

RUSSELL LEE

A CENTENARY EXHIBITION



WITTLIFF GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN & MEXICAN PHOTOGRAPHY



Cover: Tenant purchase clients at home.
Hidalgo County, Texas, 1939.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF34-T01-032010-D]

Russell Lee, c. 1943.

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MARCH 29 - OCTOBER 12, 2003

WITTLIFF GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN & MEXICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

ALKEK LIBRARY - TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY - SAN MARCOS

CO-CURATORS MARY JANE APPEL & CONNIE TODD

RUSSELL WERNER LEE

THE MAN WHO MADE AMERICA'S PORTRAIT

ESSAY BY MARY JANE APPEL

FOREWORD

The Wittliff Gallery connection to Russell and Jean Lee goes back many years before the actual founding of the gallery to a time when Bill Wittliff and Russell Lee became close friends, sharing a passion for photography and fly-fishing. In his visits to Russell's darkroom, Bill often reacted enthusiastically to certain images, whereupon Russell would always give him the print. Bill finally told Russ that he was going to stop admiring his work altogether unless Russ would sell him the prints instead of gifting them. That's when Bill's collection of Lee photographs really began.

Later on, when I was working for Bill at the Encino Press/Pangaea office, we were fortunate to find ourselves on Russell's weekly "route" of visits. He would drop in and we would happily stop everything, sit down with a cup of coffee, and talk about whatever was on his mind and on ours—often his early days traveling and taking photographs. You could well understand how Russ was able to put his subjects at ease when he was working in the field—his manner was gentle, he was genuinely interested in whatever you had to say, he had wonderful stories and a great sense of humor. When the Hurley monograph on Lee was going out of print, Russell bought all the remaining copies, Bill warehoused them at the Encino and subsequently distributed them for Russ. The Encino Press also produced a special, rebound, signed, slipcased edition that was sold with a signed print made by Russell especially for the book.

Russell died in 1986, the year Bill and Sally Wittliff—with the support and cooperation of the university—founded the Southwestern Writers Collection at Texas State. Jean Lee gifted to the Collection a great number of early FSA prints as well as photographs from other periods, and she donated wonderful memorabilia—Russell's paintings from the Woodstock days, his early cameras, many family photographs, mementos that had hung in Russell's darkroom always—like the handmade going-away card from the FSA-OWI staff. After Jean's death in 1996, Dow Chapman donated the Werner Family Bible from Russell's mother, one of Russell's best paintings from the Lee home, and special documents...precious things that personalize our Lee collection and make it

possible for us to present in this exhibition not only the man's work, but a bit of the man himself. In 2000, the Wittliffs donated their Lee images to the gallery.

In 1999, the Wittliff Gallery received a grant from the Texas State Library & Archives Commission to digitize the Russell Lee collection and create a website on Lee. We advertised for an archivist and were incredibly lucky to find Mary Jane Appel, who had already begun writing a book about the photographer after falling in love with his images while working at the Library of Congress, where the Farm Security Administration negatives reside. She noticed that, although many of Lee's FSA colleagues—Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Arthur Rothstein—enjoyed more name recognition, the photographer most often requested for reprints was Russell Lee. Appel's subsequent investigation of his work convinced her that someone needed to do an in-depth examination of the man, his career, and his place in the history of documentary photography. She created for the Wittliff Gallery an excellent, highly researchable website (www.wg.txstate.edu) in which each of our Lee images is scanned and identified and all historical artifacts and memorabilia are pictured and described.

It was an obvious decision to ask Appel to write the catalog essay for our Russell Lee centenary exhibition. She has done so with much attention to detail, including new information and insights into this remarkable American photographer and his work. The essay focuses primarily on Lee's early history and on his work with the FSA, although she adds brief sketches of his subsequent photography as well.

The Russell Lee Collection at the Wittliff is one of our most distinguished bodies of work, and it is a great pleasure and privilege to present a small part of it in this tribute to one of the finest talents in the history of American documentary photography.

Connie Todd, Curator
Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography

THE MAN WHO MADE AMERICA'S PORTRAIT

RUSSELL WERNER LEE 1903 - 1986

Russell Lee was born in Ottawa, Illinois in 1903, the year the Wright Brothers made their first flight at Kitty Hawk, the year the first silent movie, *The Great Train Robbery* debuted, the year Pittsburgh lost the first World Series to Boston, and the year President Theodore Roosevelt and Britain's King Edward VII exchanged the first transatlantic wireless communication.

Lee lived a childhood marked by wealth, tragedy, loss, and displacement. He was forced at a young age to create order from personal chaos, and later in life was able to draw on abilities gained from these experiences to better understand the human condition. 1903 was the dawn of the Edwardian era—a time of faith in the superiority of technology—and Russell Lee embraced technology and science: he trained to become a chemical engineer and—later—a photographer, skills he combined with a strong social conscience to ultimately create a compelling photographic portrait of America and a legacy that would profoundly influence the course of photography.

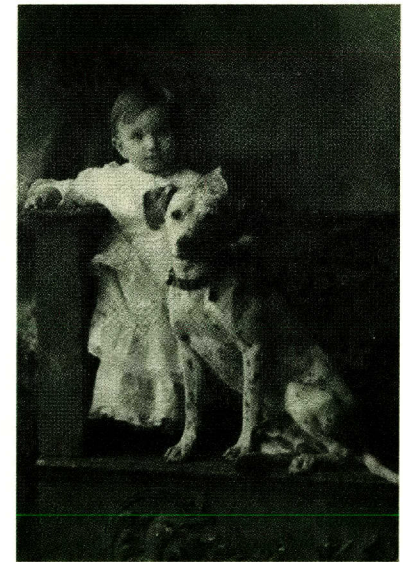
Although his photographic career spanned four decades, Russell Lee is best known for his work from 1936 to 1942, making pictures for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal program designed to assist poor and destitute farmers during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Together with a stable of photographers that included Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein, John Collier, Marion Post Wolcott, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange, Lee worked directly under the creative supervision of Roy Stryker, head of the FSA's Historical Section and director of photographic projects. Stryker's documentary team created approximately 164,000 negatives from 1935 to 1942; of these, 77,000 were printed and used to promote the FSA's programs. Essentially propaganda, in the sense that they sought to influence opinion, many FSA photographs were published in a variety of newspapers, books and magazines. Using

these photographs, Stryker's graphic designers and editors produced posters and exhibitions that toured cities around the United States, aiming to educate mostly urban Americans about the country's rural problems.

Today, the work produced by the FSA photographers provides us with a collective memory of the era of the Great Depression and subsequent mobilization for war. These images have now become so much a part of our national experience that most adults in America have seen them, and can conjure up a visual "memory" of the time, whether they lived through it or not. As the most prolific of any other FSA photographer, Russell Lee created some of the most recognized images from the Great Depression.

Yet Lee himself is not known as the creator of many of these photographs. Unlike some of his FSA colleagues, including Dorothea Lange, creator of the iconic "Migrant Mother," Russell Lee has no such singular image by which people identify him. However, when one begins to examine the collective visual memory of the Depression, Lee's photographs are some of the most frequently reproduced, often without credit. His images appear regularly in our popular culture: certain models of DELL laptops have included a complimentary screensaver of an anonymous photograph entitled "The Good Old Days" which is actually Russell Lee's FSA photograph titled *Tenant purchase clients at home. Hidalgo County, Texas, February 1939*. Similarly, the opening credits to the television program "Cheers" anonymously includes another of his FSA photographs: *Saturday night in a saloon, Craigsville, Minnesota, September 1937*.

Of all the FSA photographers, Russell Lee created the largest body of work and covered the greatest geographic territory. He photographed in 29 states. From wheat fields in Walla Walla to tenements in the Bronx, from pay day in a Minnesota lumber camp to life in small town Texas, Lee traversed the country for six years, exploring and creating a visual document of life in America during one of its most desperate eras. He photographed pneumatic drilling machines with the same thoroughness and enthusiasm as he did the Little Norway Knitting Club. He



Russell Lee, c. 1905.

documented victims of floods, droughts and epidemics with the same compassion and sensitivity that he used to photograph migrants, tenants and sharecroppers. He was, without question, the most deeply committed of any of the FSA photographers.

Over the course of seven years, Stryker hired approximately twenty-five photographers, but many made only a small number of images; the majority of the FSA-OWI (Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information) pictures were made by fewer than ten photographers. Of the approximately 63,000 captioned photographs created by Stryker's team, Russell Lee contributed almost 19,000, or almost 30% of the total, more than twice the amount of any other photographer.¹ The sheer volume of his FSA work, undoubtedly daunting, may have ultimately worked against him; to date, examination of Russell Lee's FSA photography has been cursory at best, mostly by a single project or in FSA compendiums.

During his FSA tenure, Lee developed a photographic style that distinguished his images from those of his colleagues and influenced countless numbers of photographers who came after him. Formally educated and trained as a chemical engineer, his technical acuity enabled his experimentation with developers that allowed him to "push" his film at a time when the fastest film speed was an ASA of 20. This manipulation, paired with the evolution of his groundbreaking technique of multiple flash in the field, enabled Lee to photograph interiors in great detail.

Like many of his FSA colleagues, Lee also had significant training in art: he studied painting for five years prior to his work with the FSA. Although he never considered himself an artist, he combined his artistic background and sensibility with his technical skills to create beautifully-crafted and compelling photographs, true works of art.

Lee was an integral part of an emerging trend in the 1930s towards series work, as featured in magazines such as *LIFE* and *Look*. Certainly as a result of his university training, Lee possessed a particular talent for illustrating how something functioned, how it was created, built, or dismantled.

A man of independent financial means, Lee supplemented his government issued camera equipment and per diem with equipment and money of his own, and was able to purchase a new car each year. He could have chosen any number of lifestyles, professions, or pastimes, including doing nothing at all. Instead, he chose to spend six uncomfortable years painstakingly documenting the Depression's problems and the New Deal's proposed solutions. His choice speaks to not only a strong commitment to photography and social action, but to a real spirit of adventure and discovery. Indeed, his tenure with the FSA was one of the most important periods of his life; he called it the best job he ever had.² When Lee left the FSA-OWI to join the Air Transport Command in 1943, the FSA-OWI staff made a going away card for him. It features a caricature of Lee looking through the lens of a camera on a tripod while pulling the shutter release. The card is addressed: "Happy Landings to a Great Guy Who Did America's Portrait" and is signed by the entire staff. Russell Lee kept this memento of his FSA years hanging in his darkroom like a family portrait until the day he died.

In this centenary year of his birth, the Wittliff Gallery celebrates the life and work of Russell Lee.

September 17, 1913

Adele Werner Lee emerged just after 7 P.M. from dinner at the Clifton Hotel, an Ottawa landmark and one of the finest hotels in Illinois. The night air was damp with a misting rain as she paused on the sidewalk, scanning the opposite side of Columbus Avenue until she spotted the family car and chauffeur, waiting to drive her home. Inside the car, watching and waiting for her, were her father and her beloved ten-year-old son, Russell.

Having legally separated from her husband, Burton Cook Lee, several years before, she and Russell lived with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Werner at 1002 Ottawa Avenue. Adele Lee, a local beauty and an accomplished pianist and concert vocalist, belonged to Ottawa society; and at age 32, was one of the city's wealthiest women. She had spent the day in Chicago with friends, shopping and attending a matinee of "The Road to Happiness." Addie stepped off the curb and made her way to the street car tracks where two street cars were standing, facing north. As she passed around the rear of the first car, it began to move forward, obstructing her view of Columbus Avenue.



Going-away card to Lee from FSA-OWI staff, c. 1942.

Phillip Godfrey, a young man from Ottawa, headed south on Columbus Avenue in his father's new touring car; and because the road was wet, he proceeded slowly at only seven or eight miles per hour. The rain covered his windshield, and as this particular model had no wipers, Godfrey's passenger, Ray Thomas, kept his head out the window and his eye on the wet pavement in front of them. Ahead, Columbus Avenue appeared clear of any traffic, except for the two street cars to the left and an idling car on the right.

Godfrey and Thomas didn't see Adele Lee as she passed between the street cars and Adele didn't see Godfrey's car until she found herself in its path. As the touring car struck Adele in the middle of Columbus Avenue, she briefly clung to the car's front right fender and radiator in an attempt to prevent being knocked onto the pavement. The radiator's heat burned her hands, and after the car had moved about five feet, she loosened her grip and fell, the car dragging her beneath the front wheel. Godfrey was able to stop the car before the rear wheels reached her. Two bystanders in front of the Clifton Hotel ran to the scene, pulled Adele from the beneath the car and placed her inside the very car that had caused her injuries. Godfrey rushed her to Ryburn Memorial Hospital where it was immediately clear that she could not survive.

Charles Werner and his grandson, Russell Lee, in shock at having seen the horrendous accident at close range, were driven to the hospital, where they met Godfrey's car with a dying Adele inside. She recognized her son and father, but was bewildered as to what had just taken place. Adele suffered from massive internal injuries and died the next day, on the occasion of her 13th wedding anniversary. Adele's funeral was held at the family home and she was buried a few blocks away in the Werner plot at Ottawa Avenue Cemetery.³ On that September day, having just witnessed the horrible death of his mother, Russell Lee's life took a decidedly different course. His father had left him and Adele several years before, so Russell Lee was now parentless; his maternal grandmother, Eva Werner, immediately became his legal guardian.

Eva Werner, nee Pope, overbearing by all accounts, was also—like her daughter, Adele—one of Ottawa's wealthiest women. In 1881 she married Charles Werner and had two daughters, Adele in late 1881 and Clara in 1884. They moved to 1002 Ottawa Avenue where they built their house, which still stands today. Clara, an invalid, died at the age of eleven, but Adele grew to adulthood and studied in Chicago to become a singer. In

September 1900, at 18, she married an Ottawa resident, Burton Cook Lee, and went on a European honeymoon with her new husband and her mother. In early February 1901, while honeymooning in Rome, Adele gave birth to a daughter, who was immediately given up for adoption. The identity of the father is forever lost, as is the fate of the child. Serious attempts to find her were made after Adele's death, and again after the death of Russell Lee, but to no avail. Only one thing remains certain: Burton Lee was not the father. The child was conceived in spring of 1900, in all probability while Adele was in school in Chicago; she most likely returned home soon thereafter, whereby an arrangement was made with Burton Lee to marry her. Burton Lee worked at various occupations from 1894 to 1904—he was a carpenter, an insurance salesman, a loan officer and a salesman of men's furnishings and hats. By 1907, he had no occupation and by 1911 he had left Ottawa, an unhappy marriage to Adele, and his 8-year-old son, Russell.

