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Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration

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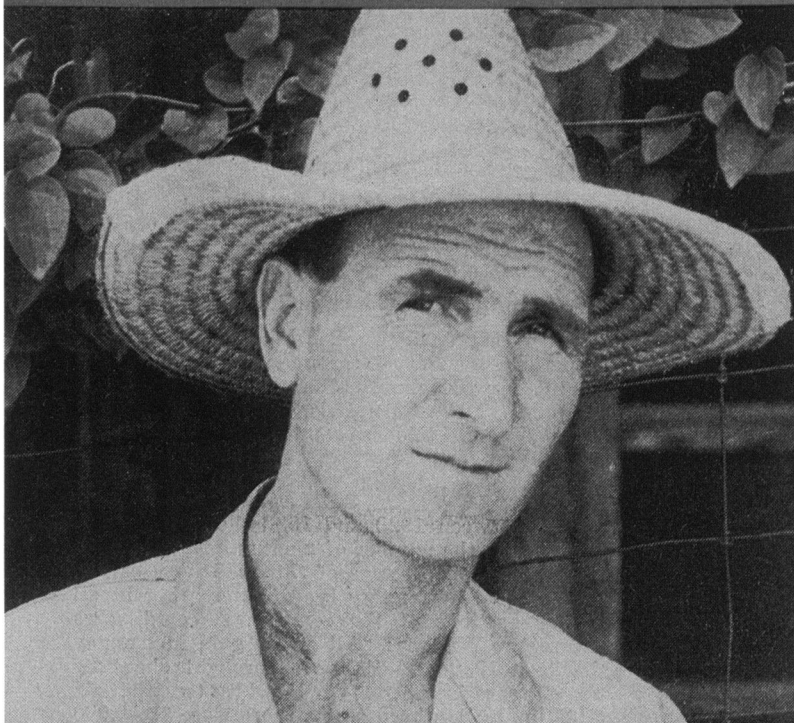
Roy Stryker probably would have hated the title of this essay. He was sensitive about his work for the government, and bridled at those who easily dismissed it as propaganda. The photographs produced under his direction were documentary, he argued: accurate, truthful, unmanipulated slices of real life. My purpose here is to show that, in fact, Stryker did produce propaganda, but it was propaganda infused with the methodology of documentary.

The Farm Security Administration collection of photographs¹ is now most commonly seen as an attempt by the federal government to provide worthwhile employment for a small group of photographers who used their cameras with great artistry to portray the Great Depression in America. Although some contemporary critics dismissed the FSA images as self-serving and highly partisan, today many of the photographs are prized as works of art and as a group are rightly considered to be a national treasure. But to characterize Stryker's photography project as wholly art-oriented is ultimately as misguided as flatly dismissing it as partisan politics.

Conceived as a means of illustrating the necessity and effectiveness of New Deal agricultural programs, the photography project evolved into a complex and varied visual record of the United States from 1935 to 1943. It was not simply a photographic version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The images describe hope as well as despair, plenty as well as scarcity, well-being as well as suffering. There are indeed views of ruined lands, and of rural Americans desperately in need, but especially in the last years of the project, there is evidence of progress and of the essential strength and vigor of the nation. "The FSA photographers were the pioneers of contemporary realistic photography, and their work reflected the troubled years during which they operated," wrote Arthur Rothstein, the first photographer hired by Stryker. But he added that it would be incorrect to conclude that all the FSA images are "depressing, somber, or lack a positive approach." In fact, Rothstein felt that most of the FSA photographs "note that there is happiness in the world and indicate an upward look at life...."²

1. The photography unit was originally housed in the Historical Section of the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration, an agency that was renamed the Farm Security Administration in a bureaucratic reshuffling in 1937. Shortly before it was terminated, the Historical Section photographs were moved to the Office of War Information. The collection is now in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress.
2. Arthur Rothstein, letter, *New York Times*, 17 April 1955, sec. 2, p. 19.

FARM TENANCY —THE REMEDY



Ben Shahn, *Farm Tenancy—
The Remedy*, Farm Security
Administration brochure, cover.
Photograph courtesy of the
University of Louisville
Photographic Archives.

