Living Newspapers," the WPA's *American Guide* series which produced geographical and cultural road maps for every state and major city as well as a host of interesting byways, the blossoming of photojournalism in *Life* and *Look* magazines, and such quasi-documentary expression as radio soap operas. William Stott has made the interesting point that while the Hoover administration was continually embarrassed by the documentary approach, the New Deal "institutionalized documentary; it made the weapon that undermined the establishment part of the establishment."<sup>19</sup>

The historian Irving Bernstein recently observed that "the anguish of the American people during hard times demanded a pictorial record."<sup>20</sup> The photographs in this volume make clear that while Bernstein has probably summed up the initial motives of many of the FSA photographers accurately, they accomplished far more than the depiction of American anguish; they created a record of American life. The photographers may have set about documenting the immediate impact of the severe economic depression, but they succeeded in creating a remarkable portrait of their countrymen's resiliency and culture. In these photographs, as in such other sources as the many oral interviews that were recorded during and after the 1930s, the more than fifteen million letters people wrote to President and Mrs. Roosevelt, and the rich folklore that was collected, we are made witness to a complex blend of despair and faith, dependency and self-sufficiency, degradation and dignity, suffering and joy.

It is difficult to take exception to a statement made by Bob Aden, who was the subject of a John Vachon photograph in 1942: "I'm sure the experience of the Depression—what we went through—established patterns and habits that all of us have carried through for the rest of our lives. For example, I could never stand to buy anything on time; I had to have the money to pay for it. The first time I bought an appliance on time, it scared me to death."<sup>21</sup> The effects of the Depression and the war that followed it were deep and enduring. But, as these photographs indicate, while few escaped the tumultuous events that surrounded them, they were not the mere mute products of those events; in a number of important ways, their lives often transcended their immediate experiences. What scholars are too prone to dismiss as the "trivia" of life are revealed by these sources to be often integral parts of life's essence. Ella Watson's world (see pp. 226–39) was crucially affected by the conditions of her employment; by the actions of governments, federal and local; by the racial mores and prejudices of her fellow Americans. But her world was not confined entirely by these perimeters; it included her relationships with her family, her friends, her church. It did not begin and end with the hours during which she wielded her mop in government offices; it was richer and more complex, embodying other dimensions. Whatever his original intentions, Gordon Parks's accomplishment was to afford us a glimpse of a hard life lived with a greater degree of dignity and strength, containing more variety and choice and telling us more about an entire culture, than he may have initially realized.

The process of visual documentation was by no means simple, and the photographers' own needs and perceptions often become almost indelibly intermeshed with those of their subjects. Depression Americans, living through one of the greatest crises in their history, were prone to look back upon the past, and particularly the folk past, as a symbol of a simpler, cleaner, less problem-ridden time when individuals still commanded their own destinies and shaped their own universe to a greater extent than was any longer possible. This urge to look back, which certainly was present in the nineteenth century, became particularly noticeable after the trauma of the First World War. In the 1920s popular culture was laced through with an emphasis on the self-sufficient heroes of such bygone eras as the Old West, when good and bad supposedly were distinguished with ease and human beings had the capacity to alter their environment. This urge led as well to an appreciation of the self-contained folk in what were conceived of as primitive societies and explains the surprising popularity of such documentary films as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), which depicted the hard but integrated and meaningful life of an Eskimo group, and the vogue of Black Harlem, where people were portrayed as still expressing their repressed urges and experiencing life more fully on their own terms. There was, of course, another side to this romantic urge: if the "primitive" were envied, they were also pitied and depicted as excluded from the wondrous fruits of modernity.

This ambivalent yearning to combine the innocence and clarity of the past with the sophistication and technological complexity of the present can be discerned throughout modern American culture but was particularly strong in the 1930s, when composers like Aaron Copland and George Gershwin, Hollywood directors like King Vidor and Frank Capra, and artists like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton turned to the folk past and the small town in their search for the American Way.<sup>22</sup> This trend helps to explain why industrial strikes featured rural folk songs and singers, why Americans were so taken with films like Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941) which sought to probe the fate of small-town values in modern urban America, and why the photographers in Stryker's section spent far more time and energy recording agrarian and small-town America than industrial and urban America.\* It is in this context that we should understand such series as "Tenant Farmers" (see pp. 146–59), in which Arthur Rothstein seems to be indulging in nostalgia for the self-sufficiency and simplicity of the Afro-American culture of Gee's Bend, Alabama, even while he reveals the bare poverty and almost total lack of modern conveniences that characterized the lives of these tenant farmers. This is not to say that in "Tenant Farmers" we are viewing Rothstein's fantasies rather than a black southern community in the 1930s, but that in order to

\* Only about 25 percent of the photographs in the FSA-OWI Collection depict subjects in towns of fifty thousand or more inhabitants. Most of the urban photographs were made in 1942 and 1943 (Nicholas Natanson, *Urban Representation in the RA-FSA-OWI File, 1935–43*; unpublished report in *Documenting America, 1935–1943*, project records, Supplementary Archives, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).



understand the particular form Rothstein supplied for the substance he photographed we need to comprehend more fully the intellectual prism through which he observed that community.

