

# IN THIS PROUD LAND

AMERICA 1935-1943 AS SEEN IN THE F S A PHOTOGRAPHS

Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood



1. At home in Grand Junction, Colorado, Roy Stryker selecting FSA prints from his personal collection

# The FSA Collection of Photographs

by Roy Emerson Stryker

*In 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Resettlement Administration as part of the New Deal. The basic responsibilities of RA included: Low-interest loans to poor farmers which would enable them to leave small or marginal tracts and become owners of productive land; land-renewal projects, such as reforestation; removal of certain families from cities where the economy would not sustain them to communal farms and well-ordered rural villages where they could become self-sufficient; and sponsorship of camps for migrant farm workers. The Department of Agriculture absorbed the RA early in 1937, and the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act gave it legal status and a new name—The Farm Security Administration. [Ed.]*

For nearly eight years, from 1935 to 1943, it was my great privilege to direct a small group of photographers working out of a grubby little government office in Washington, D.C. These gifted men and women of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration produced 270,000 pictures during that time. It is called a great collection now, perhaps the greatest ever assembled in the history of America. But I am not interested in adjectives. I am only interested in pictures.

And what pictures they were. I had no idea what was going to happen. I expected competence. I did not expect to be shocked at what began to come across my desk. The first three men who went out—Carl Mydans, Walker Evans and Ben Shahn—began sending in some astounding stuff that first fall, about the same time that I saw the great work Dorothea Lange was doing in California and decided to hire her. Then Arthur Rothstein, who had set up the lab, started taking pictures. Every day was for me an education and a revelation. I could hardly wait to get to the mail in the morning.

I especially remember one of Walker's early pictures—one of a cemetery and a stone cross, with some streets and buildings and steel mills in the background. Months after we'd released that picture a woman came in and asked for a copy of it. We gave it to her and when I asked her what she wanted it for, she said, "I want to give it to my brother who's a steel executive. I want to write on it, 'Your cemeteries, your streets, your buildings, your steel mills. But our souls, God damn you.'"

Pictures like these were pretty heady. It was important that they came in when they did, so early in our experience. They gave me the first evidence of what we could do. They made it clear that the FSA collection was going to be something very special.

Just how special, though, we could not appreciate at the time. Sure, we had a sense that we were in on the beginning of something. In 1936 photography, which theretofore had been mostly a matter of landscapes and snapshots and family portraits, was fast being discovered as a serious tool of communications, a new way for a thoughtful, creative person to make a statement. Flash bulbs and small cameras were being used for the first

time. The rotogravure was dying; the first big picture magazines, which would take its place, were already being roughed out. In a year or so, and with a suddenness matched only by the introduction of television twelve years later, picture-taking became a national industry. We would have been insensitive indeed not to have realized that we were an important part of a movement.

In a sense, by experimenting freely with new forms and techniques, our unit was doing for professional photography what the WPA Theater was doing for the stage. Still, we had no idea that we were doing anything of the importance that later historians have credited us with. We particularly underestimated the content of our work. We know now that we helped open up a brand-new territory of American life and manners as a legitimate subject for visual commentary. We did not know it then. Day to day, we were too busy taking routine pictures for other Farm Security units, feeding pictures to newspapers, providing illustrations for reports and exhibits. There was one exception, however—and I guess I may as well admit it now. During the whole eight years, I held onto a personal dream that inevitably got translated into black-and-white pictures: I wanted to do a pictorial encyclopedia of American agriculture. My footnotes to the photographers' instructions ("keep your eyes open for a rag doll and a corn tester") undoubtedly accounted for the great number of photographs that got into the collection which had nothing to do with official business.

In truth, I think 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. There's an unusual continuity to it all. Mostly, there's rural America in it. It's the farms and the little towns and the highways between.

But most important, there is in this collection an attitude toward people. To my knowledge there is no picture in there that in any way whatsoever represents an attempt by a photographer to ridicule his subject, to be cute with him, to violate his privacy, or to do something to make a cliché. However they might have differed in skill and insight, our photographers had one thing in common, and that was a deep respect for human beings. Russell Lee's picture of the gnarled hands of the old woman, for instance—Russell took that with every degree of commiseration and respect. He wanted to say, "These are the hands of labor," and he said it eloquently. So it is all the way through the file. There's honesty there, and compassion, and a natural regard for individual dignity. These are the things that, in my opinion, give the collection its special appeal.

