Migrants, Mothers, and Museums: The Great Depression on Exhibit

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CALIFORNIA DREAMIN’:
Investigating the Migrant Experience during the Great Depression
By: Heather Walker
“You've all heard the story of old Sunny Cal
The place where it never rains.
They say it don't know how…
They say, "Come on, you Okies,
   Work is easy found.
   Bring along your cotton pack.
You can pick the whole year round.
   Get your money ever' night.
   Spread your blanket down.
It's always bright and warm.
You can sleep right on the ground."
   But listen to me Okies,
   I came out here one day
   Spent all my money getting here.
   Now I can't get away….”

-Jack Bryant, Firebaugh FSA Camp, 1940
Historical Question:
Was California the Promised Land for Depression-era migrants?
Guiding Questions

• What role did Route 66 play in Dust Bowl migration?
• Why was California the destination of choice?
• What was their experience like in California?
• Did it meet their expectations?
• Did migrants stay in California after the Depression?
CALIFORNIA OR BUST

- Consistent varied growing seasons provided work
- Promoted by tourism agencies in 1920s and through 1930s
- Earlier migration provided family connections to region
- Ease of journey and accessibility of Rt. 66
- Offered generous unemployment relief
The advertisement above was created by a tourism agency called Californians Inc. in the 1920s. Often they exaggerated reality.

Attracting farmworkers, the flyer to the right is advertising work as cotton pickers in Arizona. Similar flyers produced by the government were seen in California.
NEW DEAL, NEW LIFE

- Two streams of migration: rural and urban
- Urban migrants found jobs more quickly, higher standard of living
- Influx of rural workers caused wages to decrease, poor living conditions
- Federal government took burden off state and local infrastructures:
  - Resettlement Administration (1935) and Farm Security Administration (1937)
  - Labor camps used to assimilate migrants
  - Addressed health concerns and safety concerns
“They sure do take care of us. We have everything them city folk have. They take care of everybody.”

L.D. Westfall, Shafter FSA Camp, August 4, 1940.
An aerial view of the FSA camp for migrant workers at Shafter, California (1938)
DREAMS COME TRUE?

• Limited agricultural opportunities
• Hostile response by established population
  – “Okie” discrimination
  – Bum Blockade
• Vying for citizenship
CONCLUSIONS

• The push factors influenced the migration more than pull factors.
• Rural migrants fared worse than those that migrated to urban areas.
• California, with assistance from the federal government, did fulfill basic provision for migrants in the rural areas.
• Whether or not California lived up to migrant expectations depended on the individual experience.
• The expectations of Depression-era migrants changed over time as the promises of California also changed within historical context.
Migrant’s expectations were as varied as their experiences in California.
Farm Security Administration
Essential question

- How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?
18 year old migrant mother

- Who is this woman?
- Where is her husband?
- Why is the wedding ring highlighted?
- What is up with the child?
- Why is he/she eating dirt?
President Franklin D. Roosevelt put it in his second inaugural address, "one-third" of the nation was "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," the young bore a disproportionate burden of poverty.
Photographers and writers were hired to report and document the plight of poor farmers. The Information Division of the FSA was responsible for providing educational materials and press information to the public. Under Roy Stryker, the Information Division of the FSA adopted a goal of "introducing America to Americans."
Roy Stryker’s job description is as follows:

"Direct the activities of investigators, photographers, economists, sociologists and statisticians engaged in the accumulation and compilation of reports...photographic material, vital statistics, agricultural surveys, maps, and sketches necessary to make accurate description of the various phases of the Resettlement Administration, particularly with regard to the historical, sociological and economic aspects of the several programs and their accomplishments."
Photographers

- Theodor Jung
- Edwin Rosskam
- Louise Rosskam
- Ben Shahn
- John Collier
- Sheldon Dick
- Jack Delano
- Walker Evans
- Dorothea Lange
- Carl Mydans
- Gordon Parks
- Arthur Rothstein
- John Vachon
- Marion Post Wolcott
- Russell Lee
How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?
How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?

CHILDREN OF MIGRANT COTTON FIELD NEAR CASA GRANDE PROJECT, ARIZONA
CREATOR(S): LANGE, DOROTHEA, PHOTOGRAPHER
DATE CREATED/PUBLISHED: 1937 MAY.

MIGRANT CHILDREN IN FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA) MIGRATORY LABOR CAMP.
1939 FEB. | 1 NEGATIVE | LANGE, DOROTHEA
How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?

LUNCHTIME FOR YOUNG MIGRANTS
CREATOR(S): LANGE, DOROTHEA, PHOTOGRAPHER
DATE CREATED/PUBLISHED: 1939 FEB.

MIGRANT CHILDREN AT NURSERY SCHOOL, BERRIEN COUNTY, MICHIGAN
CREATOR(S): VACHON, JOHN, 1914-1972, PHOTOGRAPHER
DATE CREATED/PUBLISHED: 1940 JULY.
How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?

FARM LABORER'S WIFE AND CHILDREN, "EIGHTY ACRES," GLASSBORO, NEW JERSEY
1938 OCT. | 1 NEGATIVE | ROTHSTEIN, ARTHUR

SOUTHEAST MISSOURI FARMS, SHARECROPPER'S WIFE AND CHILDREN, LA FORGE PROJECT, MISSOURI
1938 MAY. | 1 NEGATIVE | LEE, RUSSELL
How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?