After Adele's death, Russell remained at 1002 Ottawa Avenue, his grandparents' house where he had lived with his mother. Eva Werner remained his legal guardian for four years, until her death in May of 1917. She included Russell in her will, providing him with investments and financial security.

Four days after Eva Werner's death, Russell Lee's father, Burton Lee, by this time residing in Chicago, waived all rights to his son's guardianship, and Charles Werner was appointed guardian. However, for reasons unknown, the relationship between Russell Lee and his grandfather were not at all amicable. In fact, when Charles Werner died in September 1943, Russell Lee and his second wife, Jean, returned to Ottawa for the funeral and saw Charles Werner buried in the Werner family plot⁴; but they never purchased a tombstone, and to this day Charles Werner's grave is unmarked. As a result of his unfriendly relationship with his grandfather, by November 1917, Russell Lee requested that his great uncle, Milton Pope, be appointed his guardian. This action would prove, financially and emotionally, to be a very wise one.

Milton Pope, a prominent and influential Ottawa resident, was also a wealthy land owner and financier. He was married, but had no children. Accounts of Milton Pope state that he "never showed his position or his worldly possessions to make him feel better than the man in the ordinary walk of life, and consequently he was admired by all he met. Jovial, good natured and possessed with sterling qualities of character..."⁵ Such



Russell Lee, 1913.

comments mirror recollections made by those who knew Russell Lee and attest to some of the fundamental ways in which Milton Pope influenced, guided, and imparted knowledge and values to his grand nephew.

In September, at the age of fourteen, Russell Lee enrolled in Culver Military Academy in Culver, Indiana. Although he stated years later in interviews that he did not favor the military discipline there, it was this same discipline and training that he would later draw on as an FSA photographer. The goal-oriented, team environment provided by the FSA was one in which Russell Lee thrived, as evidenced by the volume and quality of his photographic output at the time. He valued his place among other talented photographers working towards the larger cause of social justice (or at least heightened social awareness), and as such, he did not seek out the spotlight, perhaps one of the reasons many of his photographs continue to be published uncredited.



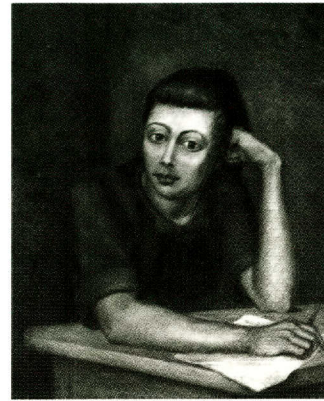
Russell Lee at Culver Military Academy, 1921.

Despite his professed dislike of Culver Military Academy, Russell Lee excelled there. He would return on holidays to 1002 Ottawa Avenue where his grandfather lived, but for the most part, he stayed at Culver.

During this time, Milton Pope saw to his nephew's finances and instilled in him the need for thrift, responsibility, and a good education. One of the very few personal documents Russell Lee kept from this time is a letter now in the Wittliff Collection from his great uncle, dated December 20, 1918, from St. Petersburg, Florida, where Pope was wintering. In it, Milton Pope warmly answered his nephew's questions about whether a business or college education was more advisable. Pope pointed out the merits of both, and assured him it was essentially his own decision. Milton Pope was now the only parental figure and influence in Russell Lee's life.

In early 1920, Milton Pope fell ill while wintering in Florida; he died in Ottawa in September that same year. During his three years of guardianship, Milton Pope had secured his nephew's financial future by investing the Eva Werner inheritance and creating for Lee a diversified portfolio, doubling the value of his nephew's estate to about \$200,000 or about \$1.8 million in today's economy.

After the death of Milton Pope, Burton Lee again waived rights to his



Portrait by Russell Lee, c. 1935.

son's guardianship. Russell Lee would have three more legal guardians by the time he reached the age of 21.

In 1921, Lee graduated from Culver Military Academy and enrolled in Lehigh University in Pennsylvania where he graduated in 1925 with a degree in chemical engineering. He returned to Illinois and accepted a position with Certaineed Products Company in Marseilles, just outside of Ottawa. He made his home with his legal guardian Burton Jordan and his family.

Lee married Doris Emrick, a painter originally from Ottawa, Illinois, in 1927. Russell and Doris Lee moved into their own Ottawa home and Russell went to work in Marseilles. The following year, he was promoted to plant manager and transferred to Kansas City; the Lees moved there in 1928, where Doris studied art with Ernest Lawson at the Kansas City Art Institute.

By 1929, Lee became exceedingly restless and bored with his career in chemical engineering. He resigned, and in September of that year the Lees moved to San Francisco, living in a house at 2784 Union Street. The crash of the stock market a month later had little effect on the Lees' financial freedom; Milton Pope had invested in a conservative and diversified manner and Lee lived off of an annuity. Russell Lee pursued painting and Doris Lee enrolled in the San Francisco School of Art, studying with the American Scene painter Arnold Blanch.

A little over a year later, in 1931, the Lees moved to New York, spending summers at an artist colony in Woodstock and winters in New York City to study with the Art Students League. In 1935, after several years of frustration painting portraits and landscapes in Woodstock and New York City, Lee heeded the suggestion of friend Ben Shahn and purchased his first camera, a 35mm Contax (now in the Wittliff Gallery collection), to aid him with brushwork and draftsmanship. He photographed his surroundings in Woodstock, venturing out to auctions to document the realities of the Depression as people were forced to sell their household goods. He also photographed New York City in the winter of 1935-1936, documenting urban scenes as well as the effects of the Depression there: unemployment, hunger, and despair. In the spring of 1936, he traveled to Pennsylvania and photographed the bootleg coal mines.



University of Texas at Austin, Center for American History (Lete negative)

Unemployed, winter of 1935-1936, New York City.

It was at this time that he began to explore, confidently and quickly, photography's technical aspects; he was soon mixing his own developing chemicals, which allowed him to "push" his film beyond its normal ratings. It was also at this time that he began experimenting with flash photography techniques. He acquired an agent and before long his photographs were published in magazines such as *Collier's* and *American Magazine*.

In the summer of 1936, Joe Jones, a friend visiting the Lees in Woodstock, told Russell Lee about a photography exhibition in New York City organized by the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration, based in Washington. The Historical Section's purpose and function was to publicize and gain national support for certain New Deal programs through the dissemination and exhibition of photographs illustrating the plight of tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and migrant workers. Lee went down to see the exhibition and was immediately intrigued by both the photographs and the ideology behind them, deciding immediately he would like to be involved. Shortly thereafter, he traveled to Washington to inquire about any available photography positions. With his bootlegger mining portfolio in hand, he met with Roy Stryker, the head of the Historical Section, who informed him nothing was currently available. Lee returned to Woodstock, and within a month, on October 19th 1936, Stryker wrote Lee a letter, offering him a temporary photography assignment intended to last two weeks. His two week assignment marked the beginning of a six year tenure with the Farm Security Administration.



Russell Lee in Woodstock, New York, 1936.

The New Deal and the Farm Security Administration

The 1930s in America—the era of the Great Depression—was also the decade in which documentary photography was born. A time of economic, social, and cultural upheaval, it also saw the confluence of two important technical innovations: the introduction of the 35mm camera (which replaced the bulky Graflex that had typified the 1920s), and the wide use of photolithography, which enabled magazines such as *LIFE* and *Fortune* to quickly and inexpensively print high quality reproductions of photographic images to illustrate their articles.

The Depression, product of a combination of disastrous events, began with the collapse of the nation's financial infrastructure. The crash of the stock market in 1929 brought about the failure of over 1300 banks in 1930, representing \$853 million in deposits. That same year, over 26,000 busi-

nesses closed and subsequent years proved to be even worse. In 1931, almost 2300 banks failed, taking with them nearly \$1.7 billion in deposits. By the end of the year, unemployment climbed to 8 million people, and within several months would approach 12 million. The 451,800 corporations still in business in 1932 had a combined deficit of \$5.64 billion.⁶

President Herbert Hoover himself named the Depression, choosing the word because he believed, in 1929, it sounded less alarming than "panic" or "crisis." He assured Americans that their hoboos were better fed than hoboos had ever been and that everyone would eventually have a job. He proclaimed that adversity was good and that prosperity was just around the corner.⁷

The 1930s was a time of dust storms brought on by years of careless plowing, overgrazing, and other farming practices that exhausted the topsoil. During a single storm in 1934 between May 9th and May 11th, an estimated 350 million tons of soil disappeared from the mid-west and reappeared along the east coast. Chicago alone received four pounds of dust for every resident. Washington, DC, Boston, and New York City burned street lamps in the middle of the day because the air was gray with dust.

One of the results of the dust storms was a mass migration of people from the mid-west to the west coast. They worked in forests as lumberjacks and joined migrant workers in the fields. They settled in cities and collected relief checks when and where they could. By April of 1932, 750,000 people were living on city relief efforts that averaged \$8.20 a month per person (about 1/5 of the minimum cost needed to live). An estimated 160,000 waited to get on the rolls as soon as money became available.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President in 1932 and brought to office with him the New Deal he had pledged to the American people. Within days of his inauguration in 1933, Roosevelt and his advisors created a magnitude of social programs aimed to restore the nation's economy—their names alone illustrate the breadth of the New Deal's efforts. Beginning with the Emergency Banking Act of 1933, America saw the formation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Industrial Recovery Act, the Public Works Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, the Works Progress Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, and the Resettlement Administration, to name only a few.

The Resettlement Administration (RA) was formed in May 1935. Under the direction of Columbia University professor Rexford Tugwell, the RA's focus was rural rehabilitation in the form of resettling farm families from overworked land and giving them fresh starts elsewhere. Although the initial goal of the RA was to resettle 500,000 families, only about 4400 were ever resettled. The RA set up several communal farms for rural families that suffered displacement, and sponsored more conventional rural communities where farmers were able to buy farms with government loans. The RA was reorganized and renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the fall of 1937; the FSA absorbed all of the programs and responsibilities of the RA.

Soon after its formation in May 1935, Tugwell created for the RA a sort of public relations functional unit. In July 1935, Tugwell hired Roy Emerson Stryker, one of Tugwell's colleagues from Columbia, to direct this new unit, named the Information Division of the Historical Section. The Historical Section's purpose was to create a permanent record of the RA's work, as well as the lives of the people affected by it. Stryker's main focus as head of the Division of Information was to put photographers in the field who understood the problems of the rural poor and possessed the sensitivity and skill to portray them for the nation. For this task, Stryker hired, within the first year, Arthur Rothstein, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Walker Evans, and for a brief time, Paul Carter and Theodore Jung. Stryker prepared this staff of photographers for the field with extensive reading lists; he made sure his team had a complete grasp of the social conditions and the rural problems they were documenting.

In addition to research prior to going out into the field, every photographer was also issued a copy of the book *North America*, a comprehensive reference book written by J. Russell Smith, one of Stryker's colleagues at Columbia. Arranged roughly by geographic region and complete with a full-size removable map, Smith's book served as a field guide to the agriculture, industries, and natural resources of the continent. Other field tools included government-supplied cameras and film, an itinerary, contacts at Resettlement Administration regional offices, road maps, and Department of Agriculture pamphlets.

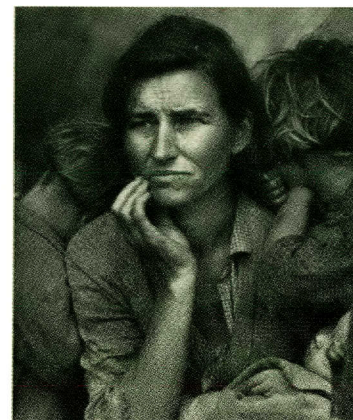
Although Stryker had been hired to oversee the creation of pictures celebrating the success of the RA, he suspected this would build little support for the programs, and that what was actually needed was more images that depicted the problems the RA was trying to solve. He believed visual infor-

mation of this kind would have a greater impact on Congress and the public, and therefore directed his team to produce this sort of image instead.

The Information Division's original mandate had been to prepare finished reports by economists, sociologists, statisticians, photographers and other specialists, but Stryker sought wider distribution for them and ensured that the photographs were also exhibited nationally in public presentations mounted by the government and printed in a variety of publications. In addition to gaining support from the public, he believed the images would enable the agency to secure more funding from Congress for its programs.

Stryker, using his contacts from New York and beyond, freely supplied FSA photographs to newspapers and magazines from a comprehensive image file which his office produced and maintained. He directed the focus and scope of the photography produced by his office, and shaped it around a structured methodology—in this case, the ideology of the New Deal.

By the end of 1940, when the United States' involvement in World War II was imminent, the focus of FSA photography broadened to include defense construction and mobilization for war. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Office of War Information (OWI) was established to coordinate and create wartime propaganda, and Stryker's team began to photograph for the OWI in addition to their FSA work. By September 1942, the photographic unit of the FSA was transferred to the Office of War Information. Assignments shifted completely from the systematic documentation of social conditions to the documentation of the U.S. involvement in World War II.



Migrant Mother, 1936 by Dorothea Lange.

ILL-USF34-9056-C1

1936

“Your first project will be our project at Hightstown...”

Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, October 23, 1936.

By the time Russell Lee joined the staff at the Resettlement Administration in 1936, its three most famous photographic images and series had already been produced. Dorothea Lange photographed her *Migrant Mother* in California in February; Arthur Rothstein photographed *Farmer and Sons Walking in the Face of a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* in April. Walker Evans and James Agee



spent the summer with two sharecropper families in Hale County, Alabama; the photographs and text became the seminal book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The bar had been set; Stryker and his photographic unit had already begun to inform Congress and the public about the plight of the land and the people who worked it. On October 19, 1936, Roy Stryker offered Russell Lee a two- to three-week per diem position, photographing the Jersey Homesteads just outside Hightstown, New Jersey.

