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Images of the Great Depression: A Photographic Essay

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Source: *Magazine of History*, Vol. 16, No. 1, The Great Depression (Fall, 2001), pp. 11-16

Published by: Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163481>

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# Images of the Great Depression: A Photographic Essay

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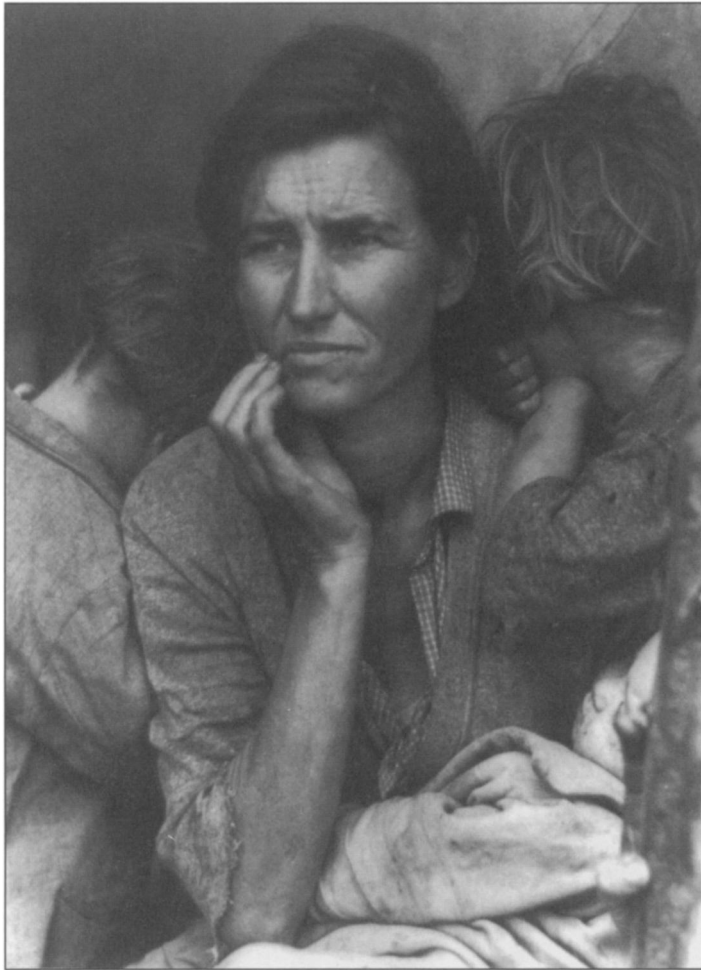
In April of 1939, a most remarkable display of photography was held, the First International Photographic Exposition, at the Grand Central Palace in New York. This show contained many camera images of the plight of Americans during the Great Depression. When the *U.S. Camera Annual* of 1939 (operated under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration) reproduced many of these photographs, it put a rather cheerful and optimistic spin on them: “And it is a happy augury that an even greater number of those government photographs, made in California, Wisconsin, Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma, and revealing, so impressively, the progress of our country’s romantic experiment in resettlement, are now being exhibited, in an itinerant fashion [much like the lives of the people their cameras captured—our note], throughout the country at large, under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art in New York” (1).

However, others who looked upon these stark, shocking views of America were not so cheery nor so optimistic. Some were moved by compassion: “Touched me to the point where I would like to quit everything in order to help these stricken people.” “Absolute proof of the great need of a continuance of the work of our administration. If this work was not to be continued, one would be tempted to curse the economic system that produced such human wreckage. For goodness sake . . . continue.” Others were appalled by them and essentially damned the messenger for the message: “They’re exceedingly lousy”; “Lousy bunch of prints”; “Subjects very sordid and dull for exhibition . . . Make them more sensational”; and “Photography good but a hell of a subject for a salon.” There were some who were repulsed by what they saw, not as the cruel imposition of poverty on thousands of Americans, but as laziness that did not reflect the nation or its people as they really were: “Next time play up the other side”; “Why not prime some of these people instead of the pump”; “What these people need more

than anything else is birth control”; “There are plenty of farmers in the U.S.A. who don’t look like that”; and “They create a false impression.” And for some, these images were quite dangerous and even seditious: “Purely propaganda for Communism”; “Magnificent propaganda”; and “Subversive propaganda.”