It might be argued that because these photographs begin only in 1935 and stretch well into the war, it is hardly surprising that they show normal pursuits, since conditions were so much improved. It is true that in the summer of 1935 the United States economy entered its first really impressive expansion since the Depression had begun, with employment in manufacturing increasing from 7.2 million in July 1935 to 9.1 million two years later. For the entire economy there were some four million more jobs in 1937 than there had been in 1935. Despite these heartening improvements, more than seven and a half million workers remained unemployed in 1937, substantial numbers of homeless men and women continued to roam the country, and hundreds of thousands of dispossessed farmers made the trek to California in search of work and land. America had hardly reached Nirvana. Nevertheless, President Roosevelt, who was urged by such conservative advisers as Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau to declare the New Deal completed, and who was himself perennially troubled by the unbalanced budget and the federal government's increasing role in the economy, used the undeniable improvements to rationalize a cutback in federal spending, including relief. The results were, or at least should have been, predictable. In October 1937 America experienced a severe collapse reminiscent of the one eight years earlier, causing income, production, and consumption to fall and unemployment to rise to well over ten million—almost one in every five American workers—by 1938. Unemployment was to remain critically high until America's entry into World War II: almost nine and half million in 1939, over eight million in 1940, and, on the eve of Pearl Harbor, despite the stimulus that defense spending and the Lend-Lease Act (1941) had given the economy, five and a half million workers—almost one out of ten—were without jobs.<sup>23</sup>

World War II ended unemployment and led President Roosevelt to spend money and to centralize economic decisions to an extent he had not been willing to attempt in peacetime. But though the coming of war helped to ease the economic problems, it replaced them with the difficulties, trauma, and crises endemic to war, so that the context in which all of the photographs included here were taken remained an America beset by crisis. It was, moreover, an America not particularly confident of the future. In 1979 John Cockle, who had been photographed by John Vachon in May 1942 when Cockle was a student at the University of Nebraska, declared, "One big difference between us and people in school now is that most now have a pretty good feeling that when they get through there will be a demand for their services. That was not at all true in the late thirties, early forties. We knew we were going into the service—that was clear even before the United States was in the war. But when we got out, what then?" During the war itself 79 percent of the soldiers questioned were convinced it would be difficult for veterans to secure good jobs after the war, while 56 percent anticipated a widespread depression when the war ended and they reentered civilian society.<sup>24</sup>

Earlier I attempted to demonstrate that when viewed as a concise series, even so small a number of images as those Dorothea Lange took of the Thompsons supplies more dimensions and the possibility of a deeper reading than the single photo that has been most widely reproduced. This is truer still of the larger series from which we have made extensive selections that help to reveal both how the agency photographers worked and how the American people lived in the midst of America's most searing economic crisis and the early years of the war that succeeded it. Looking back on his collection from the vantage point of old age, Roy Stryker observed that "the work we did can be appreciated only when the collection is considered as a whole. The total volume, and it's a staggering volume, has a richness and distinction that simply cannot be drawn from the individual pictures themselves."<sup>25</sup> Though it is obviously impossible for all but a relatively few to view the collection as a whole, its significance is far better represented by the series presented here than by the single images previously available.

A number of contemporaries pointed out the difficulty of seeing the Depression with the naked eye. Caroline Bird commented that "you could feel the Depression deepen but you could not look out of the window and see it. Men who lost their jobs dropped out of sight. They were quiet, and you had to know just when and where to find them. . . . It took a knowing eye—or the eye of poverty itself—to understand or even to observe some of the action."<sup>26</sup> This helps to underscore the importance of the FSA-OWI photographs and the reason why the images that appear to have had the greatest contemporary impact were those that concentrated upon the Depression's ravages. For the historian there is another kind of invisibility: the difficulty of perceiving those aspects of Depression life that were not the immediate result of privation and upheaval. The series featured in this volume help to penetrate both kinds of invisibility.

Americans suffered, materially and psychically, during the years of the Great Depression to an extent which we still do not fully fathom, and continued to suffer in ways even less clear to us during the war. But they also continued, as people always must, the business of living. They ate and they laughed, they loved and they fought, they worried and they hoped, they created and reared children, they worked and they played, they dressed and shopped and ate and bathed and watched movies and ball games and each other; they filled their days, as we fill ours, with the essentials of everyday living. It is true, certainly, that they did these things in the context not just of change—which is the context of all historical action—but of rapid, visible change. During these years people learned to look to institutions, especially to the federal government, in ways that their ancestors and they themselves just a few decades earlier would never have expected. That important truth is documented in these images—especially Arthur Rothstein's portrait of a farm labor camp in California and Marjory Collins's close-up of Lititz, Pennsylvania, a year after America entered World War II—and constitutes one of the major effects of the Depression and the Second World War. As important as this truth is, as central as this devel-

opment was, we cannot begin and end our portrait of the American people by focusing all of our attention on the New Deal or FDR or the breadlines. We need, desperately, to enter the movie palace and the ballpark, the workplace and the living room, the neighborhood and the church, the stores and the streets, the farmhouse and the fields.

