

## Overview: The Farm Security Administration

For those born after the 1930s, the Great Depression is something that can be visualized only through photography and film. Certain images have come to define our view of that uncertain time: an anxious migrant mother with her three small children; a farmer and his sons struggling through a dust storm; a family of sharecroppers gathered outside their spartan home. These photographs are icons of an era.

Remarkably, many of these familiar images were created by one small government agency established by Franklin Roosevelt: the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Between 1935 and 1943, FSA photographers produced nearly eighty thousand pictures of life in Depression-era America. This remains the largest documentary photography project of a people ever undertaken.

President Roosevelt created the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937 to aid poor farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers and migrant workers. It developed out of an earlier New Deal agency called the Resettlement Administration (RA). The FSA resettled poor farmers on more productive land, promoted soil conservation, provided emergency relief and loaned money to help farmers buy and improve farms. It built experimental rural communities, suburban “Greenbelt towns” and sanitary camps for migrant farm workers.

One of the New Deal's most progressive—and controversial—agencies, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) advocated government planning and economic intervention to improve living conditions in rural America. Conservative critics attacked the FSA and its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration (RA), as “socialistic.”

To defend and promote the Resettlement Administration director Rexford Tugwell created a publicity department to document rural poverty and government efforts to alleviate it. It included a photographic unit with an odd name—the “Historical Section.” In 1937, the RA and its Historical Section were merged into the newly created FSA.

Tugwell chose Roy Stryker, a college economics instructor, to run the Historical Section. Though not a photographer, Stryker successfully directed an extraordinary group of men and women who today comprise a virtual “Who's Who” of twentieth century documentary photography. Many later forged careers that helped define photojournalism at magazines like *Life* and *Look*.

The FSA photographic unit was not a “jobs program” like the New Deal's Federal Arts Project. Photographers were hired solely for their skills. Most were in their twenties or thirties. They traveled the nation on assignments that could last for months.

# The Waterbury Democrat

A Pictorial Story of Tragedy Under the Searing Sun

## Drouth :-: Dust :-: Despair

On Parched Plains



Dramatically presenting the story of America's "Dust Bowl" tragedy, these pictures were made by Resettlement Administration Photographers.

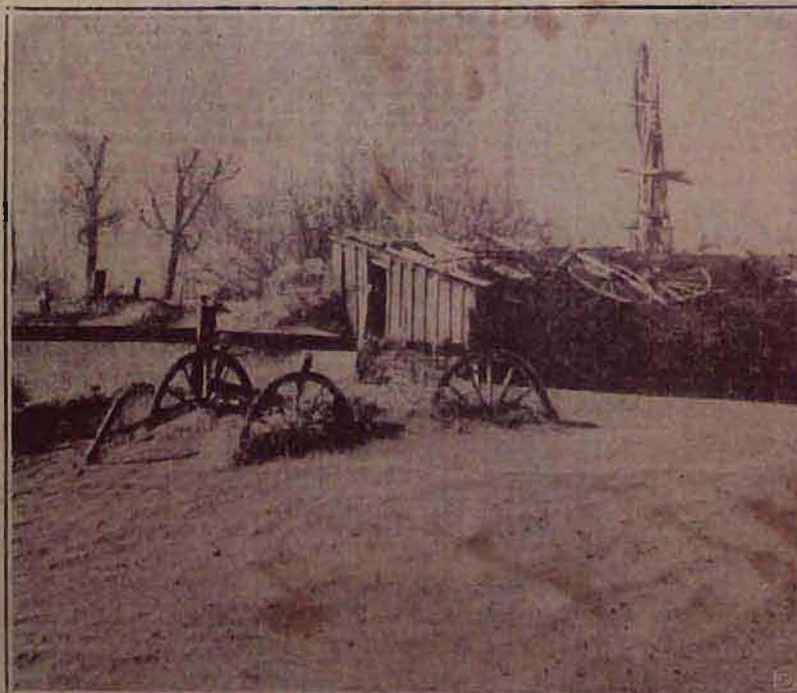
LEFT ABOVE:

**B**ONES whitening at thousands of sun-parched water-holes like this at Pennington, S. D., symbolize the doom that hovers over the vast plains country so long denied soothing, saving rain.