SHAHN

20 QUESTIONS ASKED & ANSWERED



Ben Shahn, Mrs. Mulhall and children (sharecropper family) in Muskogee, Arkansas, October 1935. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The artistic achievements of Stryker's staff are beyond dispute. However, the project was never meant to be merely an accumulation of photographic art. "I always thought that what people called 'art' was a by-product, ... a 'plus-something' that happens when your work is done, if it's done well enough," said Dorothea Lange, one of the best known and most celebrated FSA photographers.³ That Stryker's group produced art is undeniable and fortuitous, but there is considerably more to the story than that.

The FSA photography project was the first attempt by the federal government to provide a broad visual record of American society. It was also the first systematic use of photography by the government for partisan purposes. In order to convince the American people and the Congress of the need for reform, especially in the agricultural sector, still photographs that described the deplorable conditions in the countryside were produced and disseminated. In this regard, the FSA project mirrored the extraordinary publicity blitz by General Hugh Johnson on behalf of the National Recovery Administration (NRA).⁴

Johnson always insisted that his considerable efforts to publicize the Blue Eagle of the NRA were necessary in order to gain the support of the public. Without such support, he said, his agency would not last six months. He defended his actions by asserting that he was no mere "ballyhoo artist" engaged

3. Dorothea Lange, *The Making of a Documentary Photographer*, interview conducted in 1960–1961 by Suzanne Reiss (Berkeley, California: Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 1968), p. 214.

4. Raymond Moley, *The First New Deal* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), pp. 354–355.



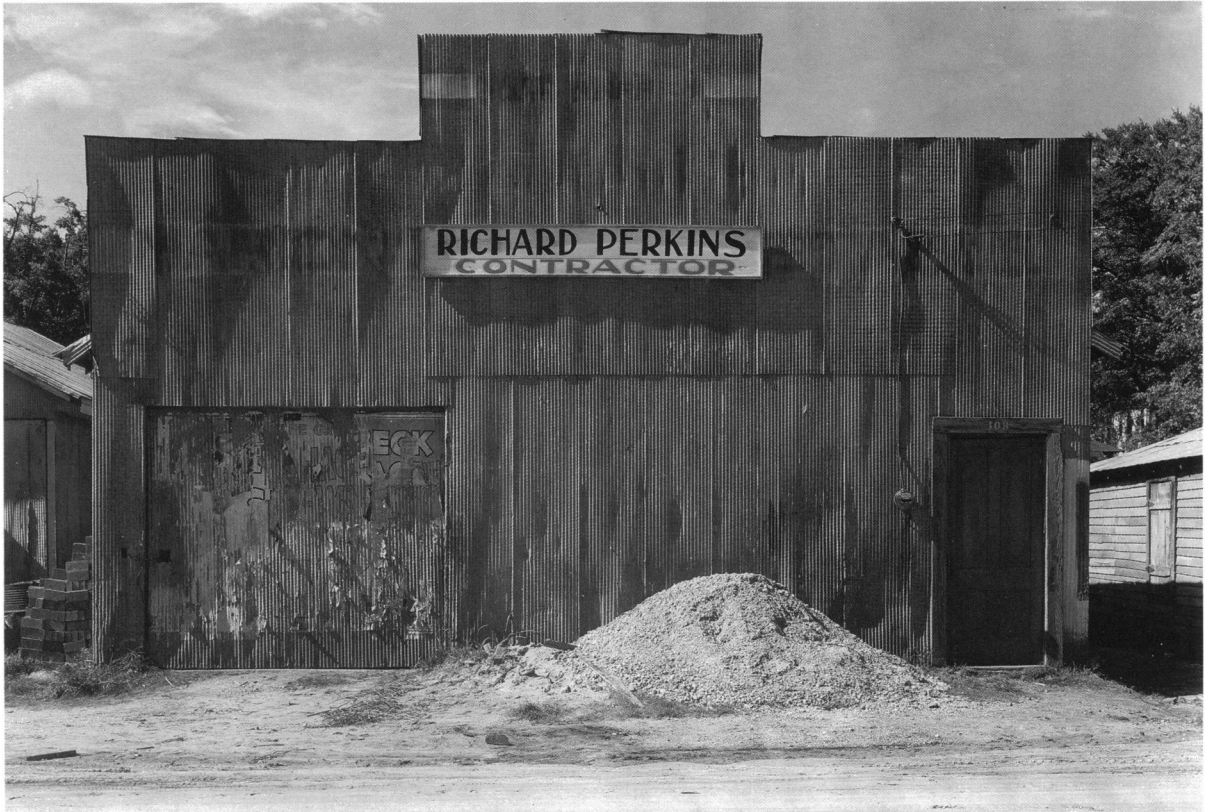
Arthur Rothstein, bank that failed, Kansas, May 1936. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

in a “constant repetition of lies, incitements, or exaggerations...” In fact, he believed that NRA publicity, no matter how stridently presented, was the unvarnished truth.⁵

So, too, did Roy Stryker defend the work of his photographers. They “helped make the public aware of national problems,” he wrote, “and justified to people in cities a program that was largely rural.”⁶ For Stryker, the fact that the photographs were truthful, accurate records of actual events, people, and places, and that they were unadorned and unmanipulated, warranted their use by the government.