Jersey Homesteads, built as an agricultural industrial cooperative community for Jewish

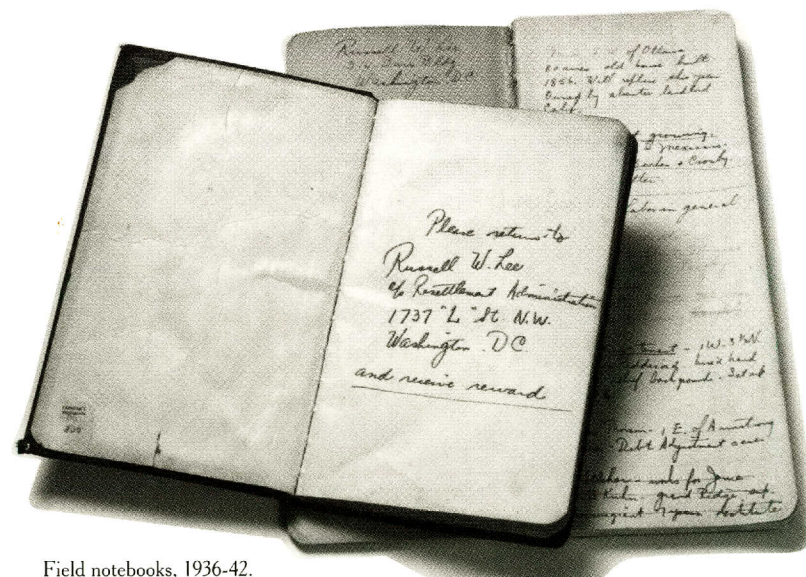
garment workers, was initially a part of the Subsistence Housing Program, a short-lived and generally unsuccessful program intended to move workers and their families from cities to newly established rural villages where they would earn their living by working and farming in the village. The Resettlement Administration took over the construction and administration of Jersey Homesteads in May 1935, and by October 1936, garment workers and their families were moving there from New York City. Stryker needed photographs of the success of the new cooperative: before and after photographs, illustrating the cramped living and working conditions in New York City compared with images of the government-constructed modern factory and 200 Bauhaus-style houses, as well as the home garden plots being worked by the cooperative's new residents. Generally, neither the photographers nor Stryker favored this type of formulaic assignment, but documenting RA, and later FSA, projects was necessary in securing more funds for future projects.

In the two week assignment at Jersey Homesteads, essentially his audition for a more permanent position with Stryker's staff, Russell Lee demonstrated the skills and style he would further hone and develop throughout

his six-year tenure. From the beginning, as evidenced in the approximately 200 pictures he made during this first assignment, he saw and photographed in multiple images and series rather than one representative image. Stryker has often been misquoted as defining Lee as a "taxonomist with a camera," but his actual statements are more complex than has been previously cited.

In the context of comparing Jack Delano with Russell Lee, Stryker defined it this way:

"Jack was the artist and being the artist would say, 'What one picture could I take that would say Vermont?' Russell was a – what is it in botany they call the man who classifies? – is that taxonomy? – No. There's a word for it, he takes apart and gives you all the details of all the plant. Russell is the engineer who wants to take it all apart and lay it on the table and says, 'There sir, there you are in all its parts. ... And I said to them one day, 'Jack, for God's sake why don't you take a little of Russell and Russell, why don't you take a little of Jack?'"⁸



Field notebooks, 1936-42.

Dust Storm, 1936
by Arthur Rothstein.

Stryker's urging to Jack Delano to be more like Russell Lee and vice versa highlights several other points: although he left chemical engineering to study art, Lee never considered himself an artist and therefore never thought in terms of one representative image, perhaps the principal reason Russell Lee is not recognized for a singular, iconic photograph. Comparable to the beauty and complexity of a scientific formula, Lee's photographs of objects illustrate not only their appearance, but also their creation and/or application, in detail. Although by 1936 Lee was skilled in operating medium and large format cameras, it is interesting to note that he photographed Jersey Homesteads exclusively with his 35mm camera, perhaps because of its ease and relative inconspicuousness as well as his uncertainty at what challenges the assignment might present. It is also worthy of note that his Hightstown images are photographed using either ambient or natural light; it would be another month before he used flash in his FSA work.

After spending several weeks on the Jersey Homesteads project, Lee received a telegram in November from Stryker requesting his return to Washington. As a result of his work on Jersey Homesteads and the opening created by Carl Mydans's resignation to join the staff of *L.I.F.F.* magazine, Stryker hired Lee on a more permanent basis, at an annual salary of \$2600 per year and \$5 per diem.

Lee met with Stryker in Washington, where they discussed the Resettlement Administration's three main themes for documentation: farm tenancy, migration and rehabilitation. Stryker and Lee mapped out his next assignment: farm tenancy in the mid-west, a subject and an area of the country Lee was familiar with, having grown up in the rich farmland of northern Illinois. By the end of November, Lee was in his home state and, in fact, used the home of Nannie Emrick, his mother-in-law in Aledo, as his base of operations. Logically, he began in the area of Ottawa and Marseilles and for about two months, he drove around Illinois and Iowa, photographing the problems and effects of tenancy; he interviewed farmers and photographed them with their homes and farms, which they were usually either renting or losing to the bank. He took copious notes in a pocket-size notebook so when he developed his negatives, he would be able to caption them before mailing them to Washington.

By December, Lee had created one of his best known photographs: *Hands of Mrs. Andrew Ostermeyer, wife of a homesteader, Miller Township, Woodbury County, Iowa*. This image of an elderly woman's work-worn,



Hands of Mrs. Andrew Ostermeyer, wife of a homesteader, Woodbury County, Iowa, 1936.

arthritic hands was precisely what Stryker was looking for to publicize the work of the RA, as it symbolized the struggles of the tenant farmer while simultaneously engaging the viewer on a human level. Through this photograph, the plight of the American farmer became not just an anonymous statistic, but a woman in Iowa who, in spite of years of bone-wrenching, disfiguring work, had lost the family farm to a loan company. The image was immediately well received and very widely published. Today, it serves as another example of the recontextualization of FSA photographs, as the circumstance and context of their creation have been obscured in recent decades by their new life as works of fine art in the relatively young photography market.

It was also during this time that Lee began to develop various techniques with flash, including one for which he became well-known: direct flash. As

a result of his dissatisfaction with the scant details he was able to capture outside, he began to experiment in Iowa with ways to illuminate the inside of homes and places of work. Until the 1930s, photographers were unable to capture the details of dark interiors and thus confined their imagery to exteriors or well-lit interiors. Flash powders developed at the end of the nineteenth century were inadequate in providing sufficient light to picture detail and really only supplied enough illumination for harsh tonal contrasts. Until flash bulbs were invented in Germany in 1925, available light (streetlights, for example) frequently demanded exposures of several hours. Flash bulbs allowed photographers to work inside, although single flash bulbs usually only illuminated the foreground, producing a very flat and harsh image with limited visual information. One of the only alternatives for interior illumination would have been an elaborate and intrusive set-up of flood lights—if the homes had electricity, and most did not. Lee stated in the documentary film *Today, Tomorrow's History: Photographer Russell Lee*, that after visiting about ten farmsteads, photographing the exteriors of the buildings and the land, he was curious about the interiors; flash enabled him to photograph inside the homes. Lee recalled:

“Here was the way people lived. How did they eat? How did they sleep? How did they cook? Everything about the house. What was around there? In the house. What did it look like? What was on the walls? What was on the mantelpiece? What was on the table? All these things were part of their particular way of life and I wanted to get this. And that was one reason, that was the best way I could do it, by using flash.”⁹

His photograph *Christmas dinner in home of Earl Pauley. Near Smithfield, Iowa*, marks one of the first examples of his use of direct flash. Its reflection is visible on the upper left side of the image, on the bowl of the cream separator. Lee's flash reveals all the details he aimed to show: the children gathered around the meager Christmas spread of potatoes and cabbage in chipped porcelain bowls on the table, the cardboard on the wall, keeping out the drafts as it covers the cracks between the boards, the cat on the floor distracted by something out of frame, the lunch box that hangs from the ceiling, and the edge of the wood stove with the coffee pot resting on top.

FSA colleague Louise Roskam recalled the visually jolting effects of Lee's flash technique: “...he stuck a flashbulb on the camera and went

vroom, you know. And all of a sudden a little shack opened up with every little piece of grime on the wall, radio cords mixed up with the electric cords, and what-not...and everybody could see it.”¹⁰

Lee worked closely with fellow FSA photographer, Arthur Rothstein, in developing various flash techniques. Using flash in the field was a major development, as none of the other FSA photographers up to this point had been able to successfully photograph inside. After his second wife, Jean, joined him, multiple flash images were possible, with Jean holding a second flash gun after stringing the synchronizing wires across the room.

Lee's first few months working for the R.A. had been successful. It was clear he had the commitment, the technical skills, and the temperament to relate to the people he was photographing. He continued in the field through the end of 1936.

1937

“Keep us informed of your whereabouts...”

Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, June 16, 1937.

Lee spent the first several months of 1937 in the Midwest photographing tenant farming. In January, halfway through his assignment, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers overran their banks, creating the Flood of 1937. He documented the devastation in the early days of the flood in January and would later return in April to photograph the aftermath: destroyed buildings, houses covered in mud, and refugees living in makeshift shelters.

By mid-1937, Lee had hit his stride, driving hundreds of miles across the Midwest and through to the Pacific Northwest with general outlines and geographic targets from Stryker. In the first few years, Lee developed his negatives on the road. Traveling with the necessary chemicals and equipment and making his hotel room light tight, he developed thousands of his own negatives. He would then mail the negatives and general captions back to Washington.

For the most part, Lee traveled alone. Occasionally, Doris would join him in the field for short trips, but would then return to Woodstock or New York City, a schedule that separated them for long periods of time. Some photographers, including Arthur Rothstein, found traveling around



Christmas dinner in home of Earl Pauley, near Smithfield, Iowa. Dinner consisted of potatoes, cabbage and pie, 1936.

the country to be a very lonely experience. Rothstein reminisced in a 1982 interview:

“When I look back on it now, it was a lonely life. I had no one traveling with me. I would get to meet people on the road and then have to drop them. They would go back to their lives, and I would go on to something new. I had many lonely evenings, many lonely experiences. I can still remember coming into a small town, say in Kansas or Iowa, finding an inexpensive hotel, and deciding whether or not I should develop my film that night in the bathroom or whether I should relax and have dinner all by myself and then walk up and down both sides of Main Street and maybe see a movie.”¹¹

If Lee experienced loneliness during his travels, he never expressed it in any existing interviews or letters. The work seemed to agree with him, and his unsettled youth certainly prepared him for life on the road. It is unclear exactly when Lee’s marriage to Doris began to disintegrate, but it was at this time that their paths diverged. Doris was reluctant to give up her painting career and join him on the road, and Russell was equally reluctant to give up his FSA work in order to live in New York full-time. On recalling this era decades later, Lee stated: “My life really was only work, and especially those early days because I sure wanted to prove myself and be retained on that job because it was exactly what I wanted to do.”¹² As he was not financially obligated to work, Lee ultimately chose his FSA career over his marriage to Doris.

While on the road, Lee kept in touch with Stryker via frequent and lengthy letters as well as telegrams and occasional long-distance phone calls. The correspondence between these two men is peppered with suggestions for photographs, Stryker’s comments and critiques, Lee’s proposed itineraries, discussions about technical issues and the challenges faced in the field. Through these letters, Stryker provided Lee with general outlines of subjects needed to round out the photographic files in Washington: “Try to get the pictures of the stores in which these people have to shop. The type of goods on the shelves.... We still need pictures of families on the move with their meager goods piled on trucks or wagons.”¹³ On occasion, Stryker would also direct Lee to be on the lookout for images to pitch to publications: “We need a few nice views of spring

work plowing, seeding, etc., with fleecy clouds floating overhead, the air balmy, the buzzing of the bees, and the willow catkins – you know, the kind of syrup that the magazine sometimes requests.”¹⁴

He encouraged Lee to deviate from these outlines if other subjects presented themselves, but also requested that Lee seek out specific subjects. In one letter from September 27, 1937, he advised:

“Do not forget some pictures on the bus terminals in the little towns you go through. These would be especially valuable to contrast with some which we are getting from the big terminals in New York and Washington. I particularly want some which will show the variety of people who use the buses. Some of the little dinky, dirty waiting rooms in the mid-west terminals should present some good photo opportunities...”¹⁵

Generally, as he did with other FSA photographers, Stryker relied upon and trusted Lee’s judgement, and gave him a lot of free reign in deciding his own itinerary. Lee’s itineraries were very studied and involved scouting out locations by stopping in a town and inquiring about the activities and conditions— talking to farmers, migrants, university professors, scientists, FSA regional offices, small town barbers, mailmen, general store owners, bartenders, and anyone else knowledgeable about or in the center of activity. He would then know when and where the action would take place, whether it was a harvest day, a payday, or a moving day.

Lee’s main photographic projects in 1937 took him to the Upper Peninsula and the Pacific Northwest where he focused on the lumber industry. As was characteristic of the engineer showing all elements, he documented the lumber industry in toto: he photographed the forests themselves, the lumber jacks working there, the depletion of the forests and the abuse of the land by the logging companies, the resulting cut-over land and cut-over farming attempted by those with few other options, the boom lumber towns where the lumberjacks spent their paychecks, and finally, the Forest Product Laboratories, where scientists developed uses for lumber by-products.