—O—

BELOW:

**L**AID waste by man's greedy farming methods and Nature's niggardliness with rain, dust and drouth turn whole counties of once-

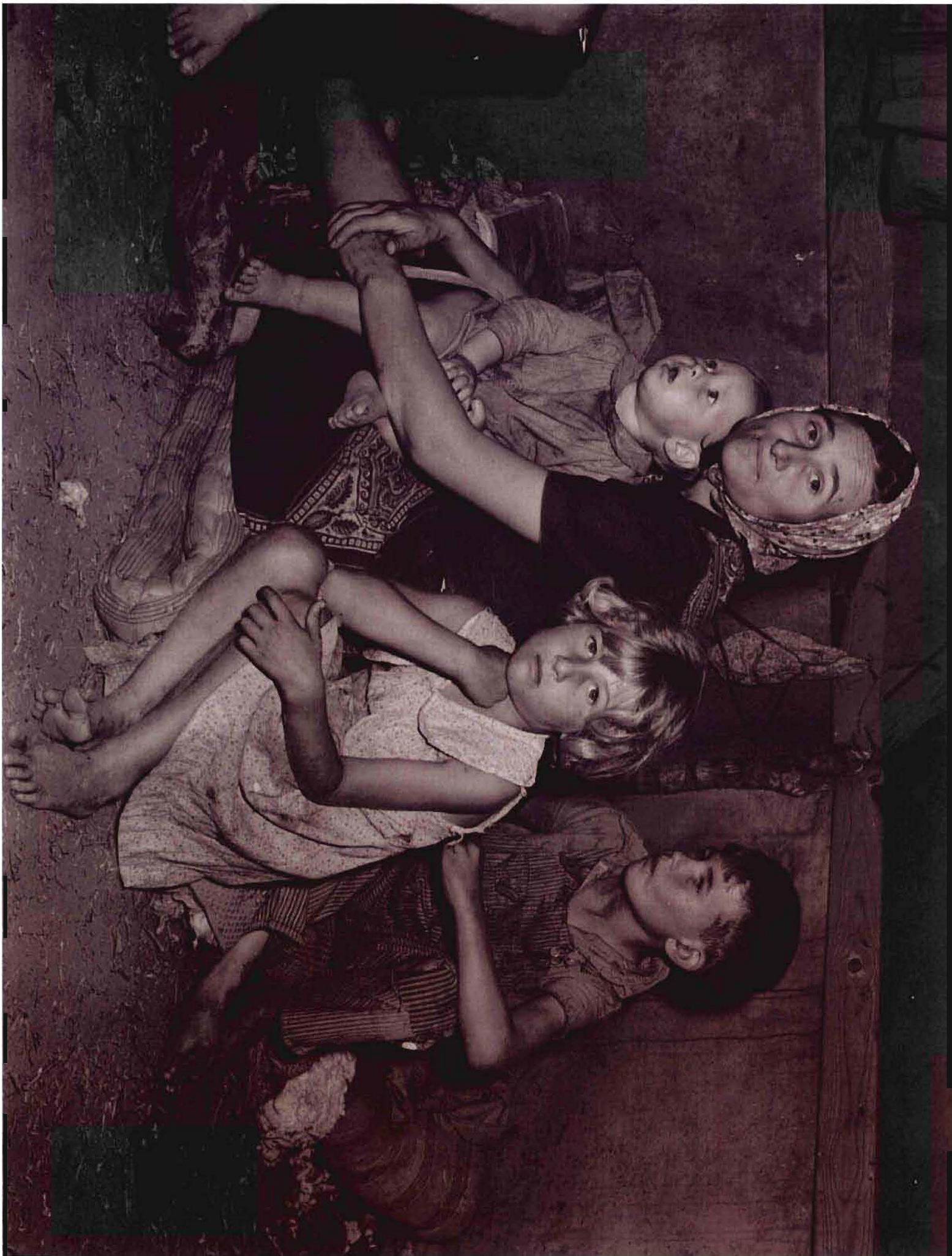


prosperous farm land into a bleak desert. As on this Oklahoma farm, even deep-probing trees shrivel in hot winds that smother machinery and buildings in dust drifts.