These photographs help us begin this process, but we will be able to learn from them only if we study them with the understanding that as familiar as the people in them might appear, they were citizens of another decade, privy to another consciousness through which they saw and understood reality. What Warren Susman has said of moving-picture images applies to still photographs as well: they "may contain disguised or unconscious assumptions and perceptions, clues to issues and concerns often fundamental to the filmmakers, but not obvious because we fail in our effort to see as they saw, feel as they felt."<sup>27</sup> Thus we must adopt an anthropological vision and prepare ourselves for the possibility that these people whose lives we are sharing for the moment are not necessarily earlier versions of ourselves whom we can know just by knowing ourselves. It is much safer to approach the people who inhabit these pages as different from ourselves, as people whose lives and thoughts we have to strive to understand in however flawed a manner. To attempt to capture *their* way of doing things, *their* consciousness, *their* worldview, is the stuff of history, the quest that gives historians purpose and meaning. The photographs that fill this volume help us do that, help us to comprehend a part of America we have heretofore neglected.

Any account of the period's culture must be expansive enough to include crosscurrents, ambiguities, tensions. A culture that made both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Gone with the Wind* best-selling novels and critically acclaimed and widely attended motion pictures, was clearly not a culture monolithically fixated on either confronting or evading the central problems of the period. On the surface, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* seem to be symbols of different cultural urges. The former, by graphically and sympathetically depicting the plight of Dust Bowl migrants, helped to compel Americans to confront one of the nation's salient problems, while the latter, by transporting Americans back to the Civil War era seen from a blatantly and romantically Southern perspective, ostensibly helped them forget such pressing realities. This simple dichotomy ignores the fact that, as different as they were, both of these novels—and films—sprang from the same ideological matrix and shared visions of the future. Both had at their core the conviction that the individual could surmount the difficulties of the present and that societal regeneration was possible. "We ain't gonna die out," Ma Joad declares toward the close of Steinbeck's book. "People is goin' on—changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on." \* *Gone with the Wind* ends on a more in-

\* The film adaptation of the novel closes with Ma Joad asserting even more confidently, "We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, cause we're the people."

dividual but no less optimistic note with Scarlett O'Hara refusing to accept the finality of Rhett Butler's decision to leave her:

With the spirit of her people who would not know defeat, even when it stared them in the face, she raised her chin. She could get Rhett back. She knew she could. There had never been a man she couldn't get, once she set her mind upon him.

"I'll think of it tomorrow . . . I can stand it then. Tomorrow, I'll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day."<sup>28</sup>

The phenomenon of *Gone with the Wind* is particularly instructive precisely because it has so often been used as an example of the mindless "escapism" that is supposed to have beguiled the American people throughout the 1930s. As I have argued elsewhere, the notion of escapism is not particularly helpful or revealing. Even if the American people were seeking to escape their plight, the real question is why they chose this particular vehicle. Why in the midst of the nation's worst economic crisis were so many Americans so deeply attracted to a novel about the Civil War? There is no single explanation, but we would commit a serious error if we did not attempt to understand the extent to which Americans were attracted to those cultural expressions that helped them, or at least appeared to help them, comprehend their own world. The real significance of *Gone with the Wind*, then, was not escape—it probably provided no more of that than most expressive culture does—but reaffirmation. Beneath its surface the novel presented a world not really far removed from the America of the 1930s: a world which at the beginning of the novel was bursting with hope and promise, as the America of the 1920s with its promise of unprecedented and unending prosperity had been; a world governed by order and reason, as the world of the 1920s had seemed to be to so many Americans; a world which suddenly disintegrated into the chaos and unreason of civil war, as the world of the 1920s had suddenly disintegrated into the chaos and unreason of economic crisis. Through the novel's more than a thousand pages, Scarlett O'Hara emerges as the individual who refuses to give in to these irrational processes. She survives the war, the siege of Atlanta, the destruction of her society. She grows and matures, rebuilds her plantation, and, as we have just seen, closes the novel on a note of hope and ultimate triumph. With its graphic depictions of the horrors of war, *Gone with the Wind*, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, did not deny the harshness of the world it depicted. Nevertheless, again like *The Grapes of Wrath*, its central thrust was to affirm traditional American values and optimism.

