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## Photographic Equality: Dorothea Lange, Her Migrant Mother, and The Nisei Internees

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Dorothea Lange's images of poverty in Depression era America and of war-time Japanese-American internees are among the most iconic photographs of the twentieth century. David J. Marcou investigates the life

and work of a photographer who recognized that human dignity lies at the heart of all great documentary photography.

Photographic Equality: Dorothea Lange, Her Migrant Mother, and the Nisei Internees

*"The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and they took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water. And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had all come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together, they shared their lives, their food and the things they hoped for in the new country." John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, 1939.*

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Big things often emerge from small

packages, and so it was with Dorothea

Margaretta Nuthorn's life.

Dorothea was born into a Lutheran family in the Jewish neighborhood of Hoboken, New

Jersey, on May 25, 1895. Her father, Henry, an attorney, walked out on her mother, Joan, when Dorothea was 12. To survive, Joan worked in a New York City library, and later for the probation courts.

The child attended primary school, but would have skipped out endlessly, if she could, to walk the neighborhoods of life, and spend time in museums and galleries, viewing the art she so loved. Dorothea preferred visualizing life rather than writing it down, though her best field-notes in the 1930s were to be insight-driven and literate.

Dorothea's ancestry was German, on both sides. Three brothers to her mother had been trained as lithographers in Germany, before they came to America. After Henry Nutzhorn absconded, Joan, Dorothea, and Dorothea's younger brother, Henry Martin, would move in with Joan's mother, Sophie Vottler.

When Joan took the job with the probation courts, it required she visit the homes of those involved. Dorothea sometimes accompanied her mother. The experience would prove invaluable.

Joan kept notes on her home visits, and Dorothea, it seems, read some of these. Walking with a limp wasn't slowing Dorothea down enough to prevent her from wanting to see the world.

The limp derived from her bout with polio at age seven, which left her right leg partially paralyzed and wizened, principally from the knee down. She couldn't flex the front of her foot for the rest of her life.

Dorothea apparently never used trusses or braces, but did wear a right shoe a half size smaller than her left. Later, she spoke of her disability: 'No one who hasn't lived the life of a semi-cripple knows how much that means. I think it was perhaps the most important thing that happened to me.'

'[It] formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me. All those things at once. I've never gotten over it and I am aware of the force and power of it.'

It is significant, too, that Dorothea Lange came to prominence during the time when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an even more severe polio victim, rose to power. Neither would let their disability stand in the way of doing important work.

Still, Dorothea was called 'Limpy' by other children, while her mother always said, 'Now walk as well as you can!' The daughter grew bitter against her mother, as a result, but learned to bide her time sufficiently and began making her way in New York City. She always wore long dresses or slacks, though, to conceal her disfigurement.

Dorothea's camera would also become part of the things that were second-nature to her.

She said: 'You put your camera around your neck in the morning, along with putting on your shoes, and there it is, an appendage of the body that shares your life with you.'

For high school, Dorothea's mother arranged to send her to Wadleigh, for girls, in Manhattan by stating their residence was in New York City, not New Jersey, where it actually was.

At Wadleigh, Dorothea's progress was helped by a teacher who upgraded her student's paper crucially once, when she'd done abysmally, so she could finish school there.

When Dorothea graduated, Joan asked her what she wanted to be. 'I want to be a photographer,' she said. [Footnote:1]

## **EXPANDING CONTACTS**

After graduation, Dorothea studied at a Teachers' College, because her mother said she needed something to fall back on, if becoming a photographer didn't pan out. However, she longed to take pictures and soon found teaching wasn't for her.

She next studied photography, with Clarence White, a notable pictorialist, portraitist, and chiaroscuro specialist at Columbia College, known for his deft, delicate people photos; and she apprenticed under several photographers, including Arnold Genthe, who had famously photographed the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and had later come to New York, where he established his studio. Among Genthe's sitters were Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, as well as John D. Rockefeller and Greta Garbo.

In 1918, Dorothea felt ready to travel, photographing as she went. She and friend Florence Ahlstrom set out on a world-tour, but when they reached San Francisco their money was stolen and they had to find work immediately.

Dorothea got a job at Marsh & Company, whose business included cheap photo-finishing. Then, in 1919, the divorce between Dorothea's parents went through, and Joan retook her maiden name; Dorothea converted her last name to 'Lange', too, utilizing it the rest of her life.

One of the first people Dorothea Lange met at Marsh's was artist Roi Partridge, who was married to Imogen Cunningham. With expanding contacts, Dorothea soon set up her own portrait studio, and her clients included some of the best-connected families in the area.

Cunningham, a close friend of Lange's, would later become part of the famed f/64 group of photographers, which would begin in 1932, and which got its name from the smallest aperture on a camera, yielding the fullest depth of field. Other members included Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

Dorothea never joined f/64. However, she was a friend of many in the group, including Adams, whom she periodically relied on for his superb print-making from her negatives.