Spending four weeks in Michigan, Lee extensively documented the desperate conditions of cut-over farming. In a letter to Stryker from Iron River Michigan, he explained the cut-over farming and its effects:

“The damage which has been done to this land is still being carried on. There is one big logging company still operating in this section removing 10 million board feet per year. They plan to operate for another four or five years. I plan to get some of these logging pictures tomorrow - they are breaking camp very soon. These logging companies leave the land in horrible shape. No attempt is made to remove the slashings, peelings and dead-falls and consequently there is a constant supply of tinder to spread any fire. The logging companies usually sell the land they have cut-over to individuals who cut up what is left for firewood. After that, the land is usually offered for sale as “farm” land. The hardships of clearing this land of brush and stumps are tremendous and seems to result in a gradual demoralization of the people. Even after the land has been cleared there is usually but a short time before erosion sets in. Have visited a few of the shackers’ homes. Invariably they are on W.P.A. There is a great deal of malnutrition, I am told and living conditions are very bad.”¹⁶

Following his cut-over work in Michigan, Lee drove to the Pacific Northwest, a popular destination for the unemployed during the depression: 460,000 people moved there and found a variety of new opportunities. Some went to work on the building of the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams, others found abandoned homesteads they could work in southern Idaho and the eastern valleys of Oregon and Washington. A portion joined the migrant workforce in the hop and beet fields, or were employed in the region’s ancient forests as lumberjacks by large logging companies. It was the lumberjacks that Lee went to photograph.

Later, Lee concentrated his work in Minnesota, where Stryker joined him for the first time in the field, and traveled with him for roughly ten days, a practice he would repeat about once a year. After Stryker returned to Washington, Lee spent some time in Wisconsin at the Forest Products Laboratory, and then returned to Minnesota in August to photograph more of the lumber industry. By the end of the following month Lee had photographed perhaps his most viewed photograph: *Saturday Night in a Saloon, Craigsville, Minnesota, September 1937*.

Lee arrived in Craigsville, on Friday, September 17, 1937, specifically to photograph what he referred to as “Pay Day in a Lumber Town.” Craigsville, 260 miles northwest of Minneapolis-St. Paul, could only be reached in 1937 by unpaved but graded roads. His general practice upon arrival in a new town was to leave all of his camera equipment in the car whereupon he would ask around town what was happening, all the while becoming acquainted with the local residents. By the time Lee was set to begin photographing, sometimes hours or sometimes days after his arrival, people would already be accustomed to him and take little or no note of his presence. This practice allowed him to photograph almost invisibly, and his shots illustrate his subjects’ total disregard for his presence. This remains a striking feature of Lee’s work, and given the fact that he was almost six feet tall—a very large man for the 1930s—his “invisibility” attests to the fact that he put his subjects at ease and they trusted him.

Lee made less than fifty exposures at Craigsville. Apparently, as evidenced from his twenty-four captioned photographs, the only activities were centered in the saloons. It is unclear how many saloons were in Craigsville in 1937, but Lee photographed the patrons of two of them. Singled out, most probably by Stryker, as the sole representation of his “Pay Day in Lumber Town” assignment, *Saturday Night in a Saloon* is somewhat misleading, as it suggests Craigsville to be a congenial small town whose main industry happens to be lumber. Other photographs from Lee’s visit to Craigsville suggest a different reality and include a lumberjack passed out under a table in one of the saloons, and a young lumberjack photographed with a bandaged head after he had been beaten up and “rolled” in a saloon.

Taken on the day after Lee arrived, *Saturday Night in a Saloon*, depicts four patrons sitting at a bar inside a saloon that doubled as a barber shop in the daytime. The makeshift barber shop, which Lee photographed during the day, was confined to a corner and partitioned off by several two-by-fours; it included an actual barber chair, two stools, and a mirror, propped up on a corner shelf. At night, the mirror was removed, probably for safekeeping from the rowdy patrons. In *Saturday Night in a Saloon* the bar patron taking a drink completely obscures the barber chair, but the rest of the barber area, sans the mirror, can be seen in the background. Also visible in the background, reflected on the window frame, is Lee’s direct flash illuminating the scene. His vantage point, that of the bartender from behind the bar, becomes the viewer’s vantage point and provides an intimate view of each of the bar’s four patrons.



Saturday night in a saloon, Craigville, Minnesota, 1937.

This image has not been viewed primarily by a 1930s or New Deal audience, but rather by a 1980s television audience, as part of the opening credits of the television series *Cheers*, now in worldwide distribution. As with most of Lee's images, *Saturday Night in a Saloon* is uncredited.

Lee spent most of the remainder of 1937 in the northwestern states, photographing in Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas. By December, he had returned to his apartment in New York City to spend Christmas with Doris, and by the end of the month he was in Washington with Stryker, where they mapped out his next assignments.

1938

"...I may take a writer, who lives down here, along with me for a while..."

Russell Lee to Roy Stryker, from New Orleans, November 1938.

Lee spent the first four months of 1938 in Washington, DC and New York City, embarking on only one photographic trip, to Greenbelt, Maryland, just outside Washington, DC. Greenbelt was one of the Resettlement Administration's "Greenbelt" project towns: planned suburban communities located outside of large cities and surrounded by woodlands and fields. City government services and commercial establishments were centrally located and highways kept on the outskirts. Only three Greenbelt towns were ever built, but none remained intact as each succumbed to the sprawl typical of the suburbs in the post war decades. Lee photographed the other two Greenbelt towns the previous year: Greenhills, Ohio (outside Cincinnati) in February and Greendale, Wisconsin (outside Milwaukee) in March.

By May, Lee was in Missouri, photographing the FSA-sponsored Southeast Missouri Farms Project in Sikeston, Missouri. Stryker wrote Lee of the FSA's excitement about the project, as well as their interest in publishing a book:

"Jack [Fischer] was excited about the Sikeston Project. He is anxious that we get a complete story of the erection of one of the houses from the bare ground until the completed house. They will be putting up the last houses next week. If you should get there in time please give your first attention to such a story. The

whole Administration is very excited about this project. Baldwin suggested that Sherwood Anderson might be interested in doing the book, in which case they would want you to work with him so that you would have illustrations."¹⁷

A Sherwood Anderson collaborative book never materialized, but Lee's photographs of Sikeston were significant for the FSA's promotional purposes. Working according to the formula for portraying an FSA project, Lee created "before" and "after" rehabilitation photographs, illustrating the dismal living conditions in shacks and cabins prior to relocation to the project and the clean, new government sponsored facilities. In response to the formulaic directive by Jack Fischer and Roy Stryker, Lee produced one of his trademark sequences, a visually arresting series of photographs of the construction of a pre-fabricated house. Viewed singly, each image is certainly interesting, but the sequence as a whole provides a cinematic experience and is akin to watching a film of the house's construction.

As part of his "before" group of photographs, another of Lee's well-known images was made at this time: *Sharecropper's son combing his hair in the bedroom of a shack*. (see p. 19) Lee's flash captured an image of a young boy, barefoot and dressed in soiled coveralls, inside a sharecropper shack; he stands before the cracked mirror of a bedroom bureau, and combs his hair, the wood floor of the cabin beautifully reflected in the mirror. The room is generally tidy and newspapers, a poor man's wallpaper, decorate the walls; the more practical butcher paper used for insulation is visible underneath. The newsprint wallpaper teases with advertisements for "better coats" and "two trouser suits." Hats and other possessions hang on the wall. Lee's flash even captures the thread spool that has rolled underneath the bureau. This image would serve the FSA's immediate purposes as an excellent contrast to the clean new facilities at Southeast Missouri Farms, but would also serve to work against Lee in later decades as his images were dismissed as sentimental.

Many of Lee's images do, in fact, possess a certain level of sentimentality, as the very purpose of their creation was to evoke emotion; a photograph of the same corner of the same sharecropper's cabin without the human element of the child would not have been as effective or engaging, and Lee knew that. Lee has frequently been cited as the creator of human documents, but his work is more complex and calculating than this. His

analytic mind must have asked what would make an image the most engaging, sympathetic and influential for garnering governmental and public support while still presenting accurate visual information. In fact, throughout Lee's FSA tenure, Stryker consistently requested images of this sort:

"Also we need—and none of you folks seem to be getting for me—a few "front cover" pictures. I know you don't just walk into towns and pick them up, but keep an eye out for them. Put on the syrup and white clouds and play on the sentiment."¹⁸

Nothing was accidental or unintentional about Lee's work; the fact that he photographed a child in a sharecropper's cabin was not a coincidence—many of his photographs depicted children; children figure so often in FSA photographs because they are viewed as the blameless victims of social circumstances. However, this makes his photographs no less truthful about the conditions he was documenting, nor does it negate or diminish the fact that his photographs exist today (as they did when they were created) as powerful, engaging and beautiful images. Like every single photograph in the FSA collection, Lee's photographs are "propaganda," only in the sense that they were designed to influence opinion and evoke emotion from the 1930s audience that viewed them.¹⁹ They were not meant to misdirect, only to communicate fully what Lee saw. He did not create strictly scientific or analytically sterile images, nor did he rely strictly on fact to convey his message. He was striving to go beyond the facts, and he realized, like many of his fellow photographers, that real emotion could be stirred by the vivid presentation of straight information.²⁰

Lee's work at Sikeston marks the beginning of the end of developing film in the field. He processed some of his Southeast Missouri Farm negatives with tainted chemicals, causing improper development. Stryker wrote him on June 1, 1938: "You probably remember our saying that, due to some bad potassium alum, your films never properly hardened. Roy [Dixon, an FSA photo lab technician] feels that these particular negatives will only be able to go through the enlarger some two or three times."²¹ This improper development is visible on many of Lee's Sikeston negatives as they appear to be uncharacteristically flat with very little tonal range. From mid-1938 onward, photographers sent their undeveloped film to Washington for processing and by return mail were sent contact prints to caption. By September, Lee refers to this change in practice in a letter to Stryker's secretary: "As we are

not developing in the field anymore, we should be kept informed as to how they [the negatives] look with sample prints from typical negatives..."²²

Also by September, Lee was in Louisiana on several assignments. In efforts to either produce more revenue or simply to supplement funding to keep his photographers in the field, Stryker hired out or lent his photographers to other agencies whenever the right opportunity presented itself. In other words, his photographers could work in the field on another agency's funding, while concurrently continuing to create photographs for the FSA. Such was the case with Lee in Louisiana, where he worked on assignments for the Public Health Service and for the WPA Guide to Louisiana, part of the American Guide Series.

While on assignment in Louisiana in the fall of 1938, Lee met Jean Smith Martin, a journalist living in New Orleans. Personal details and facts about Jean are few, but it is known she was born Jean Smith in Texas in 1908 and at some point had married, so that when Lee met her in 1938, she was Mrs. Jean Martin. Jean recalled in a 1996 interview that when she met Russell Lee, they were immediately attracted to each other: "Russ and I took one look at each other, and it didn't take fifteen seconds to know we belonged together."²³

In November 1938, a more modest time, Russell Lee hinted to Roy Stryker that a change in partnership was underway:

"After Doris leaves, I may take a writer, who lives down here, along with me for awhile. Her name is Mrs. Martin and she is very interested in all this and I believe that it will help me and the files very much. (She has done feature work on southern newspapers.) She can help with the driving, too, Thank God."²⁴

Jean did, in fact, immediately begin working and traveling with Russell in the fall of 1938, as both a companion and an assistant.

By the end of 1938, on the road with Russell Lee, Jean quickly became a key contributor to his FSA work, as she interviewed the people being photographed, persuading them to talk about themselves and their situation. Having journalism experience, Jean kept fastidious notes which she later transcribed when captioning the thousands of photographs that were to be printed. Her abilities to engage his subjects in relaxing yet informative



Southeast Missouri Farms. Son of sharecropper combing hair in bedroom of shack, 1938.

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conversation allowed Lee to concentrate on making the photographs. Russell Lee described Jean's contributions: "She was just invaluable. And Jean was a very, very perceptive person - she'd also been a reporter and she knew just how to write and she kept great notes. She relieved me of all these responsibilities and that was simply terrific because this means that I was able to devote practically all of my time to photography."²⁵ Jean continued to work and travel with Russell until he left the FSA in 1942. Unfortunately, it is believed that Jean Lee destroyed her notebooks shortly after Russell Lee's death.

1939

"I believe that we should now start a series of pictures showing the operation and life on somewhat better farms..."

Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, April 7th, 1939.

January of 1939 brought Russell Lee to Texas, where he would spend the next four months photographing FSA programs, health and living conditions, migrant camps and housing, agricultural industries, and small towns. During this assignment his love affair with the state of Texas began, and it would last the rest of his life. Many of the photographs from this period would be used in the WPA State Guide to Texas. In the course of this project Lee created another of his most reproduced images.

In February, as one of the requisite "after" FSA rehabilitation images, Lee photographed *Tenant purchase clients at home, Hidalgo County, Texas*, an image that has been reproduced, uncredited to Lee, over the years in a variety of contexts. This image depicts a man and woman seated in arm chairs in the clean and tidy living room of their new home purchased through an FSA loan. The man reads a magazine and the woman tends to her sewing; a console radio, topped with family photographs, sits between them. A large unframed tapestry, reminiscent of a Hogarth print, is tacked on the wall. The photograph juxtaposes their new-looking furnishings with the couples' soiled, worn and patched clothing: the man's right sock, containing a large hole, exposes more of his ankle than it covers.

In the last decade alone this image has been interpreted in a number of different ways. In 1999 DELL offered the picture on some of its laptops as a complimentary screensaver entitled "The Good Old Days." Historian T.H. Watkins included it in his seminal book, *The Great Depression* and speculates that the couple could have been listening to Orson Welles and

his realistic radio dramatization of *The War of the Worlds* on October 30, 1938. Most recently, it served as an illustration in the Smithsonian Institution's *American Presidency* exhibit as a depiction of a couple listening to one of President Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats. In none of the three instances was Lee credited as the photographer.

A plausible explanation for this consistent anonymity may be that this image, like many other FSA photographs from the file, was printed as a press print and mailed from the FSA offices to various magazines, newspapers, and other press outlets and agencies. Typically, each press print was identified on the back with the caption typed directly on the print and the FSA credit line stamped on the bottom. Although the credit line requested that the print be returned to the FSA office, this was hardly the usual practice of the press outlets requesting prints. One of the press prints of *Tenant purchase clients at home, Hidalgo County, Texas*, found its way into the Bettman Archive, which was the repository for the images of United Press International. In his book *The Great Depression*, T.H. Watkins credits UPI/Bettman for this photograph.

In 1995 Corbis bought the Bettman Archive and *Tenant purchase clients at home, Hidalgo County, Texas, February 1939* is now offered as a stock photograph on the Corbis website with the following caption: *Couple Listening to a Radio*. Ironically, Corbis charges rights and use fees for the image although all FSA images are in the public domain, as they were created by a government agency, and cannot be copyrighted. Another amusing irony lies in the fact that Lee never divulged in his caption whether or not the radio was even turned on.