In the culture of the 1930s past calamities could become didactic mechanisms for illustrating the ways in which people might triumph over adversity, rediscovering in the process those enduring values they had lost sight of in better times. *San Francisco*, the most profitable film of 1936, depicted the transformation of a hard-bitten saloonkeeper who only through the trauma of the 1906 earthquake is able to sort out his priorities and discover his true feelings for a woman he had formerly maltreated, even attaining enough humil-

ity to sink to his knees in prayer when he finally finds her unharmed by the disaster. Three years later the highly popular and critically acclaimed film *Stagecoach* pictured the individual redemptions of an outlaw, a prostitute, and an alcoholic doctor thrown together on a flight for life through Indian territory. The analogies were unmistakable: the individual, sometimes alone and sometimes in cooperation with others, could rise above disaster—be it warfare, earthquake, or depression—in pursuit of redemption, a theme that penetrated much of Depression culture.<sup>29</sup>

These notions of individual and societal survival and regeneration were endemic to the culture of the Great Depression, and it is hardly surprising to find them in the photographs that so quickly became an integral part of American culture. The photographs never denied the problems America faced, although like so many other genres of American culture during the period they failed to probe very deeply into their underlying causes and their relationship to other features of American life. If there is a predominant innocence in these photos, however, it is not that of evasion—since few other forms of expressive culture documented the failure of the American economy more graphically or immediately—but the innocence of faith, the belief that Americans had within themselves the qualities and traditions necessary to regenerate themselves and the American dream. Speaking of the photographer Russell Lee, Roy Stryker wrote, “When his photographs would come in, I always felt that Russell was saying, ‘Now here is a fellow who is having a hard time but with a little help he’s going to be all right.’ And that’s what gave me courage.” Stryker returned to this theme again and again:

The faces to me were the most significant part of the file. When a man is down and they have taken from him his job and his land and his home—everything he spent his life working for—he’s going to have the expression of tragedy permanently on his face. But I have always believed that the American people have the ability to endure. And that is in those faces, too.

Many of these people were sick, hungry, and miserable. The odds were against them. Yet their goodness and strength survived.

You could look at the people and see fear and sadness and desperation. But you saw something else, too. A determination that not even the Depression could kill. The photographers saw it—documented it.<sup>30</sup>

These photos, then, evince Depression culture not only in their images but also in the ideology out of which those images issue. An understanding that these icons reveal not merely the external but also the internal realities, not only appearances but also beliefs, is an important key to comprehending their significance and their meaning. The ubiquitous image of the victim was originally intended to help galvanize public opinion behind the need for governmental help and reform and has served historically to explain the necessity for the massive federal intervention that took place

# Look in her Eyes!

That woman is watching some-thing happen in America and to herself and her children who are a part of America. You can see in her eyes the horror of what is happening for she is not looking at it with the objectivity of a statistician or professor. She is looking at the story of farm tenancy and is feeling its effects.

Statisticians like her do not have to look at the map below to know that the problem of absentee and corporation land ownership and acute and frightening tenancy exists by water, drought and concentration.

Once farm tenancy was thought upon in an America where rugged homesteaders needed only to move west from free farm to free farm. Now the rugged tenant farmer moves from landlord to landlord.

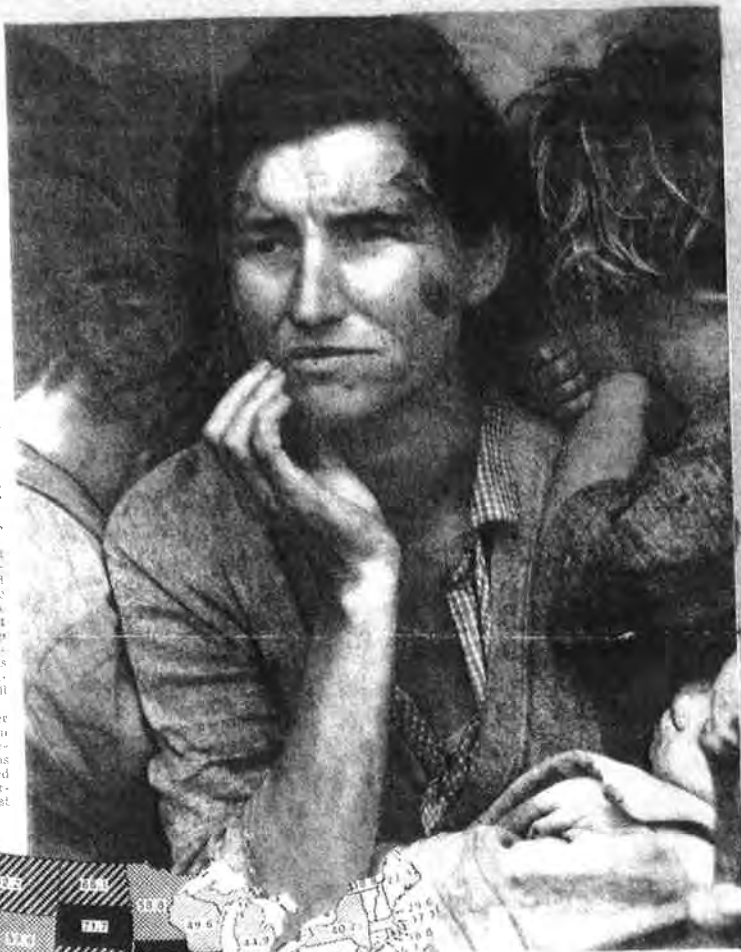
He dies devastating the farming population, the rise of tenancy devastates the soil itself. The annual farmer is a stranger in the land. He does not plant trees, nurse shrubs, repair ditches, nor follow a permanent policy of soil improvement and crop rotation. And worse off than the tenant is the farm-laborer who is subject not only to the will of impoverished tenants, but to the will of the seasons as well.