These comments reflect the various views of America held by people during the Great Depression. While some were moved and touched by the misery of those in America as it really was, others preferred to ignore reality by either dismissing poverty as mere laziness or arguing it did not really reflect America as they wanted America to be. Such clashing views are a common thread throughout the art depicting the Great Depression—some sought to dress it up in bucolic elegance, while others felt that America in its nakedness more accurately reflected the ravages wrought by its collective starvation. While one viewer would see the cure for poverty as being something on the order of a grade school lesson (“Teach the underprivileged to have fewer children and less misery,” revealing a truly mind-boggling incomprehension of the problem at hand), others were more practical (“Americans who think F.S.A. a waste of money should see these”).

You may ask yourself, what is the legacy of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs? Was their value “in the record itself, which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done,” as Walker Evans asserted? Or if they were “subversive propaganda,” precisely what about them was subversive? If one defines “subversive” as that which works against the prevailing system or government, then we are at a bit of a stalemate. As a product of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, these photographs obviously did not constitute an attempt to overthrow the government, or even weaken it. Quite the opposite, in fact, was true. But if one sees the true “subversion” not as a weakening of the federal government, but as a direct challenge to the capitalist system, then the term “subversive” may have some merit.



Migrant mother. "Destitute Pea Pickers in California." Nipomo, California, February 1936. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-95653.)

### The FSA

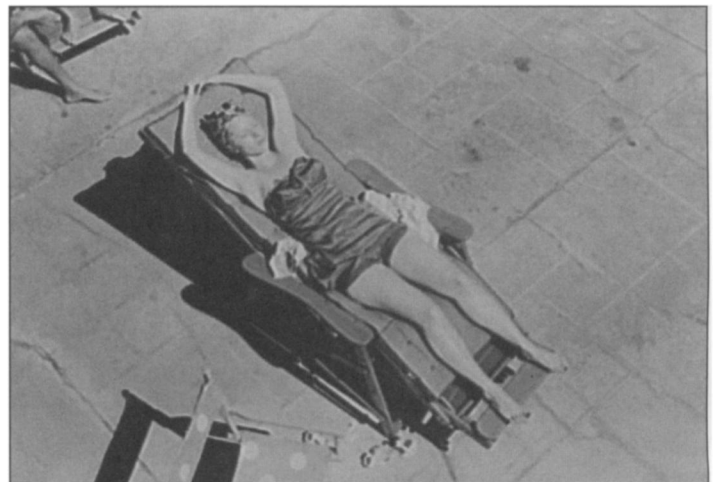
The FSA began in 1937 as an outgrowth of the Resettlement Administration (RA), created in 1935. The Resettlement Administration was created to alleviate rural poverty and assist people dislocated by such forces as farm mechanization and the Dust Bowl. Its stated reason for being was "to assist the poorest farmers" (2). This noble goal was consistent with previous agencies created by Roosevelt as early as 1933, such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Farm Credit Administration, and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), which "made loans, tried to affect the market for farm commodities, resettled farmers on better land, and offered assistance under the rubric 'rehabilitation'" (3).

One of the most powerful and persuasive ways of depicting the plight of the farmers was photography. It was hoped that unblinking representations of life as it really was for the farmers would create public support for the various federal agencies that were

intended to alleviate their misery, the FSA chief among them. This focus eventually broadened to include workers generally, although the farm was always paramount. Lawrence Levine writes that by March of 1933, "at least one out of every four American workers were jobless and that only about one-quarter of those were receiving any relief, most of it grossly inadequate" (4).

To accomplish this task of documenting farm conditions—and conditions generally in the country at this time—the photographic section of the FSA was created, with Roy Emerson Stryker as its head. This agency began in the days of the RA and became part of the FSA when it was established in 1937. Stryker gathered around him a host of mainly new and often unheard-of photographers to accomplish this enormous task: Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Marion Post Wolcott, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, John Vachon, and Ben Shahn.