However accurate or truthful, and however esthetically pleasing, the images produced under Stryker’s direction were designed primarily to inform, persuade, and act as catalysts of reform. Yet, for a variety of reasons, the political implications of the FSA images are often ignored. Perhaps because in the public mind “photographs never lie,” their value as subjective description, as visual argument, is only superficially understood. But the tendency to view the FSA images as creations curiously separate from the quotidian world that spawned them, as works of pure art or pure fact, belies the nature of the FSA photography project. To deny the persuasive aspects of these images, to study

5. Hugh S. Johnson, “The Blue Eagle from Egg to Earth,” *Saturday Evening Post*, vol. 207, 2 February 1935, p. 86; and vol. 207, 2 March 1935, p. 81.
6. Roy Emerson Stryker, letter to Wallace Richards, 7 November 1949, Roy Stryker Papers, University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter cited as RES Papers).



**Walker Evans, tin building in
Moundville, Alabama, summer
1936. Photograph courtesy of
the Library of Congress.**

them apart from their social and political contexts, ultimately diminishes their significance. These photographs are historical and cultural artifacts; in order to fully understand them, one must ask why they were created, to whom they were addressed, and, most important, what messages they were meant to convey.⁷

The initial inspiration and impetus for the photography project was political. Images made for the Resettlement and Farm Security Administrations were intended to persuade Americans that changes needed to be made in the agricultural sector, and that New Deal programs were effective. As such, they can and should be considered to be propaganda, which according to Walter Lippmann is “the effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another.”⁸ The impact of this propaganda was manifold: it served to enlighten, to educate, to persuade, even at times to entertain the public. But while Stryker’s methods and purpose were obvious, he steadfastly refused to acknowledge his role as propagandist for the New Deal. To do so would have jeopardized the work of the Historical Section, for the connotations of propaganda were and still are, for that matter, nefarious. In 1935, as today, an especially effective way to dismiss or belittle the arguments of another is to label them as propaganda.

7. Joan M. Schwartz, “The Photograph as Historical Record. Early British Columbia,” *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 4 (Spring 1981), p. 65.

8. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press, 1922), p. 16.

**Arthur Rothstein, man and
Model-T Ford on Highway 10
near Missoula, Montana, 1936.
Photograph courtesy of the
Library of Congress.**



Yet propaganda, the organized dissemination of information and ideas for the purpose of influencing attitudes and behavior, is vital to the proper functioning of democracy. The free flow of information, some of which must surely emanate from government, is an essential component of democratic society. Or to put it another way, publicity about the affairs of government, issued by the government, is a legitimate function of the government. Propaganda becomes intrinsically suspect only when it is, by law, the only information permitted, and when its purpose is to deceive rather than to educate. While the concept of engineering public opinion may seem overly manipulative and distasteful, the wholesale rejection of propaganda, as Oliver Thompson suggests, is anarchic.⁹ Democratic propaganda that is truthful and factual is both credible and necessary. Regardless of the semantic bludgeoning of the word in the wake of wartime excesses, American propaganda, whether in the form of words or pictures or both, has often been indispensable and useful.

The photographs produced by Stryker's staff were used effectively as propaganda, first in support of federal programs designed to succor the rural poor, and later, during the war years, as evidence of American strength and vitality. What made the images especially believable and persuasive was Stryker's insistence upon a strict adherence to a comparatively new photographic methodology called documentary that was characterized by a straightforward approach to actual conditions. Documentary eschews photographic tricks, gimmicks, and what the British film critic John Grierson called "the shimsham mechanics of the studio."¹⁰ The intention is always to record real life without artifice. In the documentary photograph what one sees is what was actually before the photographer.

9. Oliver Thompson, *Mass Persuasion in History* (New York: Crane, Russak and Co., 1977), p. 6.

10. Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1946), p. 80.