Revolt in America is brewing faster among the agrarian population than among city workers. Sheriffs are defied in the Cotton Belt. Tenant unions and farm labor unions are organized successfully and clashes with owner-vigilantes take place under harvest

means. But the mobilization of sheriffs solves no problems and enlightened landlords now realize that farm tenancy cannot be fought with torch-light raids.

The Resettlement Administration is trying to move tenants off eroded lands and place them where crops actually rise above the surface of

October 17, 1936



the earth. It is hoped long-term government loans will bring eventual ownership of their new homes to transplanted farmers.

The government can protect the farmer against the institution of the mortgage, just as it can establish mechanisms to protect the farmer against other causes of tenancy: crop disasters, soil erosion, droughts, depression. An enlightened nation looks to its government, no matter of what political party, to salvage the land and those on it so that by the time these frightened children in this photograph reach maturity, the American farmer once more will stand on his own feet and call the plot of ground he works his own.

23

15. *Midweek Pictorial*, 17 October 1936, from the FSA Scrapbook, FSA-OWI Written Records.

and to justify what happened to the American polity during the thirties. Thus *Midweek Pictorial* utilized Lange's "Migrant Mother" to illustrate its indictment of the inequities inherent in farm tenancy and its demand for change, while the *Buffalo Times* employed an array of Resettlement Administration photos in the before/after format popular throughout the decade to justify federal farm programs (figures 15, 16). The documentary quality of these photos made it difficult to deny the realities of the 1930s, but the photos nevertheless furnished the opportunity of reasserting traditional beliefs. Was "Migrant Mother" a study in despair or in inner

# Hope for the Despairing



TO THE MANY AMERICANS who live on the nation's 100,000,000 acres of land, the Department Administration one of Washington's alphabet agencies is bringing new hope. Typical of the kind of work these people live on, is this house near Stony Man Mountain. As with its thousands of counterparts...



FOR THIS SHARECROPPER'S CHILD, suffering from sickness and malnutrition, there is hope of a happy life in the better land his family is being moved to. He lives in Alabama.



THIS YOUNG LAD IS LUCKY—He is still not too old to forget the ways and the misery faced on some of these people by their battle to make a living from subsistence soil. Modern schools and training for a useful life await him in a new community.



THE AMBITIOUS MEMBER OF THE FAMILY—The man left his farm home to find work, got a job as deckhand on a Mississippi boat—but his circumstances still show in his clothing.



THE RESULT OF THE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM—This farmer has been resettled on good land, as the money to buy the land and to help him get started in the future with a smile on his face.



IT IS HARD FOR SAYS HICKORY, slowly stretching himself at Stone County, Arkansas, to understand what the change will mean. But he is glad to see the Department program...



ALL HIS LIFE has been spent on Stone land. But now the 33-year-old settler, one of the few who have stayed all night in the settlement farm, says he is being resettled on good farmland near Chicago. The twilight of his life will pass in good surroundings.

16. Buffalo Times, 14 February 1937, from the FSA Scrapbook.



**DUST BOWL FARMER IS NEW PIONEER**

This man is one of the great crop of farmers driven from their land by the dust bowl. A new pioneer in the new world of the West. His hat is a hat of the old West. His jacket is a jacket of the old West. His face is a face of the old West. His eyes are eyes of the old West. His hands are hands of the old West. His feet are feet of the old West. His soul is a soul of the old West.

17. *Life*, 21 June 1937, from the FSA Scrapbook.

strength? Were her face and demeanor symbols of victimization or dignity? It was possible to read into these photographs what one wanted, what one needed, to see in them, and in the 1930s many wanted and needed to see both qualities. It is significant that during these years the image of the victim was never sufficient; it had to be accompanied by the symbols of dignity, inner strength, and ultimate self-reliance. Stryker identified the tension in the images his photographers captured as “dignity versus despair,” and commented, “Maybe I’m a fool, but I believe that dignity wins out. When it doesn’t then we as a people will become extinct.”<sup>31</sup> Characteristically, *Life* magazine had no difficulty in perceiving in Dorothea Lange’s photo of a grizzled, impoverished migrant farmer the visage of a traditional American pioneer (figure 17; see also p. 125). Though all cultures require icons, they do not require the same ones or use them for the same purposes. That the salient



qualities in the icons Depression America used to rationalize massive federal action seem to have been suffering *and* dignity, helplessness *and* self-reliance, tells us much about both the people who created them and the people for whom they were created.

