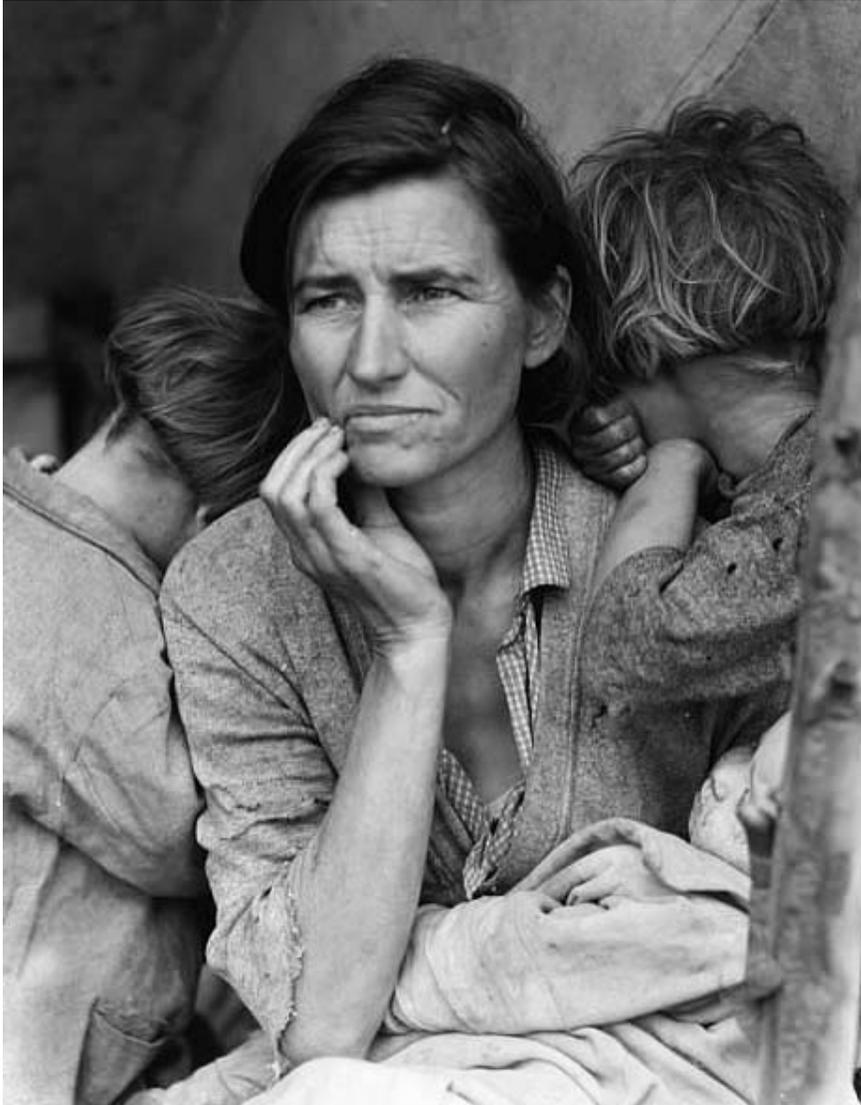




United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA PHOTOGRAPHER RESCUES DESTITUTE FARM WORKERS

By Gwen Gilbert, Federal Women's Program Manager



In celebration of Women's History Month, I would like to share the story behind the making of the famous "Migrant Mother" photograph, taken by government photographer Dorothea Lange, during the Great Depression. Lange was a documentary photographer working for the United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration (FSA), previously known as the Resettlement Administration, during the 1930's.

Dorothea Lange recounts the story of the "picture that symbolized an era", in an article entitled "The Assignment I'll Never Forget", published in *Popular Photography* magazine, February, 1960. She had been working in the field for a month, photographing migrant farm laborers in California. With her assignment done, she headed north, driving past Nipomo in San Luis Obispo County, seven hours from home, on that cold and rainy day in March, 1936:

I was on my way and barely saw a crude sign with pointing arrow which flashed by at the side of the road, saying PEA-PICKERS CAMP. But out of the corner of my eye I did see it.

Migrant Mother, by Dorothea Lange

I didn't want to stop, and didn't. I didn't want to remember that I had seen it, so drove on and ignored the summons. Then accompanied by the rhythmic hum of the windshield wipers, arose an inner argument: 'Dorothea, how about that camp back there? What is the situation back there? Are you going back? Nobody could ask this of you, now could they? To turn back is certainly not necessary. Haven't you plenty of negatives already on this subject? Besides, if you take a camera out in this rain, you're just asking for trouble. Now be reasonable, etc., etc., etc.'