Evans was born in 1903 into a prosperous midwestern family and was well educated at private schools such as Andover and Williams College. In 1927, debating whether or not he should be a painter or a writer, he gravitated toward photography (5). By the early 1930s, Evans broke from American traditional photography. Gilles Mora and John Hill, in their excellent study of his work, state "he rejected this focus on nature, concentrating his interest on prosaic culture, roadsides, signboards, the humblest manifestations of popular creativity" (6). It was only logical, with this interest, that Evans would find working for the FSA a natural extension of his vision, although he wished to steer clear of the politics involved in such photodocumentation: "The value, and if you like, even the propaganda value for the government lies in the record itself, which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done. NO POLITICS WHATEVER" (7). Evans's most famous series of photographs taken for the RA/FSA were done in the South, especially Hale County, Alabama. His work, and the work of the other FSA photographers, was so



At the beach. "June in January." Miami Beach, Florida, [March 1939?]. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF33-030466-M1.)

incisive as to the lives of the people they captured that Ansel Adams once complained to Roy Stryker, "What you've got are not photographers, they're a bunch of sociologists with cameras" (8).

Dorothea Lange was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895. She studied photography in New York City prior to World War I and moved to San Francisco in 1919, where she earned her living as a portrait photographer. Indeed, the ability so needed by a successful portraitist, to reveal the hidden dynamics in that which is presented to the public, informed her work for the FSA. It is especially evident in the portrait she made of Florence Thompson and her four daughters in the pea-picker camp in Nipomo, California, to which we will return later. She met Paul Taylor, whom she would marry, in 1934, and the two of them documented migrant farm workers in 1935, the year that Stryker hired Lange to work for the RA and, later, the FSA.

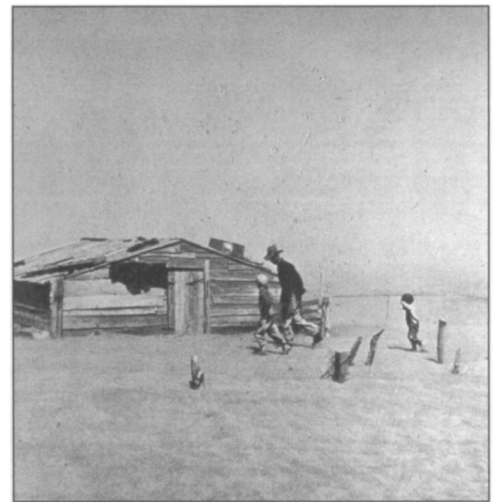


Migratory Mexican field worker's home on the edge of a pea field. Imperial Valley, California, March 1937. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-T01-016425-C.)

Ben Shahn was noted primarily as a painter of great talent, but photography was also a passion of his. He was born in Lithuania in 1898 and emigrated to New York City with his family when he was six years old. Shahn for a time shared a studio in Manhattan with Walker Evans, from whom he learned the art of photography. Unlike his mentor, Shahn's politics were everywhere in his work. He worked with Diego Rivera in New York, and his socialist and even communist leanings were quite evident in the art he produced, to the extent that Mora and Hill note, "Ben Shahn . . . and many other artists were espousing a political radicalism that often verged on Marxism" (9).

There were many other gifted photographers working for the RA/FSA in addition to the three we have discussed above: John Vachon, who started out as a file clerk for the FSA; Arthur

Rothstein, who was a student of Stryker at Columbia University; Russell Lee, born in Illinois in 1903, whose interest in photography began when he was a student of chemical engineering; and Marion Post Wolcott, who taught herself photography, to name just a few. Their combined work during the Great Depression produced a corpus of photographic art that "represented an achievement that in some ways paralleled the accomplishments of the WPA art projects" (10).



Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-004052.)