It is particularly important to comprehend the extent to which the ideology represented by these symbols was a shared one. The tendency of recent critics to see Stryker as the author of the worldview that permeated the FSA-OWI file, without adequate reference to the worldviews of his photographers or their subjects, can be misleading.<sup>32</sup> The FSA-OWI file was, after all, reformist and optimistic, embodying a blend of individual and community orientation which was in a long-standing American tradition. Stryker certainly had his priorities, though they were no more totally consistent and successfully implemented than those of his leaders, from Rexford Guy Tugwell to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. There was confusion in Stryker's goals and actions simply because there was confusion and uncertainty in Stryker—the identical body of confusion, hesitation, and ambivalence that ran like a thread through the New Deal from 1933 to 1941. Insofar as Stryker had an ideology, it was not the product of a smoke-filled conference room teeming with politicians and capitalists; it emanated from the same matrix that had long permeated American politics and the American people and was shared by many of Stryker's colleagues and those they photographed: belief in the individual; in voluntary cooperation; in a harmony of interests; in the virtues of the agrarian/small-town way of life; in the future; in the possibilities of peaceful, progressive reform; in the superiority and primacy of the American Way. To say that politicians and businessmen often manipulated these beliefs for their own ends is not to prove that they invented them or controlled them. That the FSA-OWI photographs revealed these beliefs is hardly remarkable; so did most of the other major cultural expressions of the period—movies, radio, paintings, magazines, newspapers, music. What needs to be remarked upon is the extent to which the most widely known photographs—as well as many of the creations of the other most popular iconographic form of the period, the movie—went beyond comfortable consensus to show crisis and breakdown. What is equally important is the extent to which the photographers were able to rise beyond a simplistic rendering of their ideological concerns to create a record of those aspects of American life and culture that were generally ignored or downgraded by most cultural and artistic agencies.

Many years ago Robert Louis Stevenson described how he and his schoolmates would place a bulls-eye lantern under their coats, its presence unknown to all but one another, and walk along the links at night, “a mere pillar of darkness” to ordinary eyes, but each exulting in the knowledge that he had a hidden lantern shining at his belt. Stevenson used these recollections as a paradigm for the human condition, commenting that a good part of reality “runs underground. The observer (poor soul with his documents!) is all abroad. For to look at the man is but to court deception. . . . To one who has not the secret of the lanterns, the scene upon the links is meaningless. And hence the haunting and truly spectral unreality of realistic books.”<sup>33</sup>

In the same sense, one might speak of “the haunting and truly spectral unreality” of many ostensibly realistic photographs. Indeed, Rexford Guy Tugwell seems to have had something like this on his mind when early in the history of the photography project he advised Stryker, “Roy, a man may have holes in his shoes, and you may see the holes when you take the picture. But maybe your sense of the human being will teach you there’s a lot more to that man than the holes in his shoes, and you ought to try and get that idea across.”<sup>34</sup> Tugwell’s conception was only imperfectly realized. The difficulties were formidable: the photographers’ limited vision, the subjects’ ability to mask what they felt and thought, the force of ideologies, the intrusion of perceived political necessities. Arthur Rothstein, the first photographer hired by Stryker, observed, “It was our job to document the problems of the Depression so that we could justify the New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate them.”<sup>35</sup> Stryker’s instructions to his photographers often bore this out. In January 1936, as Dorothea Lange was preparing for her first major trip for the Resettlement Administration, Stryker wrote her:

Would you, in the next few days, take for us some good slum pictures in the San Francisco area. (Of course, no California city has slums, but I’ll bet you can find them.) We need to vary the diet in some of our exhibits here by showing some western poverty instead of all south and east. . . . When you get to Los Angeles, I think it might be worthwhile to see if you can pick up some good slum pictures there also. Do not forget that we need some of the rural slum type of thing, as well as the urban.<sup>36</sup>

Even in the midst of this ideological and political urge to document suffering, Stryker showed that his mind never strayed too far from the practical. “As you are driving along through the agricultural areas,” Stryker wrote Lange in the same letter, “would you take a few shots of various types of farm activities such as your picture showing the lettuce workers. I think Dr. Tugwell would be very appreciative of photographs of this sort to be used as illustrative material for some things which the Department of Agriculture is working on.”<sup>37</sup> He could also issue orders to downplay adversity, as he did in his often-quoted letter to Jack Delano in the fall of 1940:

Please watch for autumn pictures, as calls are beginning to come for them and we are short. These should be rather the symbol of Autumn . . . cornfields, pumpkins. . . . Emphasize the idea of abundance—the “horn of plenty”—and pour maple syrup over it—you know, mix well with white clouds and put on a sky-blue platter. I know your damned photographer’s soul writhes, but to hell with it. Do you think I give a damn about a photographer’s soul with Hitler at our doorstep? You are nothing but camera fodder to me.<sup>38</sup>

In the winter of 1942 Stryker asked Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein to provide "pictures of men, women and children who appear as if they really believed 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 much what happens." Though he quickly added, "(Don't misunderstand the above. FSA is still interested in the lower-income groups and we want to continue to photograph this group.)"<sup>39</sup>

That there is more continuity in these photographs than such gyrating mandates suggest, that Stryker's photographers did not veer wildly from recording victims to recording self-sufficient patriots, was the result both of the photographers' talent and integrity and Stryker's hunger for documentary detail, which provided the underpinning for the entire project and supplied a wealth of information about American culture and belief. He instructed his photographers to record the scenes of everyday life: "How do people spend their evenings," he would ask; "show this at varied income levels." He requested pictures of home life, of leisure pursuits, of people going to church, of group activities, of the woman's world, of backyards and porches, of baseball diamonds, of the way people dressed and decorated their walls, of the differences in their behavior on and off the job. He was proud of the fact that his photographers caught people in everyday situations. He boasted of the fact that "in our entire collection we have only one picture of Franklin Roosevelt, the most newsworthy man of the era. . . . You'll find no record of big people or big events in the collection. There are pictures that say Depression, but there are no pictures of sit-down strikes, no apple salesmen on street corners, not a single shot of Wall Street, and absolutely no celebrities."<sup>40</sup>

This final boast—"absolutely no celebrities"—highlights one of the truths of the FSA-OWI photographs: they paid more attention to regional and folk than to popular and mass culture. While these documents attest to America's complex ethnic, regional, and cultural heterogeneity, they are less successful in depicting the growing uniformity and standardization imposed by the forces of modernization. There are, to be sure, important indications of the intrusion of a national culture onto the local scene: John Vachon's photograph of a long line of cars and parking meters in Omaha, Nebraska, might have been taken in scores of American cities which could have easily supplied not only the cars and meters but also the background replete with a Woolworth's, a chain drug store, and a movie theater (see p. 95). The same point is made by Vachon's shot of an Omaha newsstand with its array of national periodicals, photojournals, and western, sport, detective, and romance pulp magazines (see p. 96). Arthur Rothstein's portrait of a young black girl in Gee's Bend, Alabama, peering from a cabin window next to which hangs a newspaper advertisement for Shredded Wheat and another featuring a white woman holding a platter of food above the caption, "Your Baker Offers You a Tempting Variety!" (see p. 151) testifies poignantly to the fate of local culture in general and local cuisines in particular. John Collier's photo of a wall in the Lopez

home decorated by religious icons, family photos, and a newspaper or magazine photo of an actress (see p. 300) illustrates impressively the increasingly complex blend of traditional, family, and mass cultures. These nationalizing tendencies are depicted even more starkly by the Office of War Information photographs of war mobilization, defense industries, and increased movement of rural populations to city factory jobs.

Nevertheless, one has to supplement these photographs with other sources to grasp fully the truth that by the 1930s all types of Americans from all areas of the country could view identical movies, listen to identical recordings in their homes or on jukeboxes, follow the same soap operas, laugh at the same comedians, be exposed to the same commercial messages, learn from the same news commentators, simultaneously attend the same presidential fireside chats, and listen as a nation to graphic on-the-spot accounts of Babe Ruth hitting his home runs or Joe Louis defending his heavyweight championship. Warren Susman has observed that while the photograph, the radio, and the moving picture were not new to the 1930s, "the sophisticated uses to which they were put created a special community of all Americans (possibly an international community) unthinkable previously. The shift to a culture of sight and sound was of profound importance; it increased our self-awareness as a culture; it helped create a unity of response and action not previously possible; it made us more susceptible than ever to those who would mold culture and thought."<sup>41</sup> Photography was not merely a mechanism for depicting these changes, it was simultaneously their product and their agent, their creation and their creator.

At the end of his life Stryker insisted that his goal had been to "record on film as much of America as we could in terms of people and the land. We photographed destitute migrants and average American townspeople, sharecroppers and prosperous farmers, eroded land and fertile land, human misery and human elation." It was precisely for this documentation of the varied and unspectacular aspects of America that Stryker came more and more to value his collection. "*We introduced America to Americans*," he asserted. Doubtless this was claiming too much, though it is true that by providing a ready source of photographs for newspapers, government agencies, and national magazines, Stryker's photographic file did constitute one of the many vehicles in the thirties and forties that provided Americans with the opportunity to share experiences, images, and culture. Stryker was more accurate when he wrote in 1973, "We provided some of the important material out of which histories of the period are being written."<sup>42</sup> And, it should be added, will continue to be written, for one of the enduring contributions of the photographers of the FSA and OWI is to help to introduce the America of their generation to Americans of ours. They have provided us with an unusually rich historical resource, which is flawed, certainly, as all such bodies of materials are, but which affords us an unusual opportunity to explore many of the past's hidden dimensions if only we have the wisdom to use their legacy with insight and sensitivity.