—O—

RIGHT ABOVE:

**N**OMADS of the drouth, in flight from the land that no longer will support them, huddle among their few pitiful belongings at Bakesfield, Okla., in a council over their foodless, jobless misery.



## The Great Plains and the Southwest



The most enduring image of rural America during the Great Depression is one of dust and human migration. This image was formed in the nation's heartland, where the people of the Great Plains and Southwest suffered both natural and economic disasters during the 1930s.

Decades of intensive farming and inattention to soil conservation had left this region ecologically vulnerable. A long drought that began in the early 1930s triggered a disaster. The winds that sweep across the plains carried away its dry, depleted topsoil in enormous "dust storms." Dramatic and frightening, the dust storms turned day into night as they destroyed farms. The hardest hit area—covering parts of Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle—was nicknamed the "Dust Bowl." FSA photographers recorded the hardships that drought, economic depression and low crop prices created throughout the Great Plains and Southwest. They documented the plight of farm families forced to abandon the land and join the ranks of migrant workers toiling for low wages on distant commercial farms. The migrant flow out of the region included people from cities and small towns and farm laborers who'd been replaced by motorized farm machinery.



## California and the Far West



For thousands of struggling rural people in the Great Plains and Southwest, California represented hope. During the 1910s and 1920s, some began traveling to California and other Far Western states in search of work. When the Depression hit, news of jobs picking crops on the state's large commercial farms swelled the migration. Hundreds of thousands of people packed their belongings into cars and trucks and headed west. Most found more hardship at the end of their long journey. The new arrivals, dubbed "Oakies" or "Arkies," often struggled to find employment. Wages were low and living conditions abysmal. Many migrants were crowded into shanty towns or squalid "ditchback camps"—unsanitary housing located along irrigation ditches.

The Farm Security Administration tried to assist migrant farm workers by creating clean residential camps with running water and simple, sturdy living quarters. The camps were organized democratically and governed by the residents. They became islands of stability for migrants enduring grinding poverty and dislocation. In John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family spends time in a government-run migrant camp.

# Humanity Hits Bottom

## ... In The Deep South

### Sharecroppers Declare War

Sharecroppers have organized a union. The plantation owners are fighting it.

Floggings, kidnappings and lynchings by night riders have resulted. Black terror stalks the cotton fields.

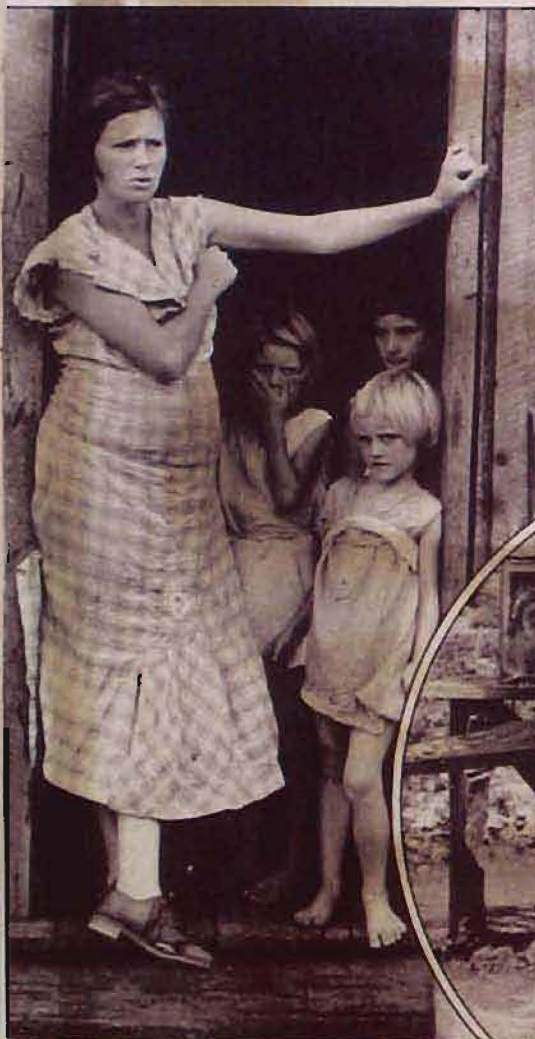
But the union is growing and sticks to its demands for better pay (it asked \$1.00 for a 10 hour day last spring).