This period in 1939 also marked a turning point in the focus of the FSA, to an emphasis on creating more positive images. Stryker wrote to Lee in April 1939:

"I believe that we should now start a series of pictures showing the operation and life on somewhat better farms in the area in which you now are. We need these very much, and they will serve a most valuable purpose, to work in with the bad conditions which you have already covered very successfully.And on top of that, what is the use in this whole situation if there is no way out? If the state of Texas has nothing better to offer in farming, then the whole situation becomes hopeless."²⁶

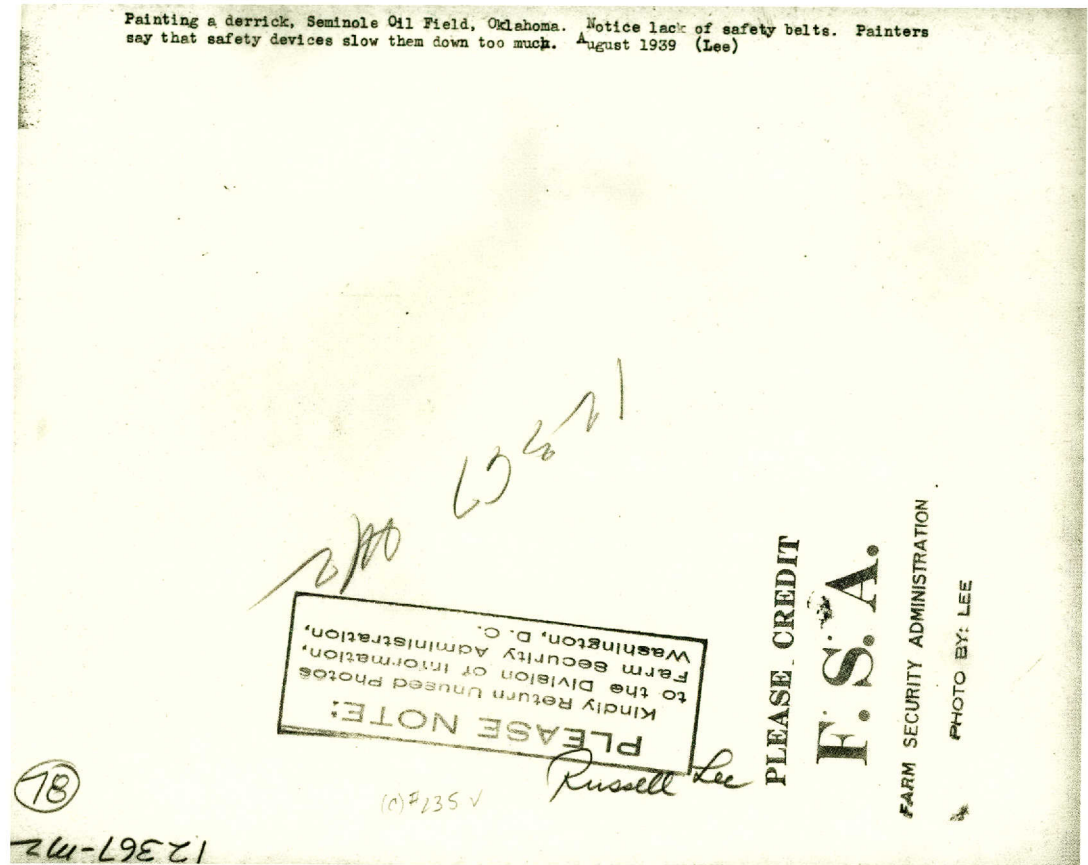
As the nation was recovering from the Depression, the focus of the FSA's images expanded to include more of the positively rehabilitated clients; at this same time, Stryker's not-so-hidden agenda became to record broader aspects of American life. Following conversations in 1936 with the sociologist Robert Lynd, Stryker had begun to contemplate a pictorial record of America²⁷ that would mature into a detailed document of small town life, an aspect of America that Stryker saw as quickly disappearing. By 1937, Stryker had already begun instructing his photographers, including Lee, to photograph subjects that had little specific relevance to the FSA projects themselves.

"In case you find a small town barber shop where they still have the individual cups that [sic] Mr. Citizen's name on each cup. Also remember the fact that the garage is today a meeting place for political, agricultural, economic and general discussion. A few pictures of the crowd hanging around these places are quite necessary for our Americana Section of the file."²⁸

By 1939, Lee began looking for a small town to fit Stryker's Americana Section of the file and found it in mid-April, when he and Jean drove into San Augustine in East Texas. San Augustine, a "microcosm of rural America in transition," had a population of about 2500 and boasted at least 15 grocery stores, two department stores, two drugstores, two blacksmith shops, several clothing stores, two banks, and a movie theater.²⁹ As was Lee's practice, he left all of the camera equipment in the car and set about investigating various aspects of the town:

"...the main street, the government, religion, education, transportation (or really movement of goods and people), housing, recreation, work, what happens by day, what happens by night, the bank, medical care, signs and symbols of a community, everyday living (men, women and children), people of various age groups, the financial, the economic base of the community..."³⁰

Lee arrived in San Augustine mid-week, which gave him ample time to visually analyze and intellectually dissect the town before Saturday, his and the town's busiest day, when all of the farmers would come in and congregate at a variety of meeting places and centers of activity: the feed store, the grocery store, the barber shop, and the courthouse square.



FSA back caption and credit line.

Taken from the third floor of the county courthouse³¹, Lee's photograph of the square captures the pulse of a small town as many residents, resembling extras in a movie, gather in groups to socialize while others congregate around the itinerant preacher's truck proclaiming "The Final Hour." Cars line the street around the square, waiting for the owners to complete the day's business. Establishments, including Café Texan, and a combination grocery and feed store are visible across the street.

Although Lee normally worked unobtrusively, even in the confines of a small sharecropper's shack, it is interesting to note that in San Augustine, his presence was atypically and definitely noticed. As evidenced in many of his "unposed" photographs, a number of his subjects are, in fact, aware of his presence and the viewer senses the subjects know they're not



Russell Lee

[LC-USF34-033044-0]

Activity in front of the courthouse, San Augustine, Texas, 1939.

supposed to look at the photographer, and they pretend not to, yet still do, if only from the corner of their eye, as if uncontrollably curious, or suspicious. In the courthouse square, a single individual, a young boy on the left-side of the photograph, looks up, and stares directly at Lee.

James Curtis, in *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, observes that some residents remained suspicious of Lee because he was thought to be a government investigator on the lookout for hookworm disease, considered to be widespread in the county.³² Also worth noting, and in all probability attributable to these suspicions, is the scarcity of interior photographs of San Augustine homes and domestic situations.

The following year, twenty of Lee's photographs of San Augustine were published in Sherwood Anderson's book, *Hometown*, and seventeen were published in *Travel* magazine in a story on San Augustine, Texas.

Following their stay in San Augustine, Russell and Jean continued traveling through Texas, documenting the state's industries and agriculture. In May, Lee conceived the idea of illustrating John Steinbeck's book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had recently been published:

"Have just finished the "Grapes of Wrath" and rate it as one of the best books I have ever read...The whole book is a shooting script. In fact, I am going to consider it as such and attempt to pick up as many of the shots that are so graphically told. After the set is complete, I think it might be a good idea to try to tip in to the book several "illustrations" and see what we can make of it."³³

Lee envisioned the first part of *The Grapes of Wrath* illustrations to be photographs of a family of "Okies" like Steinbeck's Joad family, moving



Migrant worker looking through back window of automobile near Prague, Oklahoma, 1939.

to California. In efforts to find such a family migrating to California, Lee consulted with a professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma and narrowed down his search to several regions in the state. Lee then spent some weeks there in May and June looking for a family that was moving.

It was during these weeks of late spring and early summer that Lee photographed *Migrant worker looking through the back window of automobile near Prague, Oklahoma, Lincoln County, Oklahoma*. From the backseat of the car, a young girl directs her gaze through the car's cracked

[LC-USF34-033417-D]

rear window at something outside the frame. A haunting portrait, this photograph was taken near Prague, Oklahoma, in one of the many migrant camps Lee visited in search of a family moving to California. The family of this girl, while not actually relocating to California, was most likely part of the population movement that followed the crops.

After several false starts by families who told him they were moving and eventually did not, Lee found the Thomas family near Muskogee and documented their departure to California: saying goodbye to friends, packing the truck, having a party the night before their departure, and finally, driving out of Muskogee. Along the way, in Muskogee, he photographed the simple detail of pouring water into the radiator of their car recalling, in essence, a scene from *The Grapes of Wrath*: “Al flipped the radiator cap and it jumped into the air with a head of steam behind it, and a hollow bubbling sound came out of the radiator...In the highway the cars whizzed by, glistening in the heat, and the hot wind of their going fanned into the service station. Al filled the radiator with the hose.”³⁴

Lee followed the Thomas family as far as Henryetta, Oklahoma, a distance of about fifty miles. Photographing the Thomas family was an undertaking fraught with difficulties. At one point, Lee’s car became “thoroughly stuck in the mud, had to get pulled out by mules after a nice walk through the downpour. I punctured my gas tank in the process and had to have that fixed.”³⁵ After parting company with the Thomas family in Henryetta several days later, Lee did not resume this project.

Russell Lee spent the second half of 1939 documenting a variety of FSA and non-FSA activities in the southwest and Midwest: FSA clients in Kansas and Colorado, Hispanic communities in Taos, New Mexico, and by year’s end some of the agricultural industries and stockyards in Texas.

At the close of 1939, it was clear that the marriage between Russell and Doris was over. In December, he and Jean traveled to Mexico where he obtained a divorce. That same month, Doris married her former professor from San Francisco, the American Scene Painter Arnold Blanch, and Russell married Jean Smith Martin.

1940

“I think it might be a good idea for you to stop a couple of days when you get into N.M., find a good spot, sit down, and do a little thinking about this whole area in which you are going to work.”

Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, March 19, 1940.

After his marriage to Jean in December 1939, Lee took a month’s hiatus from the field. February and March found him back in Oklahoma and Texas respectively, photographing a wide array of subjects, including Creek County rural schools and tenant families; an oil ghost town with the amusing name of Slick; a pie supper in Muskogee, and the Fat Stock Show in San Angelo. By the end of March, he was photographing the irrigation and overgrazed pastures of New Mexico and Arizona and the oil boom town of Hobbs, New Mexico.

Lee had been on the lookout for boom towns for some time. The previous fall, Stryker had specified the importance of photographing one:

“...if you hear of any boom town of any sort in your vicinity, please make a rush for it, and do a full set of pictures. The town being born - we have pictures of a town dead and dying, but to date we have nothing on the boom side; it is just likely that an oil boom might take place with you being in the near vicinity.”³⁶

However, although Lee portrayed and captioned Hobbs as a bustling boom town, the boom there had been over for almost a decade.

One of Lee’s best-known images of Hobbs is *Signs in the oil town of Hobbs, New Mexico*, depicting four advertisements posted in a desert lot. Lee, drawn to the text and aesthetic qualities of signs, created many photographs of them for the FSA file, from handwritten notices and shopkeepers’ advertisements to official highway signs and guideposts.

Pouring water into radiator of migrant’s car in the streets of Muskogee, where family has stopped [on the way] to Oklahoma, 1939.



[LC-USF34-033757-0]



[LC-USF34-035815-01]

Signs in the oil town of Hobbs, New Mexico, 1940.

Stryker was preoccupied with signs and believed them to be historical documents that indicated the social and financial status of a community. The four signs in Lee's photograph, a cross section of Hobbs, divulge some of that information. Two of the signs advertise churches in town; one sign logically offers oil leases; but the most curious of the quartet is the fourth sign depicting a ghoulish Bela Lugosi and advertising the movie *White Zombie* playing at the Scout Theater. The Scout Theater, one of four theaters in Hobbs at the time, had just opened in 1940, yet one of its first features is a movie from 1932. Showing a second run movie in a small town was not uncommon at the time, and in fact small town theaters frequently offered three programs weekly; but viewers of this photograph in 1940 would have known *White Zombie* was eight years old and would have read this theater sign as a clue to the diminished social and financial status of the community.

Following Hobbs, Lee spent April and May further exploring New Mexico and Arizona; during this time, he was told about a small settlement in Pie Town, New Mexico.

Russell and Jean Lee spent the month of June 1940 in Pie Town, creating 619 captioned photographs of modern day homesteaders and pioneers, migrants from Texas and Oklahoma, who had established a seemingly self-supporting community 160 miles southwest of Albuquerque. Lee made a photographic sweep of Pie Town, portraying many of the same small town aspects he photographed in San Augustine, but without the same complexity or visual interest. He highlighted the homesteading aspect in photographs of dug-out log homes, general views of the town, and social events such as a community sing and a square dance. The Pie Town photographs are not



Jigger at the square dance. Pie Town, New Mexico, 1940.

[LC-USF34-035912-D]

Lee's strongest work, but to date, this group of photographs has loomed too large in Lee's career; this single assignment has been emphasized and analyzed in detail in almost every discussion of Lee's work. The attention garnered by these images was in part Lee's doing, an attention he did not welcome later in life.

Initially, the Lees were very enthusiastic about their documentation at Pie Town; Jean wrote a six-thousand word essay to accompany the pictures and they spent the following year trying to find a publisher. Stryker pitched the story to *Collier's* and *Reader's Digest*, but without success. *U.S. Camera* eventually published a much-reduced version in October 1941.³⁷ However, by this time, the nation's attentions were focused on national defense and the country's imminent involvement in World War II.