Carl Mydans, migrants on the road in Crittenden County, Arkansas, "Damned if we'll work for what they pay folks hereabouts," 1936. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In the 1930s, documentary was associated with a certain approach to subject matter, and especially in the FSA group, an intention to make photographs that could influence public policy. Objectivity was not the goal of the documentary movement in the thirties; in fact, interpretation and comment were understood to be essential to the act of photographing. Selection of lens, film, camera angle, lighting, and moment of exposure were all unavoidable decisions that expressed the point of view of the photographer. "The moment that a photographer selects a subject," wrote Stryker, "he is working on the basis of a bias."¹¹ The choices a photographer must make in the pursuit of images present a personal version of the world; a certain subjectivity is inescapable. As Leonard Doob points out, "The lens of a camera is no more objective than the lens of the human eye: the rays of light passing through it are regulated by the attitudes of the photographer."¹²

Although inescapably expressive of the photographer's point of view, documentary must also be firmly rooted in the real world. It is the antithesis of fiction, presenting what writer and critic Elizabeth McCausland called "a

11. Roy Stryker and Paul Johnstone, "Documentary Photographs," in *The Cultural Approach to History*, ed. Caroline F. Ware (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 327.
12. Leonard Doob, *Public Opinion and Propaganda*, 2nd ed. (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966), p. 446.

well-defined content in a context of contemporary reality.”¹³ Its purpose is always to communicate. “In this direction,” writes Grierson, documentary “may most powerfully observe, point its observation, and act as the hand maiden of education and propaganda.”¹⁴

Stryker was aware, of course, that FSA documentary images were considerably more than hard, cold, passionless facts. “The documentary attitude,” he wrote, “is not a denial of the plastic elements which must remain essential criteria in any work.” Composition, focus, and mood are combined to serve the real purpose of documentary: “to speak, as eloquently as possible, of the things to be said in the language of pictures.”¹⁵ In 1930s America, what needed to be said visually was that the farm community was desperately in need of help. Though fettered by a strict reliance upon actuality, the photographs produced for the FSA were meant to provoke and persuade. In the thirties, the documentary approach was used to embarrass the leaders of finance and industry, and to inform the more fortunate classes about the hardships of the poor and unemployed. In effect, the New Deal institutionalized documentary, made it official policy, and used it as a weapon to undermine and vanquish those who clung to a bankrupt status quo.¹⁶ Nowhere was the commitment to documentary more profound than in Stryker’s Historical Section. And nowhere was it used more successfully to communicate with the American people.

According to Rexford Guy Tugwell, the first director of the Resettlement Administration, the purpose of his agency was to “assume the same responsibility for the rural indigent as [Harry] Hopkins’ Works Progress Administration ... was to assume for the urban poor.” It seemed an innocuous goal at first, but before long the RA’s projects began to be viewed with contempt and hostility by the press and some segments of the general public. In particular, communal farms, migrant labor camps, and suburban resettlement projects (dubbed “Tugwell Towns”) were considered to be communistic. Tugwell’s unbending commitment to radical, collectivist solutions to modern economic problems offended practically every vested interest. Business was suspicious, as might be expected, but even organized labor feared competition from state-run rural sweatshops. Tugwell was undeterred. “The sickness in our system is not yet cured,” he said in 1935. “We should [establish] a farmer-worker alliance in this country which will carry all before it.”¹⁷

In time, Tugwell came to be viewed as something akin to Roosevelt’s wicked prime minister. Alva Johnston wrote that his appointment as director of the RA was “like putting Typhoid Mary in charge of the Public Health Service.”¹⁸ He became a lightning rod for attacks against the New Deal, and was seen as the Administration’s resident Bolshevik, an inveterate foe of the free enterprise

13. Elizabeth McCausland, “Documentary Photography,” lecture delivered to the Photo League, New York, 27 July 1938, transcribed in *Afterimage*, vol. 12, May 1985, p. 11.
14. John Grierson, “The Documentary Idea,” in *The Encyclopedia of Photography*, ed. Willard Morgan, vol. IV (New York: National Educational Alliance, 1949), p. 1380.
15. Roy E. Stryker, “Documentary Photography,” in *Encyclopedia of Photography*, vol. 7, p. 1180.
16. See William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). This study remains the most thorough and cogent analysis of the growth and evolution of the documentary tradition.
17. “Tugwell: New Deal’s Leading Red Gets Job in Wall Street,” *Newsweek*, 18 November 1936, p. 16.
18. Alva Johnston, “Tugwell: The President’s Idea Man,” *Saturday Evening Post*, vol. 209, 1 August 1936, pp. 9, 74.