### Homeless

Joining the union has meant eviction for hundreds of sharecroppers.

They wander the rutted roads—no shelter, no relief, no food. Some are living in tents and old autos.

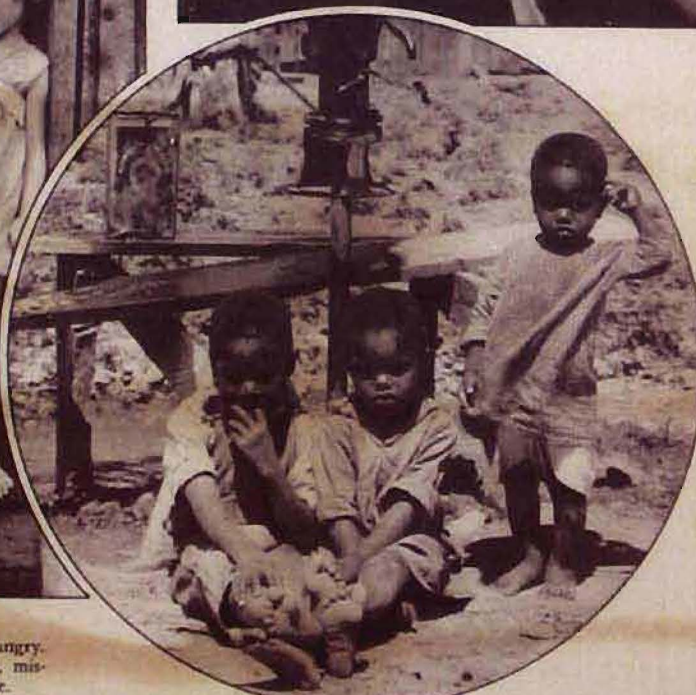


### More Children Indoors

Sharecropper children are often hungry. Undersized, scrawny, with large heads, misshapen bones, they are easy prey of disease.

Sharecropper food is bought on credit from plantation stores which charge high prices for sow-belly, corn meal, molasses.

Sharecropper store accounts are kept in a "doodlum" book and interest runs between 10 and 25 cents on each dollar.



### Many Sharecroppers Are Negroes

But not as many in proportion to whites as there used to be. Fifteen years ago 65 out of 100 croppers were Negroes. The tables are turned now and there are 60 whites and only 40 Negroes in every 100 sharecroppers.

### The Future?

President Roosevelt wants Congress to pass a law to aid the Resettlement Administration to make loans available to sharecroppers and to move the poorest onto better land.

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union is fighting for better conditions for sharecroppers.

But one cotton picking machine can do the work of 75 men. When it is perfected, what new tragedy awaits the sharecroppers?