In the decades that followed, Lee's attitude toward the Pie Town photographs slowly shifted. When Richard Dowd asked about Pie Town in the now classic 1964 interview, Lee answered, with some hesitation, that Pie Town was one of his better jobs. By the early 1980s, Lee's attitude had clearly changed. The raw footage for Ann Mundy's 1986 video documentary *Today, Tomorrow's History* reveals Lee's discomfiture towards the interviews focused on Pie Town. As he persisted in contextualizing, it was clear he did not want to be remembered solely for this particular series, but rather for his entire body of work.³⁸ In a 1996 interview, Jean Lee recalled: "There are a few good photographs in that Pie Town thing, but it isn't really great photography. It's nostalgia. I heard Russ say, 'I wish I'd never heard of that damn town.' because it attracted too much attention, more than it deserved."³⁹

One of the more visually engaging aspects of Lee's Pie Town pictures are the seventy-two color photographs he made. Lee was among the twenty FSA-OWI photographers to use color film. By nature of the medium, Lee's color images in general, and of Pie Town specifically, jolt the viewer by removing a layer of that nostalgia and its sepia-toned distance from the viewer. The color work done by the FSA-OWI photographers went largely ignored until the mid-1980s and certainly merits further examination.

By July, the Lees had moved on from Pie Town to photograph other areas of New Mexico, as well as the neighboring states of Utah and Colorado. By December, Lee was in California photographing the construction of the Shasta Dam and a nation gearing up for war.

1941

"We're living in a tent because we wouldn't pay anyone thirty or thirty-five dollars for a two-room bug trap."

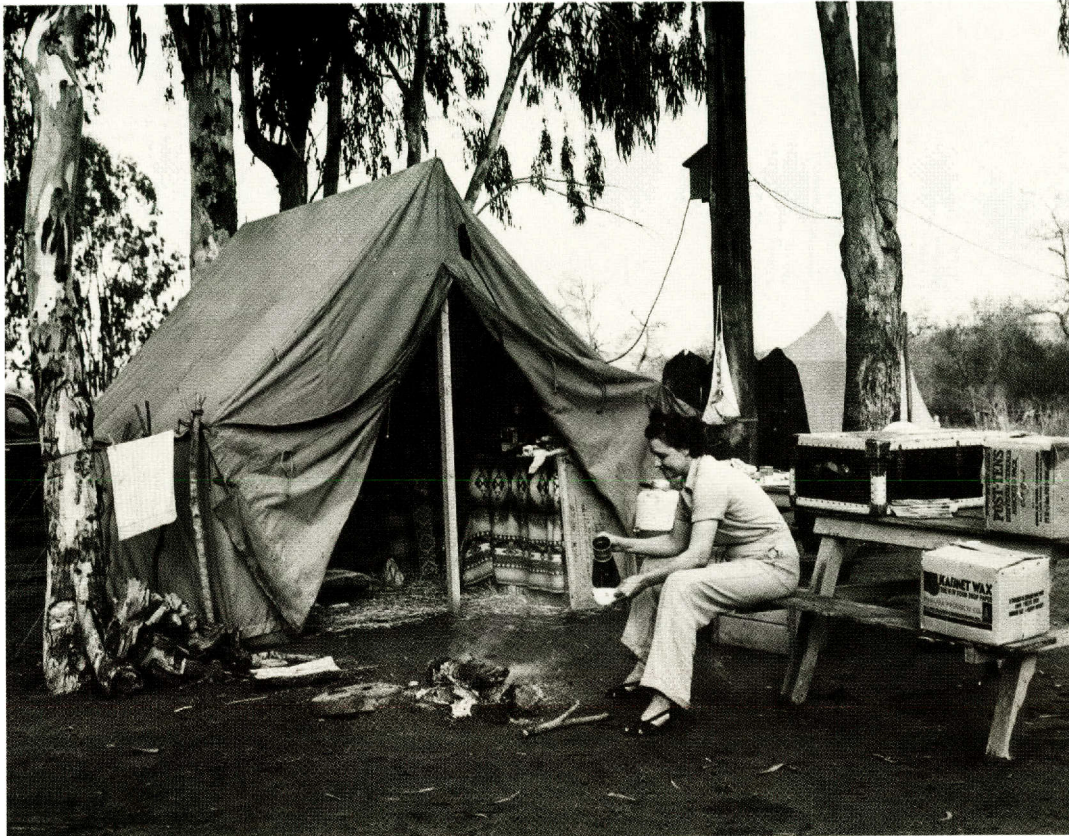
Defense worker in San Diego, California, December 1940.

By 1941, the nation had largely pulled itself out of its depression and had begun to mobilize for the coming involvement in World War II. In addition to his work on the Shasta Dam construction, Lee spent the latter part of 1940 photographing war mobilization, an assignment that would flow into 1941 and dominate a large portion of his work of that year.

His photograph of a young woman living in a tent, just outside San Diego, typifies this shift in Lee's work as well in the focus of the FSA. Depicting the severe housing shortages in California due to the influx of defense workers, Lee's image marks a departure from the photographs he had made just a few years before. The subject, a woman stylishly dressed in slacks, short-sleeved shirt and open-toed shoes, sits comfortably on a picnic table bench as she pours herself a cup of coffee. The caption indicates she is living in a tent in Mission Valley just outside San Diego partly out of choice, rather than desperation: "We're living in a tent because we wouldn't pay anyone thirty or thirty-five dollars for a two-room bug trap." Employment in the defense plants on the West Coast put many people back to work and in a more stable financial position, but the influx of workers created housing shortages and inflated rents.

Lee's image contrasts sharply with another photograph of a woman living in a tent in California taken just five years earlier: Dorothea Lange's *Destitute peapickers in California* (popularly known as "Migrant Mother"), one of the most reproduced images in history and by now a visual prompt of the Great Depression. This comparison serves to further demonstrate the shift of the FSA's emphasis to the nation's recovery. Whereas Lange's destitute "Migrant Mother" had just sold the tires from her car to buy food in 1936, Lee's defense worker, well-dressed and surrounded by supplies, resembles a tourist on a camping trip who will either stay in her tent out of principle, or will use her salary to find better living conditions.

Lee's other FSA work from 1941 reflected the same shift to an emphasis on the country moving forward, highlighting other areas related to war preparedness. Instead of creating photographs that portrayed the U.S.



[LC-USF34-03162-D]

"We're living in a tent because we wouldn't pay anyone thirty or thirty-five dollars for a two-room bug trap." Mission Valley, California, which is about three miles from San Diego, 1941.

experiencing dust storms, droughts and floods, Lee's photographs depicted a country full of natural resources and industries. Instead of midwestern sharecroppers and migrant workers in need of government loans, Lee photographed able-bodied men and women in West Coast defense construction plants.

During 1941, Lee photographed the prosperous wheat fields in the state of Washington, the production of aluminum in Idaho, logging and log raft transport along the Columbia River, and salmon fishing at Celilo Falls, Oregon. Instead of the rampant unemployment he had photographed a few years earlier, Lee now depicted the plethora of jobs available, from the frequent signs advertising for hop pickers to the armies of pea pickers spreading out into the fields. These images were meant to instill confi-

dence in a nation facing war, yet they were somewhat skewed: as late as the attack on Pearl Harbor, three million people in the United States were still unemployed.⁴⁰

By December, Lee was in California again, photographing various civilian defense activities including the cultivation of guayule at the Intercontinental Rubber Producers; Lee was documenting the progress of the Shasta Dam construction when Pearl Harbor was bombed and the United States entered World War II.

1942

"The move was in the cards. Farm Security was coming to an end. ...we did transfer [to the Office of War Information]. But it was a logical thing and there was nothing peculiar about it. ...we did so much work for them.... Farm Security was a dying thing anyway. It died shortly afterwards."

Roy Stryker, 1964.

Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the photographic unit of the FSA was transferred for a short time to the administration of the Office of War Information; assignments shifted from the systematic documentation of social conditions to America's involvement in World War II. By April, Lee was photographing specific OWI assignments along with his FSA assignments, but by August, the FSA was abolished and Lee photographed for the OWI exclusively.

Now in a wartime culture of "Use it up, wear it out, make do or go without," Lee began to create for the OWI a different, more overt photography than he had for the FSA. His OWI work continued where his 1941 FSA work left off, as he portrayed the bounty of America and all of its natural resources as well as America's wartime activities—both civilian and military—ranging from the internment of Japanese Americans to scrap salvage campaigns and parachute manufacture. In his typical thorough, incisive, human style, Lee photographed the complete fabrication of a parachute at the Pacific Parachute Company in San Diego, and then photographed the testing of the parachutes by pilots at Lake Muroc, (now Edwards Air Force Base) in California. His photographs of the internment of Japanese Americans include evacuations in California to the Santa Anita reception center, the sale of personal belongings, and the closing of family businesses in Los Angeles and Salinas. Lee also



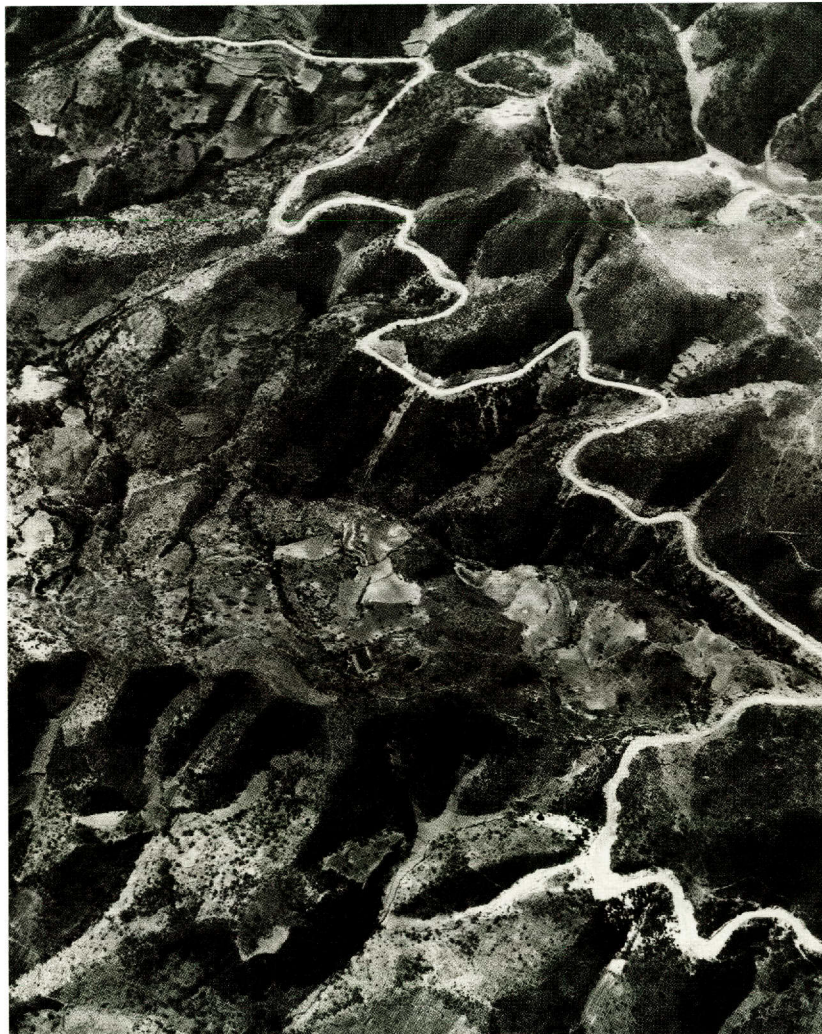
[LC-USF34-03264-01]

Soda jerker flipping ice cream into malted milk shakes. Corpus Christi, Texas, 1939.

photographed the camps themselves in Idaho and Oregon, some of them former FSA and CCC camps.

In October, Lee left the OWI and in January 1943 he joined the Air Transport Command, where he received a Captain's commission and the position of Head of the Still Pictures of the Overseas Technical Unit.

Burma Road, on flight between Assm Valley and Kunming, China, 1944.



National Archives [19-AO-177 R-35]

1943 - 1945 Air Transport Command, Overseas Technical Unit

The Overseas Technical Unit was created to photograph the routes and airfields flown by the ATC. Frequently, American pilots flew into airspace completely unfamiliar to them, often while maintaining radio silence. Pilots and crew alike experienced difficulty in remembering details of long briefings prior to flight, so a unit of professional photographers was assembled to provide these pilots and their crew with images to aid in their meticulous briefings. A B-24 bomber specially modified for aerial photography was assigned to the new unit; the nose of the plane was removed and replaced with high-grade glass to minimize any distortion of the film being shot through it. These modifications enabled the OTU to photograph airfields and landscapes as the pilots would see them. In 1944, Russell Lee was promoted to Major and in 1945, he was awarded the Air Medal.