FARM CHILDREN, SHERIDAN COUNTY, KANSAS
1939 AUG. | 1 NEGATIVE | LEE, RUSSELL

CHILDREN OF FARM WORKERS LIVING AT THE FSA (FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION) LABOR CAMP, CALDWELL, IDAHO
1941 JUNE. | 1 NEGATIVE | LEE, RUSSELL
How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?

YOUNG MOTHER BRINGS HER CHILD TO THE TRAILER CLINIC.
FSA (FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION) MOBILE CAMP.
MERRILL, KLAMATH COUNTY, OREGON
1939 OCT. LANGE, DOROTHEA

LUNCH FOR CHILDREN AT THE FSA (FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION)'S MOBILE CAMP FOR MIGRATORY FARM WORKERS, ODELL, OREGON
1941 SEPT. | 1 NEGATIVE | LEE, RUSSELL, 1903-1986
Essential question

- How did the pictures from the Farm Security Administration portray children?
- Were these children better taken care of with Government assistance?
- Did the pictures show the two extremes?
- Was this an effective propaganda tool?
- Did the Farm Security Administration introduce “Americans to Americans”?
What is the story of the Migrant Mother?

By Christi Carlson
The Characters

**Roy Stryker**
- Director of the Farm Security Administration Division of Information
- Helped launch a massive educational propaganda campaign to garner support for Roosevelt’s New Deal farming programs
- Goal was to “introduce America to Americans”

**Dorothea Lange**
- Hired as a photographer by the FSA program
- Required to submit all negatives to directly to Stryker with accompanying field notes
- No photographs were to be published or distributed for personal gain
The Characters

Florence Owens Thompson

- Mother of 8 children - 4 who were present at the time of the photograph
- Full-blooded Cherokee who moved to California after being displaced from tribal lands
- Had been working in a pea-pickers camp in Nipomo, CA at the time of the photograph
The Setting

Lange, in a 1960 interview for Popular Photography magazine:

“"I was on my way and barely saw a crude sign with pointing arrow which flashed by at the side of the road, saying PEA-PICKERS CAMP. But out of the corner of my eye I did see it I didn't want to stop, and didn't. I didn't want to remember that I had seen it, so I drove on and ignored the summons . . .

Having well convinced myself for 20 miles that I could continue on, I did the opposite. Almost without realizing what I was doing I made a U-turn on the empty highway. I went back those 20 miles and turned off the highway at that sign, PEA-PICKERS CAMP."
Lange:

“I was following instinct, not reason; I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon.

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

The pea crop at Nipomo had frozen and there was no work for anybody. But I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers. It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment."
Lange’s Field Notes: “Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute.”
The Conflict

• Lange submitted photos to local paper and they were published March 10, 1936 under the headline: “What Does the New Deal Mean to this Mother and Her Children?”
• Inspired nearly 20,000 lbs. of food to be sent to the camp (Thompson and her family had moved on by that point)
• Image became the most iconic and well-circulated image of the FSA Program
The Conflict

• As Lange never asked for the subject’s name, the identity was unknown for over 40 years.

• Thompson wrote to the local paper and identified herself, AP published the story “Woman Fighting Mad Over Famous Depression Photo.”
The Conflict

Thompson:
“I wish she hadn’t taken my picture. I can’t get a penny out of it. She said she wouldn’t sell the pictures. She said she would send me a copy. She never did.”

Katherine Macintosh (daughter):
“We were ashamed over it. We didn’t want no one to know who we were.”
The Resolution

Florence Thompson and her daughters Norma Rydlewski (in front), Katherine McIntosh, and Ruby Sprague, at Norma’s house, Modesto, CA, June 1979, by Bill Ganzel. To hear Florence’s story, click here.

Migrant Mother [Florence Thompson with her daughters], Nipomo, CA, March 1936, by Dorothea Lange.
The Resolution

• Thompson suffers from a stroke in 1983, family turns to media to help with rising medical expenses
• $35,000 and 2000 letters arrive expressing thanks to the Migrant Mother

Owens (son):
“None of us ever really understood how deeply Mama’s photo affected people. I guess we had only looked at it from our perspective. For Mama and us the photo had always been a bit of a curse. After all those letters came in, I think it gave us a sense of pride.”
The Resolution

Florence Leona Thompson

Migrant Mother: A Legend of the Strength of American Motherhood

Sept. 1, 1903 - Sept. 16, 1983
How can I use this in the classroom?

• One possible way for students to work with various documents and photographs is to create a “museum” style exhibit
• Poses the questions “How do we tell a story? Whose story do we decide to tell?” and introduces concept of public history
• Uses Common Core skills by deciphering important information and citing evidence to support an opinion
The Task

• Create a 200-word interpretive sign to be placed at one of the following locations. The sign should include the information you deem important to the story as well as 2 – 3 documents or photographs of your choice.

• The Locations:
  – Group 1: Sign to be placed at Arizona/California Border
  – Group 2: Sign to be placed at FSA Camp location in Imperial Valley, CA
  – Group 3: Sign to be placed at the site of the Migrant Mother Photograph in Nipomo, CA
Northern Arizona University: Inquiry in Teaching and Learning Website for History and Social Studies

http://nau.edu/CAL/History/History-Social-Studies-Education/Welcome/