

18_b Migrant Mother, 1936

The Great Depression was especially hard on farmers. They not only suffered through the national economic crisis but endured a string of natural disasters, including floods and dust storms that devastated their crops and destroyed their livelihoods. Thousands of poverty-stricken families migrated to the agricultural fields of California in search of work, only to find that life was not much better there. The Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration), one of the agencies established by Franklin D. Roosevelt's progressive social policies, employed a team of photographers to document the lives of these migrant workers. The object was to demonstrate the need for federal assistance and justify legislation that would make it possible. Dorothea Lange was among the agency photographers whose task, as the program's director explained, was to "introduce America to Americans."

In March 1936, having just completed a month-long assignment for the Resettlement Administration, Lange was driving home through San Luis Obispo County when the crudely lettered sign of a migrant workers' campsite caught her eye. Instinct rather than reason compelled her to stop: "I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon." Laborers were leaving as she arrived, for late-winter rains had destroyed the pea crop, and with it every opportunity for work. But just inside the camp, she found a careworn woman with several unkempt children resting listlessly in a lean-to shelter. As Lange was later to learn, the family was immobilized: after days of

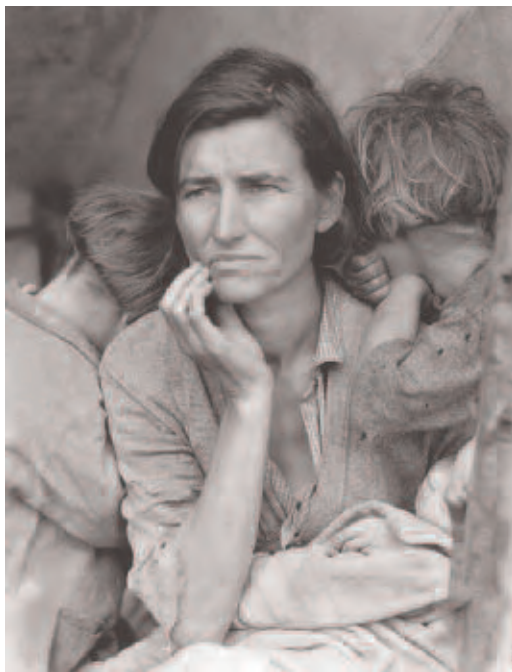
living on frozen vegetables taken from the fields, they had sold the tires from their car to buy food.

In the space of ten minutes Lange photographed the squalid scene, moving closer to her subject with each exposure. The last was the close-up view of the woman with three children that we now know as *Migrant Mother*. With that photograph, Lange achieved what she had set out to do for the Resettlement Association: "to register the things about those people that were more important than how poor they were," she explained, "—their pride, their strength, their spirit."

Migrant Mother does not take in a single detail of the pea pickers' camp—the bleak landscape and muddy ground, the tattered tents and dilapidated pickup trucks. Still, the photograph evokes the uncertainty and despair resulting from continual poverty. The mother's furrowed brow and deeply lined face make her look much older than she is (thirty-two). Her right hand touches the down-turned corner of her mouth in an unconscious gesture of anxiety. Her sleeve is tattered and her dress untidy; another of Lange's photographs shows the mother nursing the baby who now lies sleeping in her lap. Evidently she has done all she can for her family and has nothing left to offer. The older children press against her body in a mute appeal for comfort, but she seems as oblivious to them as she does to Lange's camera. Lange herself knew only the outline of the woman's circumstances; she never even learned her name, or that she was a full-blooded American Indian raised in Oklahoma, in the Indian Territory of the Cherokee Nation.

The morning after Lange visited the camp, she printed the photographs and rushed them to the city editor of the *San Francisco News*. They were published as illustrations to an article recounting the plight of the destitute pea pickers, and the story was picked up by newspapers across the nation. The photographs were shocking: it was unconscionable that the workers who put food on American tables were themselves starving. Spurred to action by pictures that revealed not the economic causes, but the human consequences of poverty, the federal government promptly shipped twenty thousand pounds of food to California migrant workers.

For all its power and effectiveness as a documentary photograph, *Migrant Mother* endures as a work of art. With the mother at the center of a classically triangular composition and two small heads on either side, the image bears the iconic emotional and symbolic character of a classical monument or a Renaissance Madonna. Yet Lange herself could never understand its particular appeal. When she once complained about the continual use of this photograph to the neglect of her others, she was reminded by a friend that "time is the greatest of editors, and the most reliable."



18-B Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), *Migrant Mother* (Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California), February 1936. Black-and-white photograph. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this photograph

noticing the details in the figures of the woman and the children.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Ask students what they first notice when they look at this photograph.

They probably will notice the woman's face.

Discuss why our attention is drawn to this part of the image.

Light shines on the woman's face, her right arm and hand lead toward her face, and the children turn toward her.

E | M | S

Describe the woman's clothing.

The sleeve of her sweater is ragged and torn. She wears an open-neck, checked shirt under her sweater.

What does the clothing suggest about the woman and children?

They are poor.

M | S

Discuss with students how Lange focuses our attention on just the woman and her children. What doesn't she show?

What is in the background?

As Lange moved closer and closer to this scene, snapping photographs as she approached, she gradually cropped out the background—the tent that the woman was sitting in front of. In this close-up, the woman and her children fill the composition.

INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Have students describe the expression on this woman's face. How does she feel? What might she be thinking?

She seems to stare out into space with a furrowed brow and down-turned mouth. She appears worried and tired. Perhaps she's wondering what to do next or where they will find food.

E | M | S

Ask students to speculate on why the children turned their heads away from the camera.

Maybe they were shy, or maybe they were afraid of a strange woman with a camera and are seeking their mother's comfort.

Lange could also have posed them this way for greater effect.

E | M | S

Why might Lange have decided to take such a close-up photograph?

It brings us closer to the subject and makes it more personal.

S

Ask students why the Resettlement Administration may have wanted to document the effects of the Great Depression in photographs rather than just words and statistics.

Photographs can be powerful eyewitness accounts that allow people to quickly grasp the meaning and emotion of an event.

S

Explain that this photograph was published in newspapers. Ask students how they think Americans responded to it.

They were outraged that this should happen in America; the federal government responded by shipping thousands of pounds of food to feed the migrants.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: the Great Depression; the Dust Bowl

Historical Figures: Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Eleanor Roosevelt

Civics: the New Deal

Geography: western migration as a result of the Dust Bowl

Literary Connections and Primary

Documents: *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck (secondary)

Arts: photography