In 1920, Lange married Maynard Dixon, a talented western artist. They had two sons, Daniel and John. However, Dorothea was not a stay-at-home mom, and in a pattern that would repeat itself often over the years, friends and family were enlisted as 'foster-parents' for the

children.

Maynard and Dorothea pursued their art primarily, with Dorothea sometimes accompanying Dixon on his trips into other western states. Her tight close-up of the face of a Hopi Indian is a notable Lange photo from this period.

The Wall Street crash occurred in October 1929, and by 1932, Lange's studio began faltering badly, due to the depressed economy. Dorothea began to venture out onto the San Francisco streets with her camera. [2]

### **THE START OF SOMETHING BIG**

In 1932, during the depth of the Depression, when 14 million work-eligible Americans were without work, Dorothea became aware of the discrepancy between her formal portraits and what was going on in the street.

She knew her strength in photography was taking pictures of people and so it was that she began shooting San Francisco street life.

A rich woman called the 'White Angel' had set up a bread line nearby, and Dorothea had finally decided to photograph it, taking along her brother for protection. As it turned out, even unemployed people took to her sufficiently, so she could photograph without objection. It was the street, nevertheless, and there would still be shocks and intrusions occasionally.

On that first day, when she'd made her decision and gone to the White Angel Bread Line, she took one of her best-known photos. It could have been lost forever, though, but for some good fortune.

Dorothea had made 12 exposures on her 3 1/4" X 4 1/4" Graflex, three of them of the bread line. When she got home, she removed her sheet-film from the camera's film holder, handing the holder to her assistant, Roer Sturtevant, for reloading later.

The next day, Sturtevant took the holder into the darkroom and, with the light out luckily, reached in and found a film not yet pulled out. He put it in the box and developed it. It was the picture Lange would call 'White Angel Bread Line,' showing an older man in hat with his cup, leaning against a fence facing the photographer, his back to the other men waiting for food. [3]

'I can only say I knew I was looking at something,' Lange said of taking the Bread Line photograph. 'You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you.'

'Sometimes you have an inner sense that you have encompassed the thing generally. You know then that you are not taking anything away from anyone: their privacy, their dignity, their wholeness.'

When her portrait customers saw the photo, they asked her what she'd been doing photographing 'that'. But Dorothea knew taking the photo was the right thing to do. She had not only made a great street portrait, but she'd also provided 'the context of the lives of the people in it,' according to writer George P. Elliott. In other words, Dorothea Lange had photographed people of interest, composing and using the lighting to tell a human story, in the subject's natural environment. It was the start of something big. [4]

The next year, 1934, Lange met Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist from Iowa who taught at the University of California. She did some work for him, and they fell in love. In 1935, she was amicably divorced from Maynard Dixon, as was Taylor from his wife, and the couple married. Taylor had three children from his former marriage, and Lange two, so their new family became a total of seven. [5]

## ROY STRYKER AND THE FSA PHOTOGRAPHERS

One of Paul Taylor's jobs was as part-time consultant to the State Emergency Relief Administration of California. Since photographers were not widely employed in his work, his office manager, Lawrence Hewes, Jr., broke the rules and hired Lange at \$1,560 a year, as a 'clerk-stenographer', to use her photos.

Then in mid-1935, Dorothea was hired by Roy Emerson Stryker, who'd himself been hired for the vague Historical Section Chief job in the US Resettlement Administration (RA), created by FDR's Executive Order of April 30th, 1935.

That executive order subsumed a number of programmes including one that moved sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and other poor farmers to subsistence farms held in-common.

The Resettlement Administration was subsumed by the Farm Security Administration, in the Department of Agriculture. The Farm Security Administration, or FSA, was to become one of the most important agencies in the employment of photographers.

Although he himself had hired her Roy Stryker wasn't immediately impressed by Dorothea Lange's photos.

Because she was part of the same organization employing talented Walker Evans, John Vachon, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, the Rosskhams (Edwin and Louise), Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, Esther Bublely, Marion Post Walcott, and eventually Gordon Parks, it took time before the hard-driving Stryker admitted Dorothea 'had the most sensitivity and the most rapport with people' of all his photographers.

The photographers assigned to the RA, and later to the FSA, photographed all over the United States, documenting chronic rural problems especially, including land-erosion and poverty. Their photos were sent to publishers, free-of-charge, to suggest how to uplift the poor, including people thrown out of their homes by bank foreclosures, etc., and forced to migrate cross-country, before there was anything like a sophisticated Interstate Highway System. Roads were often unpaved, and towns few and far between.

Lange was assigned mainly to California, though she'd travel tens of thousands of miles, including visits to Washington, D.C. The issue of who should retain the negatives struck closely to Lange, who wanted to utilize prints in California, and save time and the risk of losing images, by having her own printers do the work, and then send prints to Stryker, too. She also feared the deterioration of her films due to bad weather. Stryker balked; a tentative truce allowed negatives and prints to be sent back and forth.