I think, too, that our work assumes particular significance when seen against the backdrop of contemporary photography as exemplified by the big picture magazines. By now, the bloom is off. Our eyes are literally

assaulted by pictures every day. We're surfeited with pictures. But the problem is not so much that the public is used to pictures but that pictures are being badly used. Our editors, I'm afraid, have come to believe that the photograph is an end in itself. They've forgotten that the photograph is only the subsidiary, the little brother, of the word. Too many times nowadays the picture is expected to tell the whole story, when in truth there's only one picture in a hundred thousand that can stand alone as a piece of communication. As a result, news reporting itself has come to have a hurried, superficial, unsatisfying quality. Too often, too, the pictures are planned in advance by an editor who never sees the subject and there's no chance for the photographer's spontaneity to come through. Most of all, though, our big picture magazines were guilty of the same thing that's infected our movies, our theater, and our literature. Everything now has to happen on stage. Everything has to be shown, even the syphilis scabs.

I remember once at *Life* arguing with one of their photographers and a layout man. We were looking at a photograph of a man and a woman and a little girl. Their backs were to us. The woman was distraught. Her husband had his arm around her. The little girl at their side was winding up her overalls with one finger. The tension was unmistakable—the daughter of this man and woman had drowned in a lake and they were dragging for her. The little girl with them was their daughter's playmate. The *Life* men insisted that it would have been a better picture had the photographer taken it from the front. I could not possibly agree. Theirs was the attitude of the news photographer—always show the face, even if it's awkward—and I'm afraid that in too many instances the news photographer has taken over. This is to be regretted, I think, because too often what is communicated by this kind of overstatement, this reliance on the obvious, is not the essence of a situation but only the insincerity of the photographer.

In the light of what's happened since, it's clear that what we did at FSA constitutes a unique episode in the history of photography. And yet what was it precisely that we did? What, in a word, was our contribution?

Was it, for instance, art? Certainly we had some artists working for us. Walker Evans thought of his work as art and, to prove it, had a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art. Ben Shahn, indubitably one of America's great moderns, was on the team; indeed, some of the scenes he took for us found their counterparts later in some of his oils. I remember sending young Jack Delano on assignment to Vermont. He spent hours asking himself, a bit self-consciously, "What is the *one* picture I can take that will say Vermont?" There's no question that photographers like these produced some great pictures, pictures that will live the way great paintings live. But is it art? Is any photography art? I've always avoided this particular controversy. Nothing strikes me as more

futile, and most of us in the unit felt the same way.

Was it sociology? I'm sure it was more than a little bit sociology. Ansel Adams, in fact, once told me, "What you've got are not photographers. They're a bunch of sociologists with cameras." When the author of *Middletown*, Bob Lynd, saw some of our pictures he got terribly excited and said, "This is a wonderful device for sociologists." He then got off onto a long discourse on the need to make people really *see*. "I wonder," he said, "how many people know what's even down their own street." Interestingly enough, one of the last boys I hired, John Collier, later developed a technique for using photographs to make people see more clearly "what's down their own street." He found that pictures frequently would stimulate seemingly inarticulate people into volunteering important anthropological data.

Was it journalism? Yes and no. We took news pictures, of course. We were in the same seedbed with *Life* and *Look*, for which some of our old staff later worked. (We are, as a matter of fact, said to have contributed substantially to the rise of photo-journalism. It would make just as much sense to speak of word-journalism. It seems to me that there's only journalism, plain and unhyphenated, and journalism consists of both words and pictures and sometimes you use more words than pictures and sometimes vice versa.) But we had no news photographers, as such. By this I mean we had no people especially gifted at knowing how to get to the dog fight, how to get to the place where the excitement was, point a camera, and get out. I think it's significant that in our entire collection we have only one picture of Franklin Roosevelt, the most newsworthy man of the era—this, mind you, in a collection that's sometimes said to have reported the feel and smell and taste of the thirties even more vividly than the news media. No, I think the best way to put it is that newspictures are the noun and the verb; our kind of photography is the adjective and adverb. The newspicture is a single frame; ours, a subject viewed in series. The newspicture is dramatic, all subject and action. Ours shows what's back of the action. It is a broader statement—frequently a mood, an accent, but more frequently a sketch and not infrequently a story.

Was it history? Of course. At least it was a slice of history. We provided some of the important material out of which histories of the period are being written. But you'll find no record of big people or big events in the collection. There are pictures that say labor and pictures that say capital and 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.