## The South



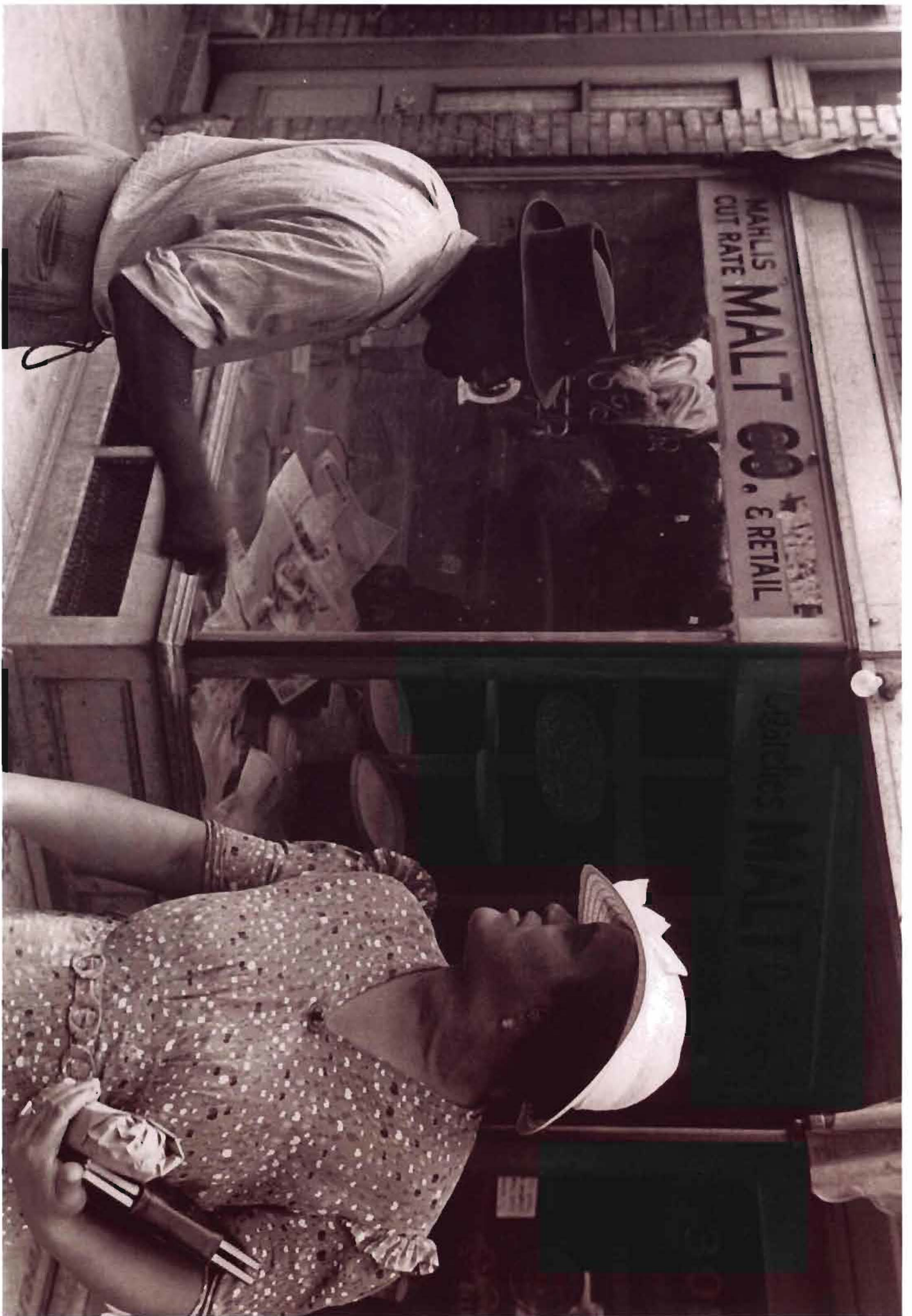
Long before the Great Depression, the South was marked by deep poverty. Largely rural and agricultural, it was home to millions of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In exchange for cash rent (or, for sharecroppers, a portion of the crop), they farmed the fields of large landowners.

Even in good times, life for these workers was harsh, with little hope for the future. The Depression—and, ironically, some New Deal programs—deepened their economic plight. To increase sagging crop prices, the government paid farmers to reduce production. Large landowners chose to evict thousands of sharecropper and tenant families from unplanted land. The growing use of gas-powered farm machines eliminated the need for many tenant farmers.

The region's large African American population carried the heaviest burden. In 1930 more than eighty percent of American blacks lived in the South. Jim Crow segregation laws and the legacy of slavery forced them to endure poverty, discrimination, and racial violence.

FSA photographers captured the varied worlds of black and white farm workers throughout the South. They also explored the region's mill towns and cities.