#### Using FSA Photos in the Classroom

A picture is indeed worth a thousand words. With that familiar adage in mind, we created a number of successful activities to engage our students in learning about the Great Depression and developing higher level thinking skills. Once students have a basic understanding of the causes of the depression, teachers can quickly move away from the textbook, challenging students to make connections between the statistics of economic decline and the

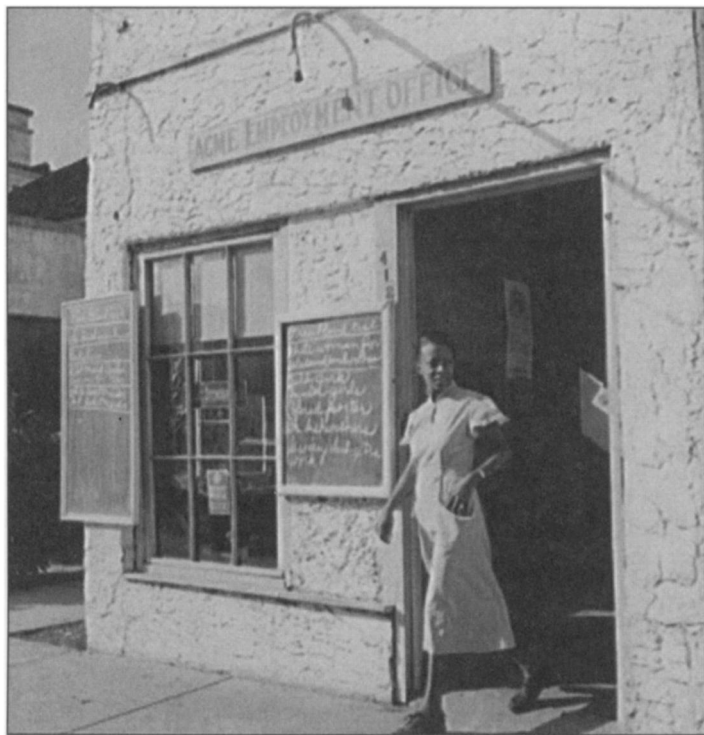


Houses near the Nebraska Power Company Plant. Omaha, Nebraska, November 1938. Photograph by John Vachon. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-T01-008878-D.)

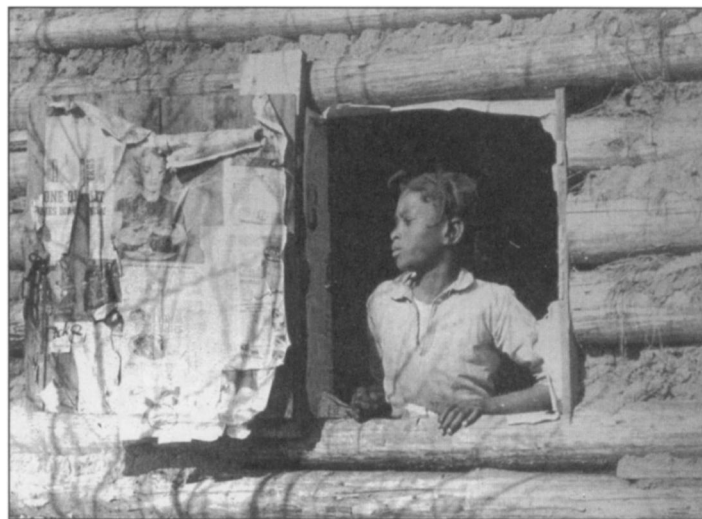
impact these conditions had on the lives of people. One excellent approach is to teach the depression through photography.

Fortunately for those of us who teach this time period, photographic documentation is no longer a problem. Two excellent print sources are available: *America at the Crossroads: Great Photographs from the Thirties* (1995), edited by Jerome Prescott; and *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (1988), edited by Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannen. Many FSA photographs are also available through the *American Memory* web site, <<http://memory.loc.gov/>>, and the National Archives is currently working toward putting still more of the photographs online. Finally, the specific photos discussed in this essay are available for viewing at the OAH web site, <<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/>>.