Was it education? Very much so, and in more ways than one. For me, it was the equivalent of two Ph.D.'s and a couple of other degrees thrown in. I know it was an education to every photographer we had, too. And I'm sure it's made a contribution to public education.



If I had to sum it up, I'd say, yes, it was more education than anything else. We succeeded in doing exactly what Rex Tugwell said we should do: *We introduced Americans to America*. We developed the camera team, in contrast to the cameraman, and the full effect of this team's work was that it helped connect one generation's image of itself with the reality of its own time in history.

The reason we could do this, I think (and perhaps the reason it could never be done again), was that all of us in the unit were so personally involved in the times, and the times were so peculiarly what they were. It was a trying time, a disturbed time. None of us had suffered personally from the Depression, but all of us were living close to it, and when the photographers went out they saw a great deal of it. Curiously, though, the times did not depress us. On the contrary, there was an exhilaration in Washington, a feeling that things were being mended, that great wrongs were being corrected, that there were no problems so big they wouldn't yield to the application of good sense and hard work. There was apprehension, sure—but no apprehension to compare with our current fear of the bomb. There was a unifying source of inspiration, a great intelligence at work. It was called the New Deal and we were proud to be in on it. And with it all there was the willingness to strike out and do new things. You could do them, too, without fearing that somebody would take your job away or that you might be hauled before some Congressional committee and be made to confess your sins. There was a spirit in Washington that wrapped up our whole group. Some of us later came into positions of real authority. Some of us have even acquired what passes for fame. But I dare say that not one of us has felt more purposeful, or had more fun, than when at FSA.

I cannot, however, attribute the success of our unit entirely to the times. I can't dismiss it all as a product of the spirit of the thirties. I was in charge of the unit. I was given more freedom in the running of it than I had any reasonable right to expect, and whatever came of it, I was—as they say in government—both accountable and responsible. I never took a picture and yet I felt a part of every picture taken. I sat in my office in Washington and yet I went into every home in America. I was both the Stabilizer and the Exciter. Now at eighty I have the honesty to advance the somewhat immodest thought that it was my ideas, my biases, my passions, my convictions, my chemistry that held the team together and made of their work something more than a catalogue of celluloid rectangles in a government storehouse.

For thirty years I have waited to make my personal choice from the huge file that passed over my desk during those eight years. Partly it was because I did not wish to offend any photographer by leaning less toward his work than another's or by skipping over him entirely. I wanted no hard feelings among the fine people who worked for me. It has also been because the pictures needed to stew for a long time in my mind.

I have not chosen the greatest pictures from that file—although some of the greatest ones are included. I have chosen not on the basis of the artistic merit of a picture but on the basis of what each one represents to me in terms of intent. It is a purely personal choice and future historians may argue with me. Yet this selection states what one man—Roy Stryker—believed this country to be during a certain period of its history. On that assumption I have made what I hope is a valid and meaningful selection.



H. and III. Rothstein, *Couple who are FSA clients, Kersey, Colorado, 1939*

IV. Lee, *Woman at Sabine Farms, an FSA project; near Marshall, Texas, 1939*

# Selected Shooting Scripts

From R. E. Stryker  
To all photographers

Suggestions recently made by Robert Lynd  
(co-author of *Middletown*)  
for things which should be  
photographed as American Background.

FSA  
1936

## Home in the evening

Photographs showing the various ways that different income groups spend their evenings, for example:

Informal clothes  
Listening to the radio  
Bridge  
More precise dress  
Guests

## Attending church

Follow through a set of pictures showing people on their way from their home to church

Getting out of church  
Visiting and talking  
Returning from church to home  
Visiting and talking in the vestibule

Here again, note the difference in the habits of the various income groups.

## The group activities of various income levels

The organized and unorganized activities of the various income groups

## "Where can people meet?"

Well-to-do  
Country clubs  
Homes  
Lodges

## Poor

Beer halls  
Pool halls  
Saloons  
Street corners  
Garages  
Cigar stores

## Consider the same problem as applied to women.

Do women have as many meeting places as men?

It is probable that the women in the lower-income levels have far less opportunity of mingling with other women than do the women of the higher-income groups.

## "How many people do you know?"

There is a marked difference here between the circle of acquaintanceship between the income groups and also on the basis of urban versus rural.

## Backyards

"What do you see out of the kitchen window?"

Various exhibit pictures could be taken in different towns and on the basis of different income groups.

## "Looking down my street"

Here again, a most interesting set of pictures could be taken, keeping in mind different income groups and different geographical areas.

