

THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN WASHINGTON STATE

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Part One: Dorothea Lange's Social Vision: Photography and the Great Depression

by Emily Yoshiwara

[\(Go to part two of this series on Lange\)](#)

Dorothea Lange's photographs of migrant farm workers and the rural poor are some of the most iconic images of the Great Depression's impact on American society. Lange's photographs do not just chronicle the poverty among farm workers, but also stand as testament to a federally funded effort to document and depict their situation. As crop prices fell over 50% during the Depression, thousands of workers and farming families were left without jobs. [1] The Farm Security Administration (FSA) was created as part of the New Deal to help combat rural poverty throughout America. In 1935 the FSA created a program that hired photographers to travel to rural areas across the country and document the lives of struggling farmers, and Lange became one of their most celebrated photographers. More than purely documentary, though, Lange's FSA photographs served as a political tool, for they helped the nation see the effects of the Depression on an individual level and challenged the agricultural practices and policies of the time. With the help of the FSA, Lange's pictures brought issues like family suffering and unfortunate working conditions to light. Lange's photographs gave a face to the distress and suffering of the nation, and spread awareness throughout the country.

Dorothea Lange's work helped to significantly develop the field of social documentary photography, which sought to use photographs to influence politics and encourage social change. Lange was born in Hoboken, New Jersey on May 26, 1895 although her career as a photographer began when she moved to San Francisco at the age of 23. In California she operated her own portrait studio, and it was there, during the onset of the Depression that she began using her skills as a photographer to document the severe economic distress of the time. Lange said she felt obligated to turn her camera away from elite portraiture to the effects of the Depression on the city and its residents because "...I was driven by the fact that I was under personal turmoil to do something." [2] She soon abandoned her portrait studio to devote herself full-time to documenting the social crisis. One of Lange's most well known photographs, later named "White Angel Bread Line," came from her work in the streets of San Francisco as she observed the lines of people waiting for free gifts of bread and food. [3]

In December of 1935, when some of her work was being displayed at a small exhibit, she met her soon-to-be second husband, Paul Taylor. [4] Taylor was an economics professor at the University of California and was an agricultural economist and progressive thinker. Taylor's political ideas helped to motivate Lange to continue her work in documentary photography. Taylor believed that better governmental relief policies could be attained by publicly revealing the scale of the social crisis in facts, statistics, reports, and images. Taylor believed that by focusing on the problem of one individual, the public could begin to understand the larger problems of society as a whole. Taylor's beliefs helped motivate Lange's work, and together they attempted to create emotionally moving photographs that would motivate changes and improvements in federal policy. Taylor had been working for the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) as a consultant to help study the large masses of migrants coming to California, as well as their dire living conditions. Taylor believed that in order to truly capture these rural conditions he would need a photographer, and his wife was picked for the job. With this new mission, Lange and Taylor traveled across California, photographing and interviewing the displaced migrants that continued to filter into the state.

In the same year the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration, was created under the Department of Agriculture as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal. From 1930 to 1936 gigantic dust storms had caused severe damage to agricultural lands across the nation, especially in the Great Plains, displacing thousands of farmers and their families who migrated west looking for work. The FSA was created in order to provide relief for the rural poor and impoverished tenant farmers, issuing low interest loans, helping improve soil conditions, and devising programs to help resettle many of the displaced and out of work farmers living in rural areas. [5] Roy Stryker, an economist who was the head of the Information Division of the FSA, also believed that documentary photography could be used to advocate social issues. [6] When Stryker saw Lange's photos he immediately decided to hire her as a photographer for his new



Photographer Dorothea Lange's work became famous during the Depression and after, symbolizing the human suffering and rural poverty of the era and pioneering a style known as "social documentary photography." Lange visited Washington State in 1939. "Washington, Yakima Valley, near Wapato. One of Chris Adolph's younger children," by Dorothea Lange, 1939. Click photograph to enlarge. (FSA-OWI fsa 8b34381)

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- Part two of our report series on Lange, Dorothea Lange in the Yakima Valley: Rural Poverty and Photography, by Stephanie Whitney
- Dorothea Lange Photo Gallery Browse a photo gallery of Lange's 1939 photographs from the Yakima Valley.
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photography campaign. The goal of this project was to show show Americans the desperation of farmers across the nation, and why they were deserving of government assistance. Stryker, sharing Taylor's progressive ideals, believed that showing the public the plight of the farmer would lead to support for government aid to the rural poor.

It is with the FSA that Lange truly began to define social documentary photography, and began to see her images as tools for political change. During the Depression, agricultural business was operating on an extremely inadequate system. Large masses of workers were needed for short periods of time, usually at harvest season, but during the rest of the year only a fraction of these workers were able to find jobs.^[7] This system left thousands of workers in unemployed for the majority of the year. Lange sought to document the effects of this uneven employment system on migrant workers and their families.

Lange's work reflected how the inadequate agricultural economy had negatively affected farmers across the nation, forced to travel the country looking for work, living in tents and shantytowns. These vagabond families were denied access to education, medical care, legal services, the postal system, and even the basic right to vote. After experiencing these conditions Lange and her husband campaigned the FSA to improve the circumstances of these poor farmers. Lange's goal was to create camps for these migrant farmers that provided clean water, food, substantial shelter, and medical services. Although Lange and her husband were only somewhat successful in this goal—only two camps were eventually created—her work helped to expose the dire conditions in which these workers were living and stood as public testaments to the humanity and struggles of migrant workers.



Dorothea Lange gave this 1939 photograph from Yakima Valley a descriptive caption that gave social context to her work: "Migratory worker in auto camp. Single man, speaks his mind. "Them WPAs are keeping us from a living. They oughtn't to do it. It ain't fair in no way. The government lays them off (that is in Work Projects Administration - 1939) and they come in because they're locals and take the jobs away from us that never had no forty-four dollars a month. I came out of Pennsylvania, used to be an oil worker. I'm getting along in years now and I seen lots of presidents and lots of systems. Voted for Roosevelt both times and I don't know of any president that ever leaned toward the laboring man like him, but this system they've got here in the fruit is a rotten system the way they work it." Click photograph to go to a gallery of Lange's images. (FSA-OWI fsa 8b34364)

Stryker and the FSA distributed Lange's work throughout the nation. Her photographs clearly documented the negative effects of the Depression on Americans, particularly the rural poor and migrant farmworkers. Lange's work was powerful in its effort to portray the personal side of the Depression's misery, as the individual families she worked with humanized the national crisis. Her work also advocated for new policies: by criticizing the large-scale farming systems that kept thousands out of work, her photographs helped show the necessity of government assistance. Because of Lange's photographs the nation was able to see the suffering of individual workers and families, and truly see the extent of the problem plaguing the nation.

Go to part two of our essay series on Lange:

["Dorothea Lange in the Yakima Valley: Rural Poverty and Photography,"](#) by Stephanie Whitney

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[1]. Baldwin, Sidney. *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968.

[2]. Meltzer, Milton. *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1978.

[3]. "White Angel Bread Line" Columbia University. "Dorothea Lange: Images of the Depression." http://www.columbia.edu/cu/amstudies/resources/dorothea_lange.html.

[4]. Gordon, Linda. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009.

[5]. Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*.

[6]. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. "The Photographers: Roy E. Stryker." <http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/photog14.html>.

[7]. Gordon, Linda. "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist," *Journal of American History* Dec. 2006: pp 698-727.