One thing Lange and others feared was Stryker's ill-treatment of negatives. Often he'd punch two holes in negatives he rejected, and as any self-respecting photographer knows you just don't destroy negatives.

Dorothea hinted to Stryker they should meet to discuss issues. Stryker said he couldn't travel to California, but would try to answer her letters more promptly. Whether Stryker agreed fully or not, Dorothea would generally develop her films in Berkeley. She would then make three prints of each photo and forward them and relevant negatives to him. He would then return one print of each photo to her, so she could keep control of her lab. At least Lange would know immediately what her negatives contained.

Another issue was criticism from conservatives that the Roosevelt administration was too left wing, and that, they said, was especially true of FSA photographers, who they called propagandists. That label didn't bother Lange; she said that when it's done with feeling and has a social purpose, everything is propaganda.

The conservatives suggested liberals were attacking rich land-owners and banks with propaganda, thus adversely affecting American livelihoods.

It was said a photo taken by Arthur Rothstein, who had moved a steer's skull onto a dry riverbed, had been faked to prove erosion was destroying American farms. Rothstein suggested he moved the skull only a short distance, and simply to take better pictures, but

critics, already outraged by FDR's deficit spending and social welfare programs, quickly latched onto a non-issue and made it a hot issue instead. [6]

### THE PEA-PICKER'S CAMP



Image via [Wikipedia](#)

In February 1936, Stryker wired approval to Lange for a one-month field trip to Southern California. The field trip completed, Dorothea was driving home, the weather cold and miserable.

'It was raining, the camera bags were packed, and I had on the seat beside me in the car the results of my long trip,' said Lange. 'Sixty-five miles an hour for seven hours would get me home to my family that night, and my eyes were glued to the wet and gleaming highway that stretched out ahead.'

'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 ... I didn't want to stop, and didn't.'

Then, accompanied by the rhythmic beat of the windshield wipers, arose an inner argument:

'Dorothea, how about that camp back there? What is the situation back there?

'Are you going back?

'Nobody could ask this of you, now could they?....

'Having 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.'

The rest is history. Though the family in the Migrant Mother sequence looks very much down on their luck, there's also strength in the mother's face, of a much-put-upon, but still resilient sort. After Lange had made six exposures of the mother and her children, her iconic photo would be published worldwide and still is.

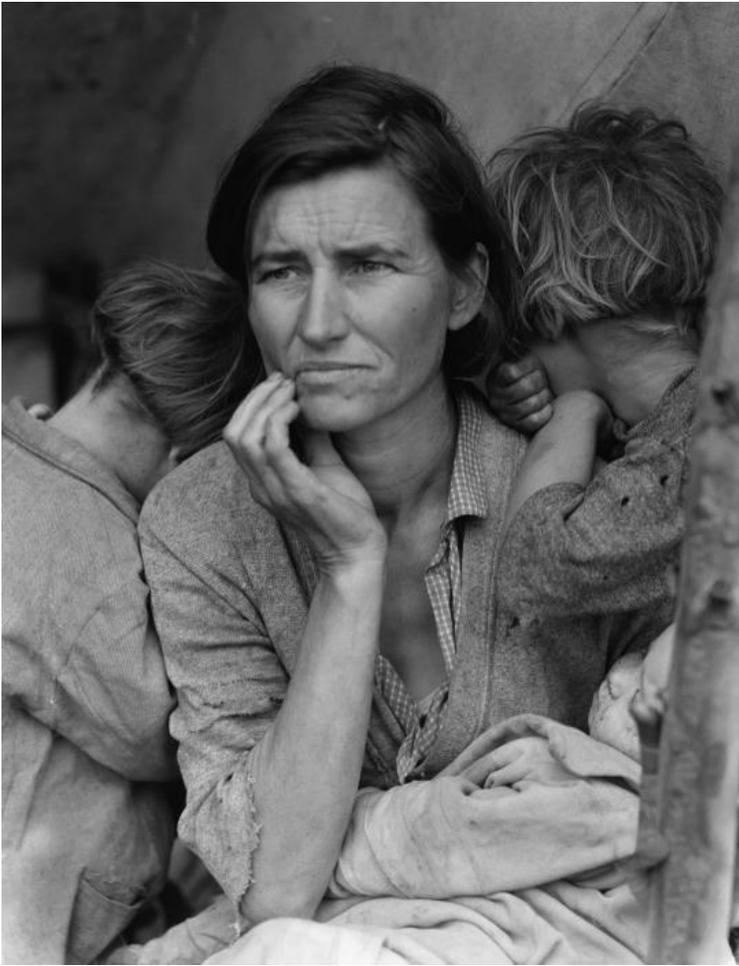


Image via [Wikipedia](#)

Almost immediately, the photograph would prompt relief assistance, which didn't directly help the Thompson family – Florence Owens Thompson was the iconic mother, and she and her family departed the area promptly after Lange was there.