1. William James, *Selected Papers on Philosophy* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1917), 1–2.
2. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 303–17.
3. The newspaper and magazine clippings collected by the FSA and OWI indicate how immediate and persistent the impact of Lange's photo was. See the Written Records of the Farm Security Administration, Historical Section—Office of War Information, Overseas Picture Division, Washington Section Collection, in the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
4. Lange left no record of the order in which she took her photos of the Thompsons. I have followed the interpretation of James C. Curtis, who has tried to establish the sequence of the shots from internal evidence ("Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression," *Winterthur Portfolio* 21 [Spring 1986]: 1–20).
5. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 58–59.
6. Maurice Berger, *FSA: The Illiterate Eye: Photographs from the Farm Security Administration*. Berger curated and wrote an essay for an exhibition held 26 November 1985–10 January 1986 at Hunter College Art Gallery, New York City.
7. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 231, 241–42; Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 67–73; and Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), chap. 4.
8. Irving Bernstein, *A Caring Society: The New Deal, the Worker, and the Great Depression* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 17–18.
9. Lawrence W. Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression," *Yale Review* 74 (Winter 1985): 201.
10. *Ibid.*
11. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941); and Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 286–87.
12. Interestingly, the photographer of the Burroughs family, Walker Evans, has been criticized for the opposite tendency as well: for posing his subjects and rearranging the belongings in their homes "to show the order and beauty that he believed lay beneath the surface of their poverty. . . . Evans sought to ennoble the sharecroppers." See James C. Curtis and Sheila Grannen, "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 1–23. In his 1942 review of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Lionel Trilling faulted James Agee for refusing to "see these people as anything but good" (Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault in It," *Kenyon Review* 4 [Winter 1942]: 102).
13. Bruno Bettelheim, "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 38, no. 4 (October 1943): 417–52; and Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), chap. 3.
14. Halla Beloff, *Camera Culture* (Oxford and New York: B. Blackwell, 1985), 18.
15. Alan Sekula, *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 7.
16. Roy E. Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 8.
17. Dorothea Lange, "The Assignment I'll Never Forget: Migrant Mother," *Popular Photography* 46, no. 2 (February 1960): 42–43, 126.

18. "Report and Notes on Experiences in Collecting Yugoslav Folk Material, December 13, 1938," Sylvia Diner folder, in Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project Life Histories, Library of Congress.
19. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 92. Throughout his study, and especially in part 2, Stott describes this documentary urge with great intelligence and insight.
20. Bernstein, *A Caring Society*, 257.
21. Bill Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descent* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 124-25.
22. This summary of the culture of the twenties and thirties is derived from my articles "Progress and Nostalgia: The Self Image of the 1920s," in *The American Novel and the 1920s*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Edward Arnold, 1971); "American Culture and the Great Depression," *Yale Review* 74 (Winter 1985): 196-223; "Hollywood's Washington: Film Images of National Politics in the Great Depression," *Prospects* 10 (1986): 169-95.
23. Bernstein, *A Caring Society*, chap. 4; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 243-45.
24. Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descent*, 122-23; Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, Studies in Social Psychology in World War II, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 598.
25. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 7.
26. Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York: D. McKay, 1966), 22-23.
27. Warren I. Susman, "History and Film: Artifact and Experience," *Film & History* 15 (May 1985): 30.
28. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939; reprint, Bantam, 1946), 378; Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936; Pocket Books, 1968), 862.
29. This theme is further explored in my article "American Culture and the Great Depression."
30. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 14, 17.
31. Ibid.
32. See, for example, John Tagg, "The Currency of the Photograph," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 126, 128. For a more interesting and subtle argument along these lines, see Sally Stein, "Marion Post Wolcott: Thoughts on Some Lesser Known FSA Photographs," in *Marion Post Wolcott: FSA Photographs* (Carmel, Cal.: Friends of Photography, 1983), 3-10.
33. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Across the Plains* (London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1892), 206-28.
34. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 11.
35. Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (Boston: Focal Press, 1986), 36.
36. F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 70.
37. Ibid.
38. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 16.
39. Stryker to Lee and Rothstein, 19 February 1942, reprinted in *ibid.*, 188.
40. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 8, 14, 15, 187, 188; Rothstein, *Documentary Photography*, appendix A, 163-68.
41. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 160.
42. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 8, 9, 14.