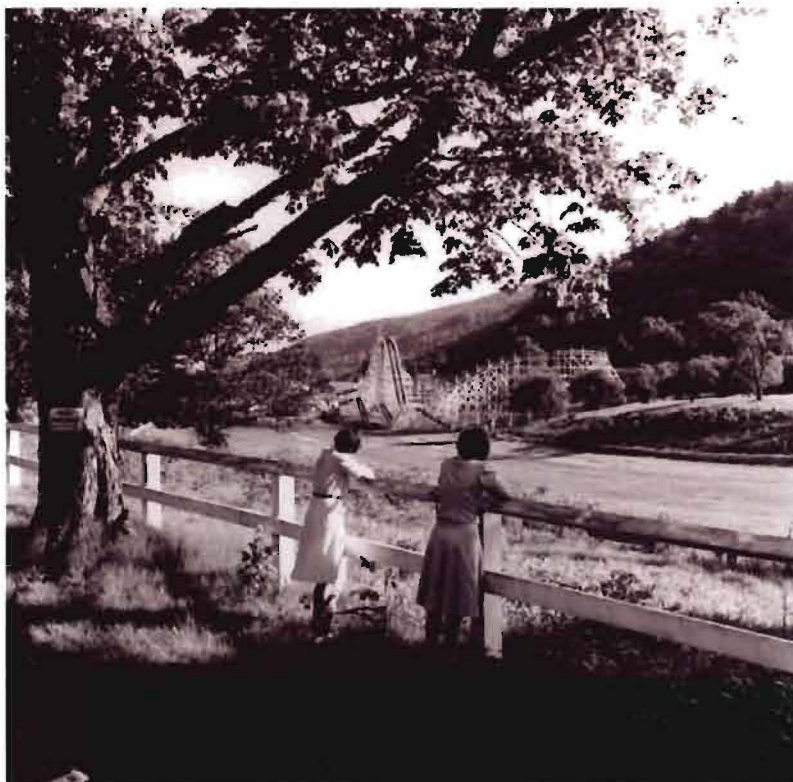
## The Northeast and Midwest



The FSA photography unit is best known for its images of rural life in the South, the Great Plains and the West. But in thousands of images FSA photographers also created a vivid record of life in the farms, towns, and cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Agency photographers documented mining towns in Pennsylvania, slum housing in Chicago and Washington D.C. and rural life in Ohio, New England, and upstate New York. They studied the lives of migrant farm workers in Michigan and the homes of packinghouse employees in New Jersey. Their work offers glimpses into everything from unemployment lines and child labor to social life and leisure activities.

## The Photo Project Goes to War

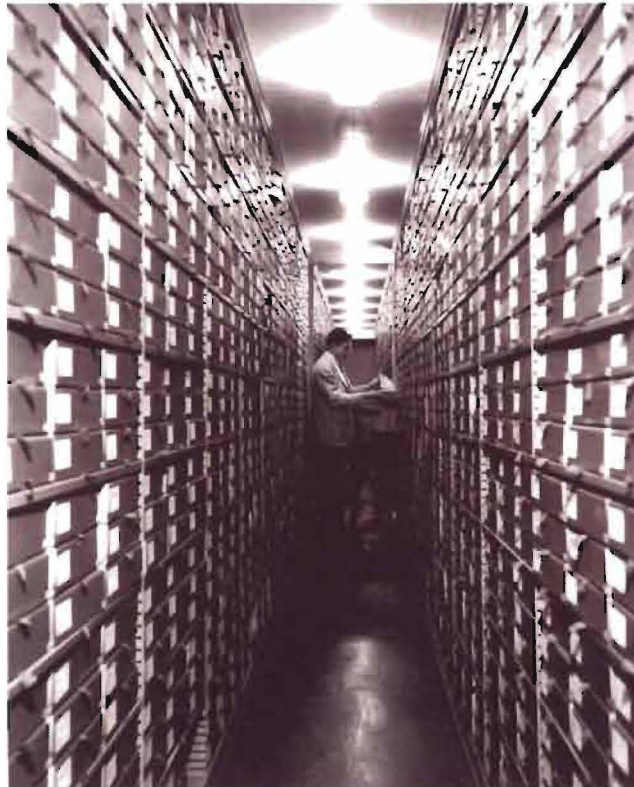
With the outbreak of World War II, the focus of the FSA photo project began to change. As the nation's attention turned from economic and social issues at home to the war against Germany, Italy and Japan, the photo unit reflected this shift. Roy Stryker encouraged his photographers to take more “positive” images of American life to bolster America's war effort. And while FSA photographers continued to document poverty and inequality, they were told to increase their output of photographs featuring reassuring images of American life. Pictures of defense factories, war workers and patriotic activities on the home front also began entering the FSA files.