Lange was later unsure about what she'd said to the mother to assuage any fear she might have had about Lange's photographing the family.

However, Dorothea did state: 'There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled

'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.'

Roy Stryker recalled what that photo meant to the FSA programme and to the country, nearly 35 years later in an interview with his biographer, Nancy Wood: 'When Dorothea took that picture, that was the ultimate. She never surpassed it,' said Stryker. 'To me, it was the picture of Farm Security. The others were marvelous but that was special.'

'People would say to me, that migrant woman looks posed and I'd say she does not look posed. That picture is as uninvolved with the camera as any picture I've ever seen,' Stryker added.

The first time the iconic image of the 'Migrant Mother' was published was in *Survey Graphic's* September 1936 issue. Other photographs from the Nipomo sequence were published in the *San Francisco News* as early as March 10th and 11th, 1936, and resulted in aid being sent to the pea-pickers camp at Nipomo. [7]

The first time 'Migrant Mother' was shown in a gallery was at the first exhibit of the Museum of Modern Art's new Department of Photography, in 1941. Countless publications and exhibits followed.

George P. Elliott's commentary hits the mark: 'Most of Lange's pictures are of people, and usually the center of interest is a face expressing troubled emotion. Her temptation is to sentimentalize these subjects about whom her feelings are so warm.

'But in her frequent successes she redeems these pictures from sentimentality by the honesty and clarity of her seeing. Her vision leads to our warm understanding ... 'Migrant Mother' centres on a manifestly decent woman whose face is ravaged by immediate worry ...

She is poor, and we assume that her poverty and the uncertainty of her future cause her worry. But the viewer is less concerned with her poverty as such, and far, far less with feeling guilty about the social conditions that imposed poverty upon her, than ... with understanding the profounder, the humanly universal, results of that poverty.

'For the picture is a sort of anti-Madonna and Child,' wrote Elliott. 'One sees on her lap part of a sleeping, dirty baby; but the mother, who, we feel without reservation, wants to love and cherish her children, is severed from them by her anxiety even as they lean on her.'

Elliott later added, 'Not all the wire-pulling and slipper-licking in Babylon will, finally, do a fraction as much to get a picture known and seen as its own power.' 'Migrant Mother' has that power. [8]

#### NOBLER THAN INVENTION



Image via [Wikipedia](#)

Of the five additional exposures Lange made of Florence Thompson at the Pea-Pickers camp in February 1936, one other is worth comment – 'The Other Migrant Mother,' in Michael Stones's term – Lange's view of Florence breast-feeding her baby, Norma.

Stones retouched it recently, due, he claims, to the tight crop at the top of the original photo, and lack of cropping of the background at right.

A big scratch on the original negative also needed retouching, Stones tells us.

In the original classic 'Migrant Mother' view, Dorothea Lange retouched the image herself to hide the mother's left thumb, which held onto the tent-pole at right.

Scratches and minor blemishes apart, one can't help feeling that any documentary photograph is superior without retouching; and that such alteration is a distraction from the truth of the moment.

Michael Stones argues for a different kind of 'truth'. 'Because [the] mandate was to show the human side of the Depression,' Stones says, 'should not the truths portrayed in the picture include those about Florence herself?' However the answer, according to Geoffrey Dunn, quoting from statements by Florence Thompson's own daughter Norma, and son Troy, is maybe not.

'Norma, the baby in the pictures, said of her mother that she "was a woman who loved to enjoy life, who loved her children. She loved music and she loved to dance. When I look at that photo of mother, it saddens me."

"They were tough, tough times, but they were the best times we ever had," said Troy.

Norma agreed: "We also had fun." And that is what is so notably missing from every face in Lange's Nipomo series – a single smile that signifies fun. (But then, it was a rainy, cold day, and the family was staying in an open lean-to, with their car broken-down.)

Regarding re-touching classic photos, one needs to be aware that critics might seek one's hide for it, because classics are classics for good reason. And 'The Other Migrant Mother' is at least a minor classic, *as Lange originally saw and photographed it.* [9]

The argument over the alteration of any of the Migrant Mother photographs should perhaps, be laid to rest with the quotation that Dorothea Lange stuck to her darkroom door in the 1930s, and which remained there throughout her working life.

Derived from a passage in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* published in 1620, the quotation is, for good reason, repeated often by photographers, and by those who write

about photography.

The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without error or confusion, wrote the statesman-philosopher, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention. [10]

### **MORE FSA WORK, A BOOK AND A FELLOWSHIP**

Not long before her death in 1965 Dorothea Lange was interviewed for the Smithsonian Oral History project. Her interviewer Richard Doud, asked which of her scenes most encapsulated Farm Security.

Once in the 1930s, Lange replied, she had stopped at a gas station where she spotted a forlorn family of American whites from Oklahoma. "We've been blown out," they told her.

'There were the people who got up that day quick and left,' said Lange of the family who had driven west when the dust storms arrived. 'They saw they had no crop back there,' she told her interviewer.