**Russell Lee, Christmas dinner
in the home of Earl Pauley,
Smithfield, Iowa, 25 December
1936. Photograph courtesy of
the Library of Congress.**

system, and a clever revolutionary who was determined to abolish forever “the dear old American ways of doing things and in their place establish a Soviet.”¹⁹

None of the attacks persuaded Tugwell to scale back the RA’s programs. The indigent farmers, sharecroppers, and migrants who constituted the bulk of his clientele had no other voice in Washington; if the RA refused to help then there was no hope at all. Tugwell was determined to make farm ownership on arable land an option for tenants and sharecroppers, even if it meant moving them to new communities. And direct federal aid would provide “treatment for disease, better diet for children, a mule, some seed and fertilizer, clothes to lift the shame of going ragged to town, some hope for the future, a friendly hand to

19. The Unofficial Observer [pseud.], *The New Dealers* (New York: Literary Guild, 1934), p. 85.

**Dorothea Lange, small,
independent gas station during
cotton strike, Kern County,
California, November 1938.
Photograph courtesy of the
Library of Congress.**



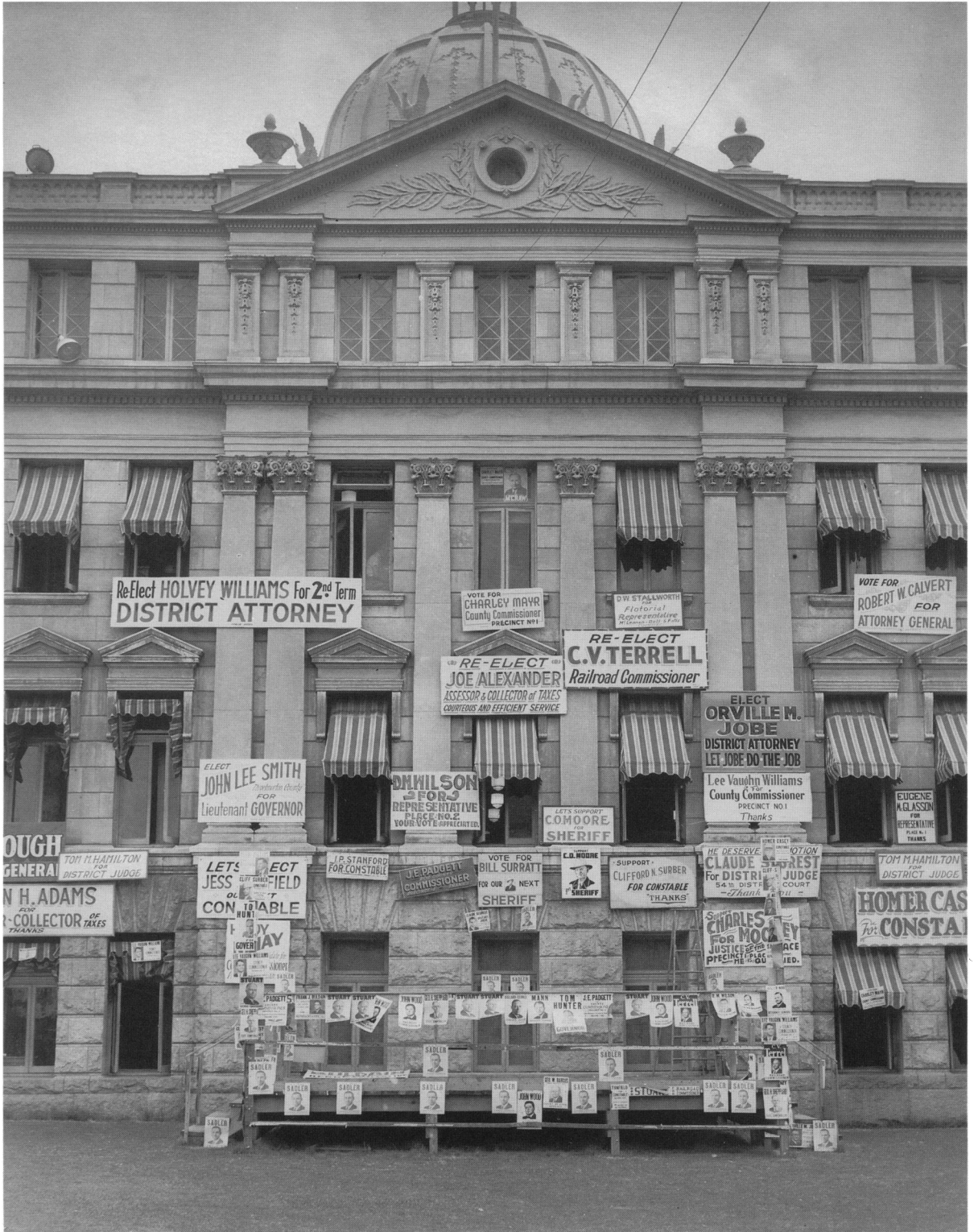
help in every farm and home crisis.”²⁰ It was precisely this kind of massive federal intervention that made the traditional farm groups and political conservatives cringe.