Since many of you teach at the middle, secondary, or college level, we suggest several different approaches that use photography to teach the Great Depression. At the middle school level, one option is a simple photography exhibition. Teachers can obtain any FSA photograph from the National Archives; a black and white, 8x10 glossy print costs eight dollars. For a small investment, you can show your students actual photographs taken during the 1930s. One of our exhibits includes the following: Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," which documents the California migrant workers' camp, purposely placed beside Marion Post Wolcott's "At the Beach," depicting affluent Americans enjoying themselves at poolside. This juxtaposition causes an immediate reaction among students. If you try this, time and time again you will hear, "That's not



Employment agency. Miami, Florida, January 1939. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-050772-E.)



Artelia Bendolph, girl at Gees Bend. April 1937. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-025359-D.)

fair." This leads to a discussion of citizenship responsibility, ethics, and morality. Another grouping, Arthur Rothstein's "Sons Walking in the Face of a Duststorm," Dorothea Lange's "Migratory Mexican Field Worker's Home," and John Vachon's "Houses Near the Nebraska Power Plant," will allow your students to compare and contrast housing conditions. Middle graders will often exhibit outrage that this was allowed to happen in America.

Although secondary teachers can present similar activities, students at this level are capable of being far more critical in their analysis. Therefore, they can analyze the photographs on their technical merits or ideological viewpoint as well. What was the photographer attempting to communicate? What technique(s) were used to achieve that purpose? Marion Post Wolcott's "Employment Agency" is one good choice for this exercise; it depicts an African American woman leaving an employment agency. A sign posted to her immediate left reads, "Free blood tests: white women for salad and sandwiches; curb girls; counter girls; colored porters; wh. dishwashers. . . ." Another good choice is Arthur Rothstein, who received some criticism for "posing his subjects rather than photographing them as they came and went on their own" (11). His 1937 portrait of "Artelia Bendolph" portrays a young African American girl looking out of a log cabin window that has a newspaper advertisement pasted to the inside shutter, creating the contrast between poverty and plenty.

It is important for secondary students to understand that photographs, like most primary documents, inherently reflect their creator's bias. Jack Delano's "Polish Tobacco Farmers," taken in Connecticut in 1940, depicts a smiling Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Lyman. Shooting at an upward angle, he created a sense of pride. This couple had been the recipients of FSA aid for some time. Is this an example of government propaganda? This photograph is similar to Arthur Rothstein's "Willie S. Pettway." In 1937



Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Lyman, Polish tobacco farmers near Windsor Locks, Connecticut, September 1940. Photograph by Jack Delano. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-041573-D.)

Rothstein was sent to photograph Gee's Bend, an impoverished tenant community in Alabama. He completed fifty-one photographs, most of which reflected the "primitive" conditions of the place. These were contrasted with the improvements made as a result of Red Cross, federal, and state aid. As a result of this aid, one report concludes with the hope that "a few years will change the primitive settlement to a modern rural community" (12). When students analyze photographs from a technical perspective they begin to appreciate not only the conditions the depression created, but also the ideological differences that existed in the reporting of these conditions (13).

In addition to the above activities you might also consider the following specific lesson plans to help your students gain insight into the Great Depression.