'That was the beginning of the first day of the landslide that cut this continent and it's still going on.'

On photographing people in distress Dorothea told Richard Doud that it is often just about sticking around and being there. 'Not swooping in and swooping out in a cloud of dust.' You sit down, she said, 'letting the children look at your camera with their dirty, grimy little hands, and putting their fingers on the lens.'

If you behave in a generous manner, you're very apt to receive it, said Lange adding, 'I have told everything about myself long before I asked any question.' [11]

Photographing for the FSA until 1939, Lange acquired standing with some people in

government, though she also made enemies. To be sure, her stellar views of former slaves and black sharecroppers in the Southeast; Mexican immigrants in the Southwest; Filipino lettuce workers in California; Okies and Arkies all along the route Westward; eroded fields on the Great Plains; churches, farms, schools, roads, and businesses in many locales; a distinguished pioneering woman named Queen in a bonnet; and officials, too, drove her stock up. [12]

Some had suggested she would be hired immediately following her FSA work, but she wasn't. She wasn't a straightforward spot-news photographer, and her photos weren't, generally, what Life and Look magazines were wanting either, apparently.

Unable to get funding to renew her contract, Stryker let Lange go. Though she'd been temperamental and hard on Washington staff, Stryker still supported Dorothea's book-project with husband Paul. The book was based on the physical and cultural erosion of America – it was called *An American Exodus*. [13]

However, the decision was made not to make photos the book's main focus, but rather one of its many elements. To Paul Strand, it seemed clear: 'In such a book as this the photographs must be the foundation materials, provide the basic structure just as in a documentary film, and that the function of the text must be to heighten and extend their individual and total meaning.'

Strand felt the photos did little more than illustrate the text. Or vice versa. And there was 'a tendency towards negation rather than active interaction between image and word.' There was also dialogue from people in the photos, which complicated artistic unity. The formula hadn't been tried much previously, and it fell flat for Strand.

Then, in March 1941, Lange was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship. Soon after the announcement of her grant the conservative Associated Farmers organization attacked the foundation for selecting the wife of 'liberal Dr. Paul Taylor,' with whom she had collaborated

on 'a grapes of wrath' book.

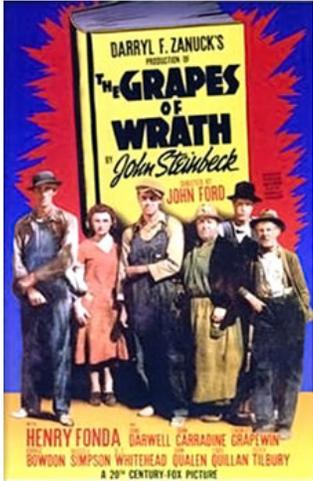


Image via [Wikipedia](#)

Lange was the first woman to receive a photo grant from Guggenheim, and there would not be another for 18 years, when Helen Levitt won one. Several others followed soon after that.

To begin the grant-coverage Dorothea went on a two-month field trip, and photographed the Hutterites of South Dakota and the Amana Colony in Iowa.

She'd also intended to photograph the Mormons of Utah, but asked for a two-month leave of absence, because she felt exhausted and not doing her best work. On top of that, her brother, Henry Martin, was arrested for defrauding a California state-unemployment-insurance fund. Henry spent six months in jail and seven years on probation. They were different types of people, but Dorothea always felt she was her 'brother's keeper,' and was fond of him.

In any case, before the completion of the grant-coverage, on December 7th, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Dorothea's plans were at least temporarily changed. [14]

**WORK FOR THE WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY**

On February 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, allowing military commanders to establish military zones in the United States wherever they thought necessary, and to remove anyone they wanted from those areas, regardless of race, nationality, or age.

General Dwight Eisenhower's brother Milton was the civilian put in charge, and on March 1st, Lt. General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, announced that all persons of Japanese ancestry would have to leave the Pacific Coast military area.

Originally, the plan was to move them, via a resurrected Homestead Act, to subsistence farms in the interior that they would own. However, that scheme was replaced by an internment plan.

Two-thirds of the 120,000 men, women, and children affected, were full US citizens. The United States was also at war with Germany and Italy, but only a handful of Americans of German and Italian ancestry were being penned up in concentration camps. This largest single-group, forced migration in American history seemed based solely on race.

On War Relocation Authority's staff was an information officer who'd shifted over from the Social Security Board Dorothea Lange's husband Paul Taylor had worked for. When WRA decided it wanted to document its work photographically, the information man, had Dorothea added to his staff.

Why the WRA hired someone to photograph the evacuation and internment is a mystery, but some staffer may have wanted to point up a government scandal, since some Americans were already criticising the internments.

Although the executive order stunned West Coast Japanese-Americans, they went about their evacuation dutifully, locking their stores and houses, and dressing in their Sunday best, as they boarded buses that would take them to the camps.