In October 1942 the FSA photo unit became part of the new Office of War Information (OWI), created to direct America's wartime propaganda efforts. The following year the unit formally went out of existence. Director Roy Stryker left government and a few FSA photographers went to work for the OWI.

## **Saving the FSA Photographs**

As the FSA photo project neared its end, Director Roy Stryker faced a dilemma. From 1935 to 1943, he had created a vast trove of nearly eighty thousand photographs (and 68,000 unprinted negatives). Stryker recognized the importance of this collection to history and feared it might be dispersed when it came under the full control of the Office of War Information (OWI).



A seasoned Washington bureaucrat, Stryker had been maneuvering as early as 1939 to secure a safe harbor for the collection in the Library of Congress. Now, working with his friend Archibald MacLeish --who was both the Librarian of Congress and Assistant Director of the OWI-- Stryker helped arrange a transfer of the entire FSA photo file to the Library's custody under unusual terms. The Library took title to the collection in 1944, but loaned it back to the OWI for the duration of the war. In 1946, the collection was physically moved to the Library, where it is available to all for study and reproduction.

This curriculum guide draws from that collection and presents a new generation the opportunity to examine the role of photographs as historical evidence. By examining, thinking, and asking questions about photographs, students will learn to better understand how and why they were created and used.

Nearly all of the photographs shot by the FSA are black and white. But during the photo unit's later years a few photographers began experimenting with color photography. In some cases, these photographers shot the same subjects in both black and white and color.

These photographs are drawn from the 644 color transparencies and 35 mm Kodachrome slides in the FSA photo collection. None of these color images were published during the 1930s and 1940s. The entire group was only discovered at the Library of Congress during the 1970s.



These images can seem startling, because we are accustomed to experiencing the 1930s and 1940s in black and white. But color photography draws the viewer into the past in a different way. Color makes the photographs appear more immediate and intimate. Faces in color appear more real--more like us. The effect is often arresting.

These are just a few technical and editorial considerations that need to be kept in mind when viewing photographs as historical evidence. The activities that follow will allow your students the opportunity to explore these and other considerations in greater detail.

# The New York Times Magazine

APRIL 11  
1937

Section  
8

Copyright, 1937, by The New York Times Company

The New York Times Magazine, April 11, 1937.

## WHEN BITING DUST SWEEPS ACROSS THE LAND



By HARLAN MILLER

**A**N earthquake shocks and writes the people. It has punch. Few acts of nature are so dramatic and spectacular as a hurricane. In a flood something can be done, there is escape, and restoration. But when the dust rises and storms across the land, as it has begun to do again in the Middle West, it numbs and paralyzes and annihilates. Against this conspiracy of earth and wind there is no retreat, in the hot sun that matches away the water, there is no answer.

Across the Dust Bowl an Eastern tourist is driving toward the West. Without knowing it he has just crossed the hundredth meridian of longitude west from Greenwich, a line which splits the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas and Texas. It is not marked on the road maps. Behind him, early this morning, he has left Wichita and the rich fields of Eastern Kansas. Ahead of him now lies the immediate theatre of the tragedy. The rough circle formed by the adjacent corners of five States—Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas. If he could drive diagonally southwest from Richfield, Kan., directly to Chaparral, N. M., he would leave in just 115 miles, his tire tracks in the scorching dust of all five.

**S**O far the day has been clear and brilliant. But now a weird yellow haze begins to obscure the blue light ahead. A few eddies of dust follow across the road in front of him. He is traveling fifty miles an hour. That ambiguous cloud ahead hugs the ground at twenty. In fifteen minutes he is in the thick of it.

Quickly he switches on the headlights of his car, though it is only 2 o'clock. The radiator cap is scarcely visible. The doors and windows of his sedan are lightly shut, the ventilator is closed, yet the dust sifts in. It is thick on the smoked glass of his white-rimmed driving goggles. It is thick in his nostrils. His wife mistakes some handkerchiefs from the vacuum jug and covers the children's mouths and noses. She hands him a handkerchief. It is difficult to breathe.