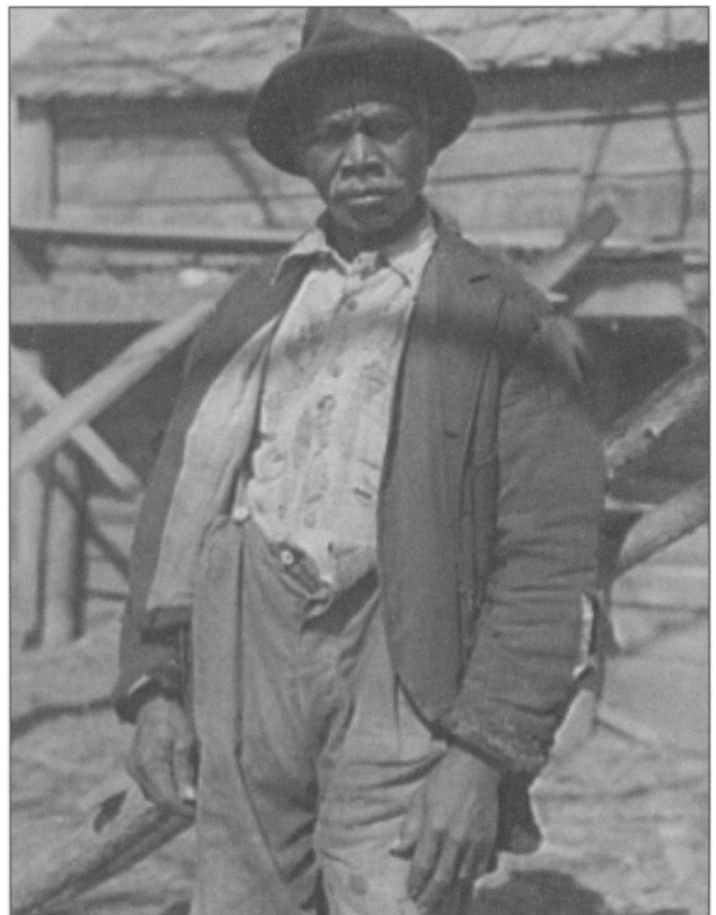
**Lesson Plan #1: The Great Depression: A Photographic Exhibition.** After viewing the classroom exhibition, students should select one compelling photograph and use it to write a newspaper account, a poem, or a diary entry.

**Lesson Plan #2: Comparing Photographers.** Students should compare and contrast the following three photographers and their photographs: Marion Post Wolcott's "A Meal on the Sidewalk at the Beach;" Russell Lee's "Christmas Dinner in the home of Earl Pauley;" and Edward Wall Norton's "Sunday Evening."

These three photographs captured their subjects during meal-time. Students should describe and summarize each photograph and state what they feel the intention of the photographer was in presenting the subjects in the way he or she did. Which photograph is the most compelling? What techniques were used to create the desired response?

**Lesson Plan #3: Photographic Techniques.** Students should distinguish which techniques are used in three different photographs to achieve an ideological perspective: a subject or scene presented in a realistic fashion, a subject or scene critical of the New Deal, and a subject or scene that supports the federal programs.

**Lesson Plan #4: Student Photography Exhibit.** The use of photography has been well documented as an educational tool, and Polaroid Corporation has an educational program which helps teachers bring the camera into the classroom. The purpose



Willie S. Pettway, descendant of a former slave of the Pettways. Gees Bend, Alabama, April 1937. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-025393-D.)



A meal on the sidewalk at the beach. "June in January," Miami Beach, Florida, [March 1939?]. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF33-030493-M2.)

of this activity is to provide students an opportunity to be 1930s FSA photographers. Not only will they learn more about the past, but they will also see to what extent the social concerns of the 1930s are still with us today. " 'Roy Stryker, who headed the FSA photography program told his staff exactly what to find,' and then sent them out into the field to take pictures" (14). Give your students the same assignment. Have them locate examples of homelessness, deterioration in neighborhoods, homes in disrepair, and the faces of the isolated. Your class can then create their own exhibition in the school's lobby, cafeteria, or wherever space is provided.

#### Endnotes

1. *U.S. Camera Annual 1939*, 11A-12.
2. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannen, eds., *Document-*



Sunday evening. Colorado, 1940. Photograph by Edward Wall Norton. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

*ing America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 2.

3. *Ibid.*
4. Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 18-19.
5. Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans—The Hungry Eye* (New York: Harry Abrams Press, 1993), 14.
6. *Ibid.*, 69.
7. *Ibid.*, 132.
8. Levine, *Unpredictable Past*, 25.
9. Mora and Hill, *Walker Evans*, 132.
10. Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Book, 1993), 302.
11. Jerome Prescott, *America at the Crossroads: Great Photographs from the Thirties* (New York: Smithmark Books, 1995), 68.



Christmas dinner in the home of Earl Pauley. Near Smithfield, Iowa, 1936. Photograph by Russell Lee. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-010124-D.)

12. Fleischhauer and Brannen, *Documenting America*, 146.
13. For more information on the political use of photography by the FSA, see James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
14. F. Jack Hurley, *Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 23.

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