Some Americans thought the Japanese-Americans were national security threats, but they also hadn't liked the economic competition from the Nisei (first generation of Japanese-Americans).

The Nisei were hard-workers and efficient savers. When they'd got the news of the order, many were desperate to prove their loyalty; they bought war bonds, donated blood, made bandages, and tried to join the armed forces (nearly all were turned away); but when the Army said the West Coast might be bombed or invaded by Japan, hysteria struck non-Nisei residents.

Assembly centers were set up in almost every available temporary space. Paul Taylor who acknowledged there was a rational basis for fears of Japanese-American disloyalty, given they were not yet assimilated and many retained a strong affinity with the land of their forebears, tried to remind Americans that the evacuees 'were not convicted, were not found guilty of anything, that they were entitled to every consideration under American principle and fair play.' [15]

However, early in April Dorothea Lange began her WRA work. Her assignment was Northern California where she photographed at the Manzanar Relocation Camp (as did Ansel Adams in 1943); other photographers covered Southern California. Dorothea photographed 'the procedure, the process of processing,' and stayed with 'the baffled, bewildered people' as they ran from place to place beforehand, trying to find information and help. [16]

Lange said, 'Everything they could possibly do for themselves, they did, asking the minimum, making practically no demands.' They even relied on their own doctors for required inoculations rather than Army doctors.

Lange's military supervisor, a Major Beasley, complained regularly about the 'negative light' Lange was shining on these events.

One complaint was that one of Lange's photos showed nurserymen in a relocation camp, working in the latticed sheds used to break the force of the sunlight. Beasley didn't like the picture because the streaks of light and shadow made it look as if the evacuees were behind bars, or dressed in stripes.

The Japanese-Americans didn't resent Lange. Take a look at her views of Nisei schoolchildren standing alongside their Caucasian peers, saying the Pledge of Allegiance;



Image via [Wikipedia](#)

or the big banner a Japanese-American grocer put on the front of his store, saying, 'I Am An American'.



Image via [Wikipedia](#)

Lange's Rolleiflex, was as unimposing to the Nisei as any camera she'd ever carry was to her subjects. They treated Lange as a friend, and upon their release, many went to visit her.

As in the case of the migrants a decade earlier, Dorothea Lange was precisely the right photographer for the job. The critic AD Coleman wrote, "She functioned in effect as our national eye of conscience in the internment camps. Her constant concerns – the survival of human dignity under impossible conditions, the confrontation of the system by the individual, and the helpless innocence of children – were perfectly suited to the subject."

Some of her 'most poignant and angry images' were made for the WRA, Coleman added.

Dorothea remembered her WRA work as one of her most intense experiences as a photographer: 'On the surface, it looked like a narrow job. There was a sharp beginning to it, a sharp end; everything about it was highly concentrated.'

Actually, though, the WRA work wasn't narrow at all. 'The deeper I got into it, the bigger it

became,' said Lange pointing out that the internment was often cited 'as an example of what happens to us if we lose our heads.'

'I think it's rather encouraging, as a sign of our mental health, that we admit a mistake,' said Lange. 'What was of course horrifying was to do this thing completely on the basis of what blood may be coursing through a person's veins, nothing else.'

Thirty years later, and after her death, Dorothea Lange's WRA photographs were made the core of an exhibition and book called *Executive Order 9066*, which reminded the country of the fragility of American justice.

The show toured Washington, New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo. Of the 63 exhibited images made by a dozen photographers, the largest group was Lange's, 27 photos. [17]

## TO A CABIN

While Dorothea Lange was photographing the evacuation of the Japanese-Americans, she suffered her first duodenal ulcer. She'd eventually also be hit by post-polio pain syndrome, then little understood.

In 1951, Dorothea received her final grant-check from the Guggenheim Foundation, and was back to work by then, after being slowed by her ailments for several years. Soon, she was also consulting with Edward Steichen on the 'The Family of Man,' for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which she contributed a number of photos to.

In her later years, she'd travel overseas, even with her ailments, because one doctor suggested she would die either way; it was up to her whether she wanted to die without experiencing a tour she so much wanted to make.

So husband Paul and she traveled to the Far East (including Java and Korea), the Middle East (including Egypt and Palestine), and Europe (including Ireland), and she photographed

these places wonderfully, though she said she couldn't capture the richness of the Far East on black-and-white film. And yet, she did very well with black-and-white, regardless.

Many intended projects kept Dorothea's mind active, even if they were not all physically happening. However, John Szarkowski, new Director of the Museum of Modern Art's Photo Department, insisted she do her retrospective exhibition there for him.

Szarkowski knew she would say no, if he asked her.



Image via [Wikipedia](#)

So instead he told her she would do it, and she worked on it to the extent she could, until her death aged 70, in October 1965. [18]

She'd been suffering from esophageal cancer, and the exhibition opened three months after she died. It would be, along with the book, *To a Cabin*, a warm tribute to her family and to her family's place of emotional and physical calm in California, the crowning achievements at the end of her life. The Lange-Taylor Grants, awarded to photographers of conscience, carry on her legacy today. [19] [20]

## A NATION'S EYE OF CONSCIENCE

Dorothea Lange was one of the greatest of photographers. What she overcame was formidable – crippled by polio from an early age, and saddled with a limp thereafter, she still chose to use medium and large-format cameras, rather than the lighter and faster Leica.