## People on and off the job.

How much different do people look and act when they are on the job than when they are off?

This would necessitate some very careful camera studies.

## Pictures showing relationship between time and the job.

This would include such things as pictures taken of the same people every ten years, showing how people age in their work, and pictures emphasizing the aged man and woman and the job.

## The effect of the depression in the smaller towns of the United States.

To include such things as the growth of small independent shops, stores, and businesses in the small towns; for example, the store opened up on the sun porch, the beauty shop in the living room

## The baseball diamond as an important part of our general landscape.

This is particularly noticeable when one views small towns from the air.

## "Fit for the likes of us"

What are the things which we feel comfortable doing with some and not with others?

## Relationship between density of population and income of such things as

Pressed clothes

Polished shoes and so on

Is it likely in large industrial areas that even the poor groups will make a greater effort to have polished shoes, pressed clothes, than the same or even a higher-income group might in the smaller populated areas. What effect does wealth have on this?

## "How do people look?"

In towns of various sizes—1500, 25,000 to 30,000, 100,000. Consider the same thing from a geographical standpoint.

## The wall decorations in homes as an index to the different income groups and their reactions.

## The photographic study of the difference in the men's world and the women's world.

## A photographic study of use of leisure time in various income groups.

## Compare headlines regionally.

Take the same topics such as a kidnapping or other news item with national interest and note the manner in which it is treated in the different parts of the country.

From R. E. Stryker  
To Russell Lee,  
Arthur Rothstein,  
in particular

FSA  
February 19, 1942

I. Production of foods—fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs, milk and milk products, miscellaneous products.

- a. Packaging and processing of above
- b. Picking, hauling, sorting, preparing, drying, canning, packaging, loading for shipping
- c. Field operations—planting; cultivation; spraying
- d. Dramatic pictures of fields, show “pattern” of the country; get feeling of the productive earth, boundless acres.
- e. Warehouses filled with food, raw and processed, cans, boxes, bags, etc.

II. Poultry—large-scale operations

- Hatching, shipping chicks
- Get a few pictures “cute” of little chicks
- Real close-ups
- Eggs—get “pictorial” shots of eggs in baskets, in piles, in crates (get pattern pictures for posters)
- Dressed poultry
- Chickens in pens and yards
- Feeding operations

III. General farming—get pictures of representative small farms (California—Texas) General farming, buildings, farmer & family, farmer at work.

IV. Small town under war conditions

- Select a small town some distance from large cities and make a camera study of how this town looks under war conditions.

Civilian Defense Activities

Meetings of all kinds—Red Cross

Farm groups, etc.

Look for a town near an Army Camp

Signs—stores, filling stations, etc.

Selective Service

Registration of new age groups

Home gardens, Civilian Defense Activities

Schools. More neighborliness (Any evidence of this?)

V. Auto and auto tire rationing. A civilian population gets off rubber tires. (Many things should be photographed now before disappearance or marked decline.)

Old tires piles.

Used car lots. Especially when enormous numbers of cars are stored.

Signs—any sign which suggests rubber (or other commodity) shortage, rationing, etc. Horse-drawn vehicles. Blacksmith shops, harness shops, buggies, delivery wagons, horse drays (for trucks), bicycles.

(What will happen to roadside hamburger stand?)  
Watch for closed filling stations or eat joints.

VI. The highway

Watch for any signs which indicate a country at war. “Man at Work” pictures. We are still short of these pictures. These should include:

- (1) highway building—big stuff, e.g., in the Rocky Mts. or major highways.
- (2) Repair and maintenance.
- (3) Emphasize the men.

VII. (for R. Lee) Mining, California, Arizona, New Mexico

Get pictures showing increased activities among prospective and small operating outfits.

Mercury—near San Jose, California. Cement, Kaiser's cement plant near San Jose, California.

(See Jack Tolan. Also Sat. Eve. Post article on Kaiser.)  
Miners—faces & miners at work

VIII. The land

The long shots for a “feel” of the country

Details

IX. People—we must have at once:

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. (Don't misunderstand the above. FSA is still interested in the lower-income groups and we want to continue to photograph this group.) We particularly need young men and women who work in our factories, the young men who build our bridges, roads, dams and large factories.

Housewives in their kitchen or in the yard picking flowers.

More contented-looking old couples—woman sewing, man reading; sitting on porch; working in garden; sitting in park; coming from church; at picnics, at meetings.