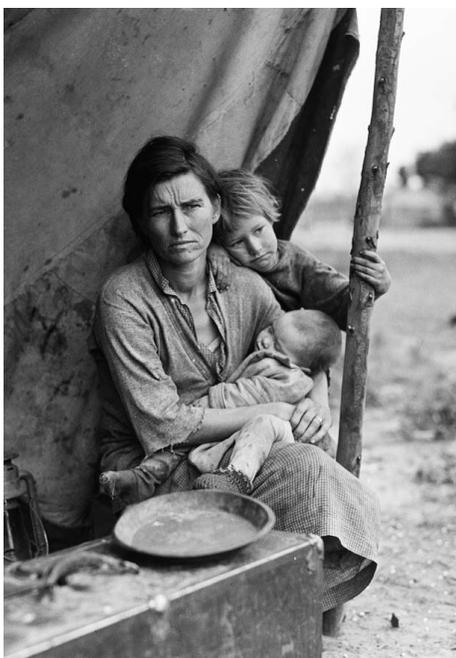


Having convinced myself for 20 miles that I could continue on, I did the opposite. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I made a U-turn on the empty highway. I went back those 20 miles and turned off the highway at that sign, PEA-PICKERS CAMP. I was following instinct, not reason; I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon.

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



What I am trying to tell other photographers is that had I not been deeply involved in my undertaking on that field trip, I would not have had to turn back. What I am trying to say is that I believe this inner compulsion to be the vital ingredient in our work; that if our work is to carry force and meaning to our views, we must be willing to go 'all-out'.



As soon as Lange got home, she developed the negatives, and dashed with pictures barely dry to the office of the *San Francisco News*. The *News* editor, George West, promptly notified Federal relief officials that the pea-pickers, stranded by crop failure in Nipomo were starving. On March 10, 1936, the *News* carried a United Press report that the Federal Government was rushing 20,000 pounds of food to the 1,800 hungry migrant farm workers. Beneath the headline "Rugged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squallor [sic]", were two of Lange's photographs of the mother and her children in the lean-to shelter.

The following day, the *News* printed an editorial, along with the "Migrant Mother" photograph, under the headline asking "What Does the 'New Deal' Mean to This Mother and Her Children?" A shipment of food (beans, flour, and rolled oats) had arrived for the harvest workers, who had been denied aid from county welfare agencies who "wanted them to move along" after the loss of the pea crop. The *News* reported, "Only the accident of a Federal survey photographer's report drew attention of Federal relief officials, and resulted in food being trucked to the camp from Los Angeles yesterday." Dorothea Lange's name was not mentioned in the stories or the photo credit lines.

Series of Photographs, Nipomo, California, 1936, by Dorothea Lange

For more information on the life and work of Dorothea Lange, the following references are highly recommended:

Andrea Fisher; *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women: Women Photographers for the US Government 1935 to 1944* (New York: Pandora Press, 1987).

Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978).

Elizabeth Partridge, *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

To view the 270,000 images recorded by Lange and the famous team of FSA photographers, you can access the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog at:

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/>

The influential editorial and the photographs published in the *News*, also resulted in the allocation of \$200,000 by the State Emergency Relief Administration, needed to begin building sanitary migrant camps in California.

The mother in the now famous photograph was Florence Thompson, who had left Oklahoma for California in 1925. The Depression hit hard about the time her husband died. She supported her children, and survived the Depression, by picking potatoes, peas, grapes, and cotton. With her daughters in the picture, Norma (Rydlowski), in her arms; Katherine (McIntosh), left; and Ruby (Sprague), right; Thompson eventually settled to reside in Modesto.

Dorothea Lange achieved something astonishing, something that was not only about starving pea-pickers, but beyond that, something about motherhood itself. Here was an image of every mother's anguish, in all times and places, whether coming from drought, flood, famine, or war. Lange later said, "what surprises me is that when they present this story of agricultural labor, people don't really see the big story which is behind it, which is the story of our natural resources."

The "Migrant Mother", like few other pictures, leads a life of its own. It is the most famous photograph of the Depression Era, and perhaps the single most universally recognized and appreciated photograph of all time. Dorothea Lange created a work of art, with its own message rather than that of its maker, which continues to speak to the people of the world.



This story was originally written by Gwendolyn S. Gilbert in 2000, when she was a Soil Conservationist and Federal Women's Program Manager for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in California. Gwen is currently a Program Analyst for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Washington, DC, where she can be reached by phone at: (202) 720-5742, or via email at: gwen.gilbert@wdc.usda.gov