Lange was among the greatest photographers, though, not because she travelled farther physically than perhaps all others, though she did travel tens of thousands of miles. Not because she took more stunning news photos than all others, because news work wasn't her style. And assuredly not because she made more money or captured more celebrities than all others, because she made far less money than her work was worth and didn't 'do' celebrities.

Lange was among the very greatest photographers because she discovered the 'news' about people best by travelling deep into their hearts, and presenting in photos the real currency of documentary photography – how and why people live as they do.

For Dorothea Lange, three elements were key: the natural environment of her subjects, their dignity, and the human story that she hoped each photograph would help tell.

Today most of Lange's photos are housed in the Library of Congress's FSA Collection and in

the Oakland Museum of California and are, through the internet, available to all. No doubt, two phases of her career will leave their marks longest: these two phases are symbolized by a comment in a letter, and by an epitaph on a gravestone in Lakewood Memorial Park, Hughson, California.

Milton Eisenhower wrote in a letter to his former boss, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard, about the internment of Japanese-Americans: 'When the war is over and we consider calmly this unprecedented migration of 120,000 people, we as Americans are going to regret the unavoidable injustices that we may have done.' [21]

Dorothea Lange, was America's eye of conscience for the Nisei internments.

#### **TRANSCENDING THE MEDIUM**

The epitaph on the gravestone in Lakewood Memorial Park is to Florence Thompson, the subject of Lange's 'Migrant Mother' photograph. A woman of Cherokee descent and already a widow when the photograph was taken, Thompson bore ten children and outlived her first husband by 52 years, and her second by nine.

Gaining almost nothing from the fame thrust upon her, she lived her final years in a trailer park, dying at aged 80 in 1983, as her daughters called out for medical aid for her cancer and heart problems. [22]

Her children had bought her a home previously, but she'd said she always needed wheels under her, and moved back to a trailer park.

Thompson's daughter Katherine, who in the iconic photograph buries her face behind her mother's right shoulder, was to say the image left the family feeling shame, and determined never to be poor again.

On her poverty Florence Thompson spoke of living under the bridge at Bakersfield,

California. In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck wrote of people living beneath that very span.

'It was the same story,' said Thompson. 'Didn't even have a tent then, just a ratty old quilt.'

The epitaph on the gravestone begins Florence Leona Thompson. It then recognises in its way, that a moment captured by a photographer on a cold wet day in March 1936, at a Pea-Picker's camp in Nipomo, California had achieved what few photographs ever achieve.

Migrant Mother, the epitaph continues. A Legend of the Strength of American Motherhood.

'Migrant Mother,' Dorothea Lange's greatest photograph, had, the epitaph seems to say, transcended its medium to become part of the folklore of an entire nation.

## LANGE AT AUCTION

It's a shame more of the money involved in art-collecting Dorothea Lange's greatest photos couldn't have been shared with more of her subjects, but then she photographed tens of thousands of people, and she didn't earn a queen's ransom herself. However, collectors continue to cash in, as a Sotheby's auction on October 11th 2005 indicates.

At that auction, a stack of 32 vintage Lange 'Oakie' prints, including 'Migrant Mother,' made \$296,000.

Bill Hendrie, whose family came from Oklahoma, had salvaged the mounted prints from a San Jose Chamber of Commerce dumpster in the 1960s, and held onto them. After his death, his daughter Marian Tankersley sold them via Sotheby's.

The joint-highest grossing item in the sale (with Weston's *The Breast* of 1921) was *White Angel Bread Line*. Lange's earliest major Depression-era work, taken in 1933, sold for \$822,400, then a record for a 20th century photograph at auction.

That October day in 2005 the Sotheby's sale of photographs totalled \$5.5 million, \$10.3 million over two days.

#### **IN MEMORY OF:**

*Photographic Equality: Dorothea Lange, Her Migrant Mother,*

*and the Nisei Internees* is dedicated to the memories of

Angus McDougall (1916-2009), groundbreaking photojournalist, educator, and director of Pictures of the Year International (POYI); and to Milton Meltzer (1915-2009), prolific author of biographies and histories.

#### **ALSO:**

The author's thanks go to Quazen for publishing this article with illustrations and footnotes, and to Graham Harrison, Roger A. Grant, Bob Mulock, the Library of Congress, the La Crosse Public Library Archives, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Smithsonian Institution, the British National Portrait Gallery, Meg Partridge, David W. Johns, Charles and Christine Freiberg, Steve Kiedrowski, Yi Do-Sun, Matthew A. Marcou, and David A. and Rose C. Marcou and their offspring, for consultations with the author about this work.