1946 - 1947 The Coal Mines Administration

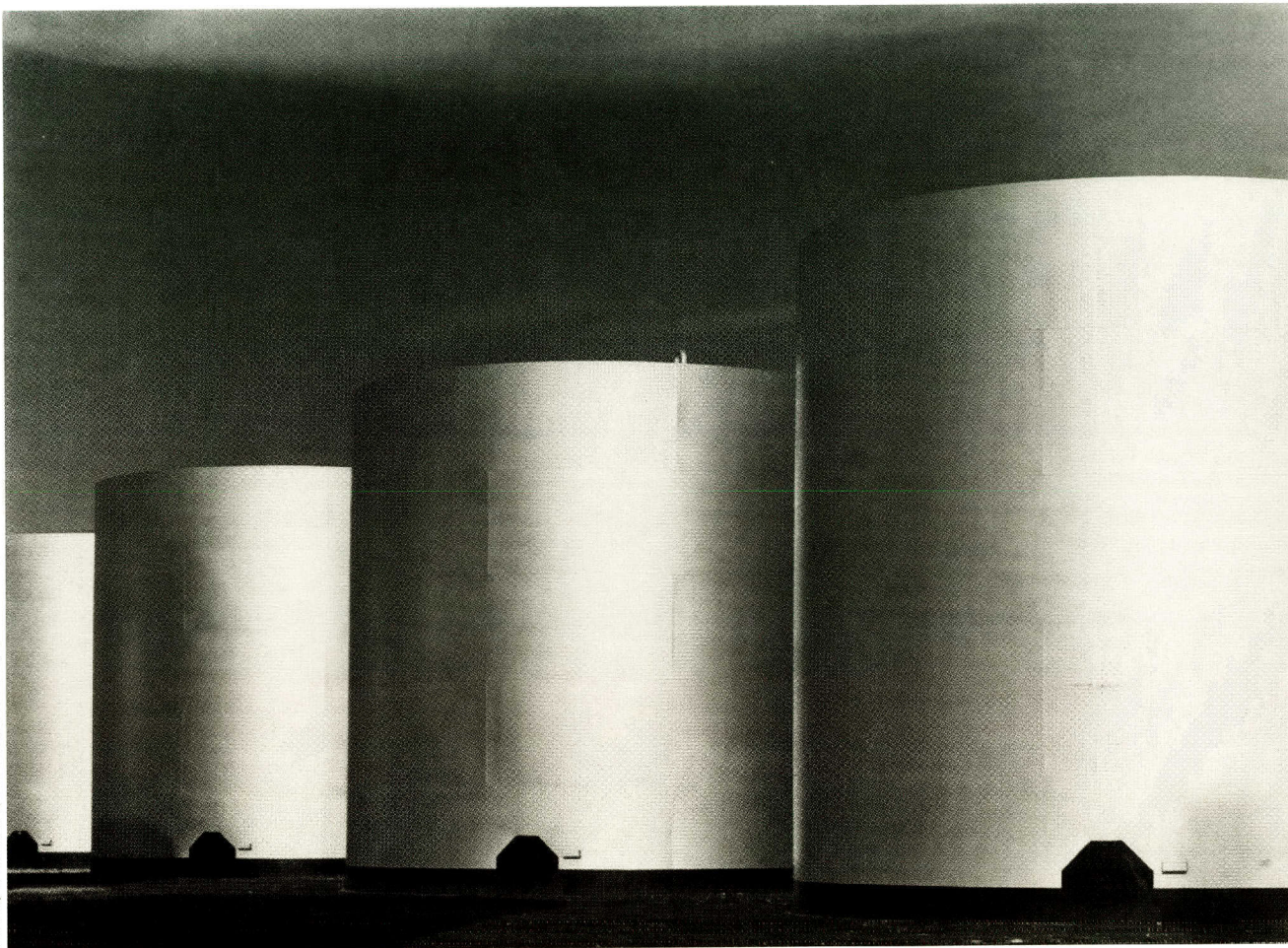
A year after leaving the Air Transport Command at the end of World War II, Lee came out of semi-retirement to accept an assignment from the Department of the Interior to document health and safety conditions in bituminous coal mines around the United States. This assignment came about as a result of worsening conditions in many mines and mining camps during the War and shortly thereafter. In 1946, the Department of the Interior and the United Mine Workers conducted a joint survey of medical, health and housing conditions to be later compiled into a report written by the Coal Mines Administration.

Under the direction of Rear Admiral Joel T. Boone, the survey teams journeyed to mining areas to collect data and photograph the conditions of mines and camps. Lee took the majority of the photographs in the survey, which document the many facets of each community: company stores and housing, mine interiors and exteriors, medical dispensaries, and everyday activities of residents. Lee made over 4000 images from August 1946 to February 1947 for the Coal Mines Administration, and the Department of the Interior used many of them in 1947, when it published the final report entitled "A Medical Survey of the Bituminous Coal Industry" and a smaller supplement entitled "The



National Archives [NWDNS245-MS-54L]

Children of miners on front porch of house in company project, Louise Coal Company, Louise Mine, Osage, Monongalia County, West Virginia, 1946.



Oil refinery, Texas [shot for Standard Oil New Jersey], 1949.

Coal Miner and His Family.” One of Lee’s best known images from this period is *Children of miners on frontporch of house in company project, 1946*, which was included in *The Family of Man*, the celebrated photographic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1955.

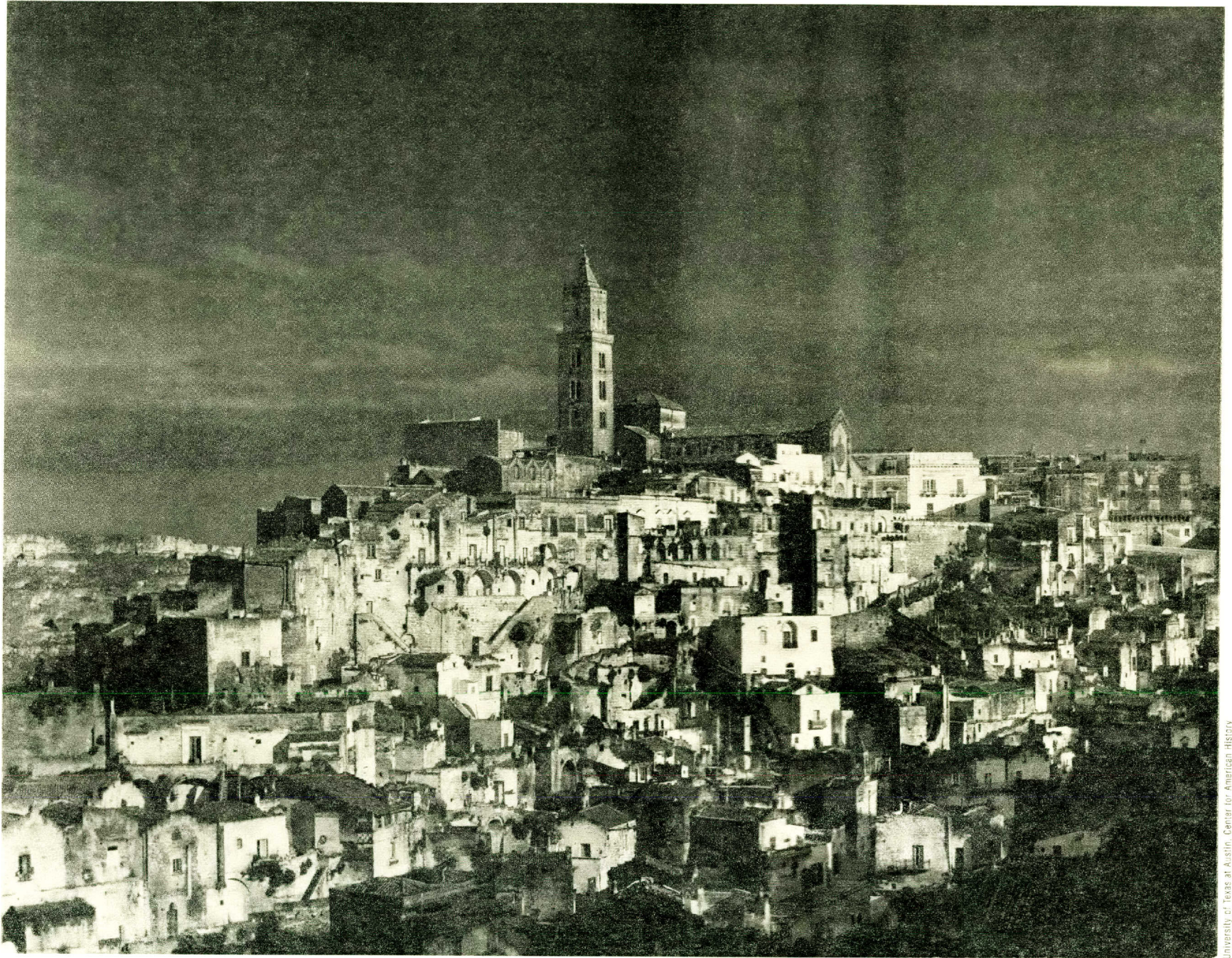
1947 - c. mid-1950s Standard Oil / ARAMCO

In 1947, following his assignment with the Coal Mines Administration, Russell and Jean Lee moved to Austin, Texas. That same year, Lee and Roy Stryker were professionally reunited, as Lee accepted a number of assignments from Stryker, who was then directing documentary projects for Standard Oil New Jersey (SONJ). Many of the same photographers who worked under Stryker at the FSA rejoined him at SONJ, where he was tasked with improving the corporation’s public image. Many of the photographs taken were directly related to the oil industry, but Stryker instructed his photographers to think more broadly about oil production and its impact on everyday life.

Lee continued his industrial photography through the 1950s, working for a variety of companies, including the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco), and Jones and Laughlin Steel.

1960 The Italian Portfolio

In 1960, Russell Lee accepted an assignment from the University of Texas at Austin to shoot a portfolio of photographs for a special issue of *Texas Quarterly* on Italy. (see p. 33) Lee spent two and a half months in Italy and shot some 4000 photographs, 150 of which were published in the September 1961 issue of *Texas Quarterly*.



University of Texas at Austin, Center for American History

View of Matera, Italy, 1960.

1947 - c. 1965
Texas

In the years following World War II, until the mid-1960s, Russell Lee photographed extensively in the state of Texas. Concurrent with his work for Standard Oil and J & L Steel, he contributed to magazines such as *Fortune*, and *The New York Times Magazine* and was an associate staff member of Magnum, the celebrated photographers' cooperative founded by Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and others. His work also appeared frequently in *The Texas Observer*.

The majority of assignments Russell Lee accepted were socially oriented. In 1949 and 1950, Lee worked in conjunction with the University of Texas to document the living conditions and health problems of Spanish-speaking people in Texas. In the mid- to late-1950s, Lee documented conditions at several state mental institutions in Texas.

Throughout the 1950s, Russell Lee photographed significant Texas political figures and their campaigns, including those of Ralph Yarborough and J. Edwin Smith—this choice of subject was due in no small part to Jean Lee's heavy involvement in Democratic Texas politics. Also in his oeuvre from this period are other photographic documents of post war Texas life and its inhabitants: from renowned Texas authors such as J. Frank Dobie and Hart Stilwell, to unknown double muggers at the Texas Cowboy Reunion.

In 1965, the University of Texas at Austin mounted a Russell Lee retrospective. The bulk of Lee's post war Texas photographs conclude circa 1965, when, following his exhibition, he accepted a position teaching photography at the University of Texas—the first in the history of the institution. Although he was still somewhat photographically active after 1965, Lee's students, not his own work, became his focus until he retired in 1973.

Within the history of photography and the history of the FSA, Russell Lee distinguished himself through a style and technique that would influence countless numbers of photographers in the decades that followed. Possessed of a clear understanding of the goals and dimensions of documentation, as well as a wry humor and friendly demeanor, Lee created engaging and compassionate images, rather than mere visual records.

Lee's technical acumen, together with his dedication to the work, enabled him to create an enormous number of uniformly excellent images. The subtlety and consistent quality of his photographs sets him apart from his FSA colleagues.

Following the documentary tradition of Mathew Brady's coverage of the Civil War and the exposure of deplorable urban living and working conditions by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, Russell Lee not only continued this documentary tradition, but in many ways turned it inside out to develop and master a new methodology. Through his effective employment of direct and multiple flash and his use of the photo series Lee profoundly impacted documentary style.

Even though the invention of the flash bulb in 1925 enabled photographers to work indoors, the use of singular flash produced a flat and harsh image with few details. Unsatisfied with these limitations, Russell Lee experimented with and perfected direct and multiple flash, taking the viewer inside the dark interiors, illuminating every detail. Lee brought the inside out.

In previous decades, newspapers usually published one image with a story, but by the mid-1930s (the era of LIFE, *Look*, and *Fortune*), photolithography enabled magazines to quickly and inexpensively print high quality reproductions of photographic images to illustrate their articles, thus allowing the publication of more than one picture per story. Whereas many of his FSA colleagues continued in the traditional singular, representative image, Lee distinguished himself by embracing the photo series and excelling at the depiction of an arc of action: how things worked or how people created, constructed, or even dismantled their products.

Founded at the same time modern documentary photography was born, the FSA became the benchmark by which documentarians still measure themselves. Comprised of a group of photographers of varying artistic approaches and temperaments, the FSA owes much of its legacy to Roy Stryker's perseverance and ability to direct and guide a widely diverse team of creative artists.

Of all the FSA photographers, Russell Lee was without question the most committed to compiling as complete, accurate and effective a visual record as possible. As part of this Pantheon of image-makers, Lee played a pivotal role in visually preparing and conditioning the eyes of the nation



Ladies talking together at Fourth of July celebration, Belton, Texas, 1956.



Coal miner's child in grade school, Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky, 1946.

to the new documentary style; for, in addition to having the longest tenure in the FSA, Lee also created the largest body of work, which, over a six-year period, provided a constant flow of images to the public. One well-known photograph (i.e., Lange's *Migrant Mother* or Rothstein's *Dust Storm in Cimarron Country, Oklahoma*) does not condition, but rather shocks, the public consciousness. Almost imperceptibly, Lee's consistent and continuous production of published photographs accustomed the public to expect the new documentary style, and irreversibly and permanently changed the direction of American photography.

Russell Lee died on August 28, 1986, having created a visual document of this country that began in one of its most desperate times, and concluded in one of its most prosperous. A self-effacing but complex man, Lee overcame a tragic childhood to become one of the 20th century's best known, but in many ways most anonymous photographers. The portrait of America he left behind is Lee's own portrait as well, revealing great talent and creative drive, a spirit of adventure and discovery, generosity to colleagues, a strong social awareness and a total commitment to his art. During the FSA years, he spent long months in the field and was aware of the inadequacies of his medium, but he never stopped trying to refine his tools to better serve his mission. He took frame after frame after frame in a truly heroic effort to effectively present to the public what he saw in his long odyssey through the American Depression.