Continually enmeshed in controversy, Tugwell realized that one of his main tasks would be to persuade Congress and the public of the necessity of the RA’s projects. He established an Informational Division that was instructed to explain and publicize the agency’s positive accomplishments. It would be the propaganda arm of the Resettlement Administration. Such a unit was necessary not only because of Tugwell’s penchant for taking politically sensitive positions, and doing so with great gusto, but also because the RA’s constituency was virtually powerless. “The people who are being worked with,” Tugwell wrote, “do not count greatly in their communities. They are the poor and the outcast....”²¹ Support for the agency’s agenda would have to come from a skeptical public and wary Congress.

It appears that from the outset Tugwell realized he would have to rely heavily on photographs to tell the story of the RA. Aware of the importance of familiarizing the public, especially city dwellers, with the plight of the rural poor, he

20. Rexford Tugwell, “Behind the Farm Problem: Rural Poverty,” *New York Times*, Sunday, 10 January 1937, Magazine, p. 24.

21. Tugwell, “Behind the Farm Problem,” p. 22.



◀
**Dorothea Lange, county
courthouse just before county
election, Waco, Texas, 1938.**
**Photograph courtesy of the
Library of Congress.**

felt that words alone would not create a groundswell of support. Stryker, with whom Tugwell had worked at Columbia University, was hired specifically to compile a complete photographic record of the RA's activities. Tugwell "gave me my great chance," Stryker wrote in 1951. "He wanted to prepare a pictorial documentation of our rural areas and rural problems, something that had always been dear to my heart."²² But the job was not simply to collect pictures; from the start, Tugwell stressed the persuasive and educational aspects of the job. "Tugwell put it this way," said Stryker. "Roy, you've got a real chance now to tell the people of America that those in distressed areas are the same as everybody else except they need a better chance."²³ For eight years, Stryker and his photographers carried out that directive, making and disseminating images that explained America to Americans at the same time that they raised public and Congressional support for FDR's most controversial farm programs. "It was a troubled period," Stryker said, looking back from the vantage point of 1960. "There were depressed areas, depressed people. Our basic concern was with agriculture—with dust, migrants, sharecroppers. Our job was to educate the city dweller to the needs of the rural population."²⁴

By the winter of 1935, Stryker's small staff of photographers began sending work back to Washington, and the collection took shape. At first, Stryker was amazed at the quality of the pictures.

I expected competence. I did not expect to be shocked at what began to come across my desk. The first three men who went out, Carl Mydans, Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn, began sending in some astounding stuff that first fall, about the same time that I saw the great work Dorothea Lange was doing in California.... Then Arthur Rothstein, who had set up the lab, started taking pictures. Every day was for me an education and a revelation.²⁵

It was clear from the start that this was not going to be some routine federal public relations project, or a new government photo agency designed to make pretty pictures of the movers and shakers in Washington. The photographers shared the commitment of their boss to the documentary tradition. "There was a feeling," said Rothstein, "that you were in on something new and exciting, a missionary sense of dedication to this project...."²⁶ Despite considerable differences in style, technique, even in the level of political commitment (Evans, for instance, resisted ideology), Stryker's staff agreed upon the need to record the vast changes taking place in the American countryside: the gradual disappearance of the yeoman farmer, the financial plight of the family farm, the desperate flight across the continent of tenants and migrants, and the widespread

22. Roy E. Stryker, "A Great Photo