**David J. Marcou**, who is a freelance writer, photographer, and editor, has lived and worked in London, Seoul, and La Crosse, Wisconsin. He has written for the *British Journal of Photography*, the *RPS (Royal Photographic Society) Journal*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*, among many publications. His works are permanently housed in the British National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian in Washington, and other leading libraries, galleries, museums, and archives around the world. David's son, Matthew, who is half-Korean, studied Chemistry at UM-Minneapolis, and is currently serving in the US Army.

#### **FOOTNOTES**

[1] *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life*, by Milton Meltzer, McGraw-Hill Ltd., USA and Canada, 1978, pp. 3-18. [2] Meltzer, pp. 22-63. [3] Meltzer, pp. 70-96; Bob Mulock, an expert on cameras for 50 years, told David J Marcou via phone August 24th, 2009, with Lange's Graflex, sheet-film was probably used in a Grafmatic holder (about 6 sheets per holder) or a front-and-back-type (2 sheets per holder). With the latter, one film could easily be left in the holder. [4] The miraculously saved White Angel Breadline photo was ground-breaking, in terms of Lange's work and in terms of documentary photographs getting at the truth of street-scenes. From Introductory Essay by George P. Elliott, *Dorothea Lange*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966, p. 9. Although in the realm of naturalistic photography, the Americans Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, and the Brits John Thomson and Peter Emerson preceded her, Dorothea Lange combined the best elements of all four in an organic way; White Angel Breadline truly was the start of something big. 'The Oxford Companion to the Photograph,' Edited by Robin Lenman, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 539-540; pp. 278-280; pp. 623-624; pp. 193; and p. 351-352. [5] Meltzer, pp. 70-76. [6] Meltzer, pp. 92-130; [Oral History interview of Arthur Rothstein](#) for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, May 25th 1964. [7] 'Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squaller,' *San Francisco News*, March 10th, 1936; and 'What Does the "New Deal" Mean to This Mother and Her Children?', *San Francisco News*, March 11th, 1936. In response to Lange's photos being published in the *San Francisco News*, the US Government, within a few days, sent 20,000 pounds of food to assist the approximately 3,000 starving migrant workers at Nipomo: *A true picture of hard times. Photo of poverty sells for a stack of riches* by Carl Schoettler, *Daily Press* (Virginia), November 12th 2002. [8] Meltzer, pp 130-136; Elliott, p. 7. [9] [The Other Migrant Mother](#) by Michael Stones; Jeff Bridgers (Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division) told David J Marcou via phone August 21st, 2009, the issue of artistic license is 'up to scholars, artists, and critics.' There are no legal restrictions on retouching FSA photos, which were taken for the US Government and are in public domain. But it's decent when all such retouch-artists identify their portion of work properly, and also properly credit the photographer and Library of Congress for the original works. [10] The Francis Bacon quote is derived from a passage in *Novum Organum, Aphorisms on the Interpretation of Nature, or the Reign of Man, Book One* of 1620. The modern version was long posted on Dorothea Lange's darkroom door, [Dorothea Lange:](#)

Photographer of the People. [11] [Oral History interview of Dorothea Lange for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, May 22nd 1964.](#) [12] [Photo of woman named 'Queen' wearing old-fashioned bonnet Nr. Gordonton, North Carolina, July 1939, by Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.](#) [13] *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, by Dorothea Lange & Paul Schuster Taylor, Reynal & Hitchcock, New York, 1939. [14] Meltzer, pp. 137-237. [15] *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*, edited by Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2006, pp 5-39. [16] [Photographs of the Japanese-American Internment Camp at Manzanar, California, Ansel Adams, 1943, Library of Congress, American Memory.](#) [17] Meltzer, pp. 238-253. [18] Meltzer, pp. 254-359. [19] *To a Cabin*, by Dorothea Lange and Margaretta K. Mitchell, Grossman, New York, 1973. [20] [The Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize](#) [21] *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*, by Roger Daniels, Hill and Wang, New York, 1993, p. 57. [22] On September 17th 1983, UPI reported that Florence Thompson, whose face 'became a haunting symbol of the suffering of millions during the Great Depression,' had died aged 80. Mrs. Thompson suffered from cancer and heart problems. Her family appealed for financial help to care for their mother, drawing hundreds of donations totalling \$25,000. *A Sort of Equality: Dorothea Lange, her Migrant Mother and the Nisei Internees* text copyright © 2009 David J Marcou. Dorothea Lange's FSA photographs reproduced with grateful acknowledgement of the [US Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, Washington DC. Rights and Restrictions Information on the FSA/OWI Collection.](#) Dorothea Lange's WRA photographs reproduced with grateful acknowledgement of the [US National Archives and Records Administration.](#) Copyright, Restrictions, and Permissions Notice of the [US National Archives and Records Administration.](#)

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Eisenhower, Museum of Modern Art, Nisei Internees, Office of War Information, Paul Taylor,