Mary Jane Appel

FOOTNOTES

1. In obtaining these statistics, I was aided greatly by DeAnna Dare Evans, former Sr. Cataloger of the FSA-OWI Collection at the Library of Congress. Of the 164,000 FSA-OWI negatives created by Stryker's team, approximately 63, 231 were captioned; captions remain the only accurate method of identifying the photographer. Of these 63,231 captioned photographs, Lee created 18,799 negatives that were captioned. The other photographers' captioned photographs are as follows: Marion Post Wolcott (8487), Arthur Rothstein (7885), Jack Delano (6978), John Vachon (6264), Dorothea Lange (3848) and Walker Evans (485).
2. Interview with Russell and Jean Lee by Richard K. Dowd, June 2, 1964. Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, page 18.
3. Facts about the death of Adele Werner Lee are from articles and obituaries in two Ottawa newspapers from 1913: *Daily Republican Times* September 18th, September 19th, and September 22nd and the weekly *The Ottawa Free Trader*, Friday September 19th and Friday September 26th.
4. Charles Werner's funeral home and cemetery records are available at the LaSalle County Genealogy Society in Ottawa, Illinois.
5. *Free Trader Journal and Ottawa Fair Dealer*, September 29, 1920, page 1.
6. T.H. Watkins, *The Great Depression*. New York: Little Brown and Company 1993, page 55.
7. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York: Oxford University Press 1973, page 68.
8. Interview with Roy Stryker by Richard K. Dowd, January 23, 1965. Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, page 5.
9. *Today, Tomorrow's History: Photographer Russell Lee* by Ann Mundy, 1986.
10. Interview with Louise and Edwin Roskam by Richard K. Dowd, August 3, 1965. Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, page 20.
11. Norman Schreiber, "Inside Photojournalism," *Camera Arts*, November 1982, page 18.
12. *Today, Tomorrow's History: Photographer Russell Lee* by Ann Mundy, 1986.
13. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, April 17, 1937. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
14. Ibid.
15. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, September 27, 1937. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
16. Russell Lee to Roy Stryker, April 15, 1937. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
17. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, May 17, 1938. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville. Jack Fischer was the FSA's Director of Information and C.B. "Beanie" Baldwin was an FSA administrator.
18. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, April 7, 1939. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
19. William Stott in his *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* separates propaganda into two categories: black propaganda which uses vilification and lies to spread dissension among the group it addresses and white propaganda which uses actual fact to educate or influence the audience. However, to many, propaganda is all deceit; few people in the 1930s made distinctions between black and white propaganda. To most, propaganda was evil. Facists and Soviets gave propaganda a bad name by practicing it and exploiting it in gross and deceptive forms. See Stott pages 22-23.
20. See Warren Sussman, "The Thirties," *The Development of an American Culture*, ed. Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1970), page 191.
21. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, June 1, 1938. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
22. Russell Lee to Clara "Toots" Dean Wakeham, September 13, 1938. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
23. Interview with Jean Lee by Joan Myers, Austin, Texas, May 16, 1996. Page 2. Interview is transcribed and in the collection of Joan Myers, Tesuque, New Mexico.
24. Russell Lee to Roy Stryker, undated, but given the location and other facts in the letter, it can be dated November 1938. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
25. *Today, Tomorrow's History: Photographer Russell Lee* by Ann Mundy, 1986.
26. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, April 7, 1939. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
27. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), page 96.
28. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, September 27, 1937. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
29. Richard Murphy, "Saturday on the Square," *Texas Highways Magazine*. July 1998, pages 36-45.
30. *Today, Tomorrow's History: Photographer Russell Lee* by Ann Mundy, 1986.
31. Richard Murphy, "Saturday on the Square," *Texas Highways Magazine*. July 1998, page 39.
32. James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), page 110. Curtis offers insightful, if somewhat conspiracy-laden, interpretation of Lee's work in San Augustine and Pie Town, New Mexico.
33. Russell Lee to Roy Stryker, May 11, 1939. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
34. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. (Viking Press, 1939) 1983 edition, page 137.
35. Russell Lee to Roy Stryker, June 22, 1939. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
36. Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, September 16, 1939. Roy Stryker Collection, University of Louisville.
37. James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), page 122.
38. Raw footage of *Today, Tomorrow's History: Photographer Russell Lee*: Video #3, Interviews 1-2-3-4-5-6 with Russell Lee, beginning December 4, 1981. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Raw footage of interviews with Pie Town residents is currently housed in the Special Collections at Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico.
39. Interview in Austin, Texas with Jean Lee by Joan Myers, May 16, 1996. Page 6. Interview is transcribed and in the collection of Joan Myers, Tesuque, New Mexico.
40. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), page 617.

RUSSELL LEE: A CENTENARY EXHIBITION
LIST OF IMAGES

Captions. The captions for works in the Russell Lee collection have been taken from the original caption drafts developed in the 1930s and 1940s while the Farm Security Administration photographic project was underway. The terms presented here are the terms found in those historical sources and represent the usage of the time.

Photographs: All the photographs in the Russell Lee Centenary Exhibition are black and white silver gelatin prints and were donated by Bill and Sally Wittliff and Jean Lee to the Wittliff Gallery. The photographs are either vintage prints or modern prints. Photographs printed within two years of the date the picture was taken are considered vintage prints and those that were printed in the 1960s, 70s and 80s by Russell Lee are modern prints. All of the photographs in the Russell Lee Collection at the Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography can be viewed online at www.wg.txstate.edu.

PRE FSA WORK

Unemployed, winter of 1935-1936, New York City.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

New York City, 1936.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Man with sign, winter of 1935-1936, New York City.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Unemployed, winter of 1935-1936, New York City.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

FSA WORK

Hands of Mrs. Andrew Ostermeyer, wife of a homesteader, Miller Township, Woodbury County, Iowa, December 1936.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Christmas dinner in home of Earl Pauley, near Smithfield, Iowa. Dinner consisted of potatoes, cabbage and pie, December 1936.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Mr. and Mrs. John Landers, tenant farmers, at the back door of their farmhouse, near Marseilles, Illinois, January 1937.
Vintage

Saturday night in a saloon, Craigville, (Koochiching) Minnesota, September 1937.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Son of sharecropper sitting on front porch of shack home, New Madrid County, Missouri. May 1938.
Vintage

FSA client, Southeast Missouri Farms, New Madrid County, Missouri, May 1938.
Vintage

Sons of fishermen, Olga, Louisiana, September 1938.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Field house erection - close-up of partition framing, Southeast Missouri Farms Project, Missouri, May 1938.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Children at the blackboard. Lake Dick Project, Arkansas, October 1938.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Negro child residing in old Trepagnier house near Norco, Louisiana, October 1938.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Fortune teller, state fair, Donaldsonville, Louisiana, October 1938.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Family of migrant berry pickers, near Ponchatoula, Louisiana, April 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Child of white migrant worker in camp near Harlingen, Texas, February 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Spanish American woman testing temperature of earthen oven by determining length of time required to scorch wool, Taos County, New Mexico, September 1939.
Vintage

Negro child playing phonograph in cabin home, Transylvania Project, Louisiana, January 1939.
Vintage

Negro mother teaching children numbers and alphabet in home of sharecropper, Transylvania, Louisiana, January 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Threading cotton ropes into thread making machine, Laurel Cotton Mill, Laurel, Mississippi, January 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Tenant purchase clients at home, Hidalgo County, Texas, February 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Kitchen of tenant purchase client, Hidalgo County, Texas, February 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Daughter of migrant auto wrecker doing her lesson on bed in tenant home, Corpus Christi, Texas, February 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Soda jerker flipping ice cream into malted milk shakes, Corpus Christi, Texas, February 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Young girl, pecan worker, classifying pecan meats, pecan shelling plants, San Antonio, Texas, March 1939.
Vintage

Farm family resting in grocery store on Saturday afternoon, San Augustine, Texas, April 1939.
Vintage

Newspaper editor, San Augustine, Texas, April 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Music lesson in grade school, San Augustine, Texas, April 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Activity in front of the courthouse, San Augustine, Texas, April 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Oil well supply company, Kilgore, Texas, April 1939.
Vintage

Homes of day laborers employed on large farm near Ralls, Texas. There are four thousand nine hundred acres in this farm and nine tractors are used. May 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Migrant worker looking through back window of automobile near Prague, in Lincoln County, Oklahoma, June 1939.
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Pouring water into radiator of migrant's car in the streets of Muskogee, where family has stopped to say goodbye to their friends in that town. Oklahoma, July 1939.
Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Barbed wire and barbed wire fence covered by drifting sand, with tumbleweed growing up all around. This is in a section which one day was reputed to have produced bushels of wheat to the acre near Syracuse, Kansas. September 1939.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Cowboy with Spanish cowpony, Pie Town, New Mexico, June 1940.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Pie Town, New Mexico. Mrs. Whinery working in her kitchen. This picture shows the dirt floor of the dugout and the natural lighting. June 1940.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Cattlemen at auction of prize beef steers and breeding stock at San Angelo Fat Stock Show, San Angelo, Texas, 1940.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Signs in the oil town of Hobbs, New Mexico, March 1940.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Jigger at the square dance, Pie Town, New Mexico, June 1940.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Pie Town, New Mexico. A community settled by about 200 migrant Texas and Oklahoma farmers who filed homestead claims. Mr. Keele, merchant and president of the Farm Bureau, in front of the general store. June 1940.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Once a year the women in the Spanish American families replaster the adobe houses. Neighboring women are hired to help with the work. Chamisal, New Mexico, July 1940.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Interlude, after watching the Fourth of July parade, Vale, Oregon, July 1941.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

"We're living in a tent because we wouldn't pay anyone thirty or thirty-five dollars for a two-room bug trap." Mission Valley, California, which is about three miles from San Diego, December 1941.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Bartender and owner of tavern on the southside of Chicago, Illinois, April 1941.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Negro family living in crowded quarters, Chicago, Illinois, April 1941.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Back of multi-family dwellings rented to Negroes in Chicago, Illinois, April 1941.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Pea pickers (labor contractors crew) spreading into the field for work, Canyon County, Idaho, June 1941.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Little girls getting tickets for the merry-go-round at the carnival on the Fourth of July, Vale, Oregon, July 1941.

Vintage

Harvest hand in the wheat fields, Walla Walla County, Washington, July 1941.

Vintage

Farm children playing on homemade merry-go-round, Williams County, North Dakota, November 1937.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Dance where round and square dances are both performed at sharecropper home on Saturday night. Near McAllister, Oklahoma, July 1939.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

AIR TRANSPORT COMMAND

Kunming, China, 1944.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Burma Road, on flight between Assm Valley and Kunming, China, 1944.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

COAL MINES ADMINISTRATION

Children of miners on the fence in front of the Howard house, Gilliam Coal and Coke Company, Gilliam Mine, Gilliam, McDowell County, West Virginia, 1946.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Son of Clabe Hicks, miner. Ten people, two adults and eight children live in a four room house for which they pay eleven dollars monthly, plus one dollar monthly for water and two dollars monthly for electricity. They have running water in the kitchen; the Hicks put in a sink, have repapered the house, supply electric wiring from the outlet fixtures in each room. Mrs. Hicks said, "All the company furnishes is the roof and it leaks." The roof is tar paper. Southern Coal Corporation, August 1946.

Vintage - signed by Russell Lee

Children of miners on front porch of house in company project, Louise Coal Company, Louise Mine, Osage, Monongalia County, West Virginia, June 1946.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

A miner, PV&K Coal Company, Clover Gap Mine, Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky, September 1946.

Vintage

Handling serpents at the Pentecostal Church of God. Company funds have not been used in this church and it is not on company property. Most of the members are coal miners and their families. September 1946.

Study print - initialled and approved by Russell Lee

Coal miner's child in grade school, Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky, September 1946.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

POST WORLD WAR II

Oil refinery, Texas [shot for Standard Oil New Jersey], 1949.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

View of Matera, Italy, 1960.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Rockdale, Texas, c. 1950.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Spanish speaking father and child, San Angelo, Texas, 1949.

Vintage - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Double muggers waiting for their turn at the rodeo [at the Texas Cowboy Reunion], Stamford, Texas, 1959.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Couple [Milton and Vernell] at Gillespie County Fair, Texas, 1958.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Ladies talking together at Fourth of July celebration, Belton, Texas, 1956.

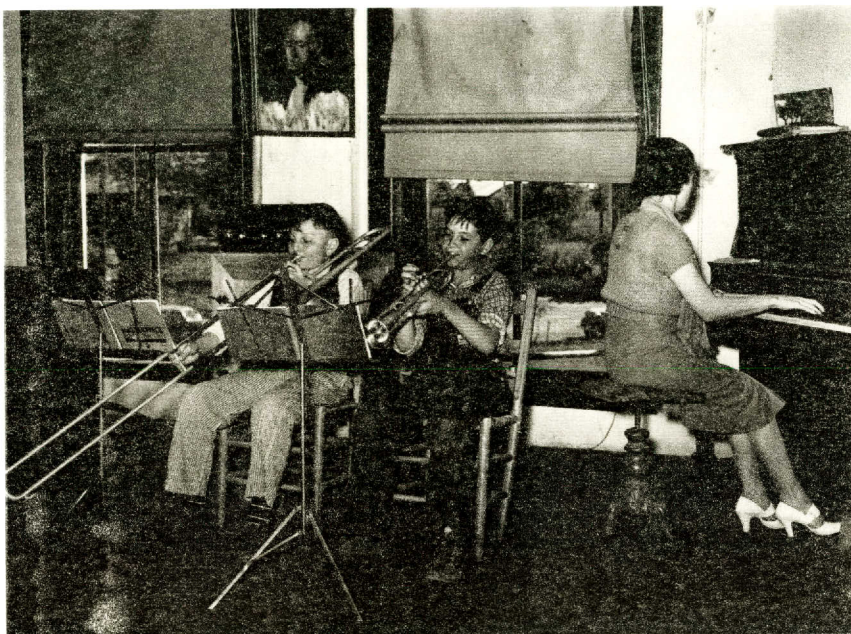
Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Maximum security ward for criminally insane, Rusk State Hospital, Texas. Tranquilizers are used to keep patients quiet and docile, c. 1959.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee

Children at play. These children may or may not all be members of one family. Corpus Christi, Texas. April 1949.

Modern - printed and signed by Russell Lee



Music lesson in grade school, San Augustine, Texas, 1939.

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Children at the blackboard. Lake Dick Project, Louisiana, 1938.

The Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography at Texas State University-San Marcos opened in 1996 as a creative center and archives devoted to the photographic cultures of Mexico and the Southwestern United States. The mission of the Gallery is to bring together a comprehensive range of work from the region that represents the history of photography from the 19th century to the present day, with an emphasis on contemporary imagery. Serving students, faculty, visiting scholars, and the community, the Gallery strives to reveal the importance of photography as a document of social realities and a testimony of personal visions. This goal is carried out by collecting and preserving photographic images, designing and promoting exhibitions from the collections, publishing the Wittliff Gallery book series with the University of Texas Press, and maintaining an active world wide web site. The Gallery also hosts traveling exhibits, and supports research in its own photographic holdings and in its collection of books, manuscripts, serial publications, and ephemera related to the photographic arts.

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