With alarm he notices that the headlights of cars coming from the opposite direction are invisible until they are almost even with his own. He swerves to the side of the highway until he feels the deeper dust of the shoulders beneath his right wheels. He is tempted to stop. But if he does, another ray

bugging the side of the road may ram his car in the rear. If he goes on he may collide with a car ahead which has stopped.

There is a slight lull in the wind. For a mile or two the visibility is better. He observes that most of the farmhouses seem abandoned, stony and gaunt, with dust banked higher than their window sills. The land is as barren of grass as a concrete tennis court or the floor of a gymnasium. There is a dead pine thicket bared so that only its topmost twigs rise above the dust. The only living things are the fuscous thrushes.

**A**ND now the dust storm envelopes him again. Would it be safer to turn off and drive across the range? No, the dust is too soft and deep; there is no ground to feel. And there will be fences. There is another break in the flying earth. He begins to notice that some of the dust clouds are black, others are gray, still others a yellow which refracts an unearthly light from its earthen molecules. These are samples from the previous topsoils of Kansas, Colorado and Texas.

A little later as he is crawling along, nervous and shaken, the dust begins to strike the windshield with a distinct gravelly note. This is the delegation of sand from New Mexico, biting into the glass and paint. This evening when he reaches his destination he will need a new windshield, which will cost 125, and when he returns home he will need a paint job on the car. The left side is pitted and scarred. He hopes his insurance will cover the cost. His wheels wobble on.

**T**HIS is the Dust Bowl, which he will remember as a nightmare tomorrow, when he reaches the hills. His has been only the brief agony of the traveler. Multiply it by the days in a year, by the years in the lifetime of a Dust Bowl dry farmer, add the total loss of a slender pillow, and you have part of the agony of an inhabitant of this scorched, stripped, insulated circle of land.

But this is merely the most desolate realm of the dust storms. There but for the grace of God lies the whole vast area between the hundredth meridian and the foothills of the Rockies, a region as great as France, Germany and Austria combined, an empire of 250,000 square miles just beginning to suffer the same skin trouble, the same ruinous malady of its grass and soil. So far the Dust Bowl is only a little bigger in area than the

New England States with New Jersey and Maryland thrown in. But symptoms of the same ailment grow more visible from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande.

The fury of the dust storms is factored with the stigma of man's own guilt and folly. The aftermath demands penance and atonement and slow, tedious regeneration. Not in a day or a year or a decade can the black speckler of the plains be laid.

To blame the eager pioneer is as futile as to blame the sheep grow that break the plains. To blame the El Niño of the war days which tempted the eager pioneer, is as inconclusive as to blame the appetites of the mob in the trenches who demanded bread, or the German imperial policy which put them in the trenches. To blame the doughty exploiters of the last sixty years who skinned the high plains is as fruitless as to blame the first lusty pioneers who tramped over the Appalachians and drove their cattle toward the free open grasslands.

**B**EYOND the Eastern mountains the miles of lush green grass flowed toward the setting sun like green gold. To the first land-hungry pioneers the sight of this grass-biting westward across the continent, across the central prairies and up the high plains, was as intoxicating as barrels of gold spilled in the street of a city slum. And the government urged the pioneers on. The westward surge across the free grass solved many an Eastern economic and political problem. The early reports of the first waves of trappers and traders were as incendiary as the tales of Marco Polo about the wealth of the Far East.

Nature had tended well her Western fields. The buffaloes were where they were, the herdsmen who followed them. Then the riches of the grasslands are almost inconceivable. The Spaniard Castaneda was standing where the Dust Bowl whirled today when he wrote, 400 years ago, that the passage of a caravan of a hundred Spaniards and 1,500 Indians and 8,000 horses and oxen and sheep left no trace in the strong knee-high and waist-high grass. Millions of buffaloes had ranged widely and with sure instinct across the green grass and the buffalo grass, the curly mesquite and bluegrass and bunch grass. They left it unscarred. Then the violent out-thrust of the early young nation, the blind, vigorous gesture of national policy. It was a nation's mistake, and now it is a nation's penitence.

**AFTER the Civil** (Continued on Page 26)

In the top of a dust storm—Farmer and son resting on mats of clean air in the "unbaited storm," called the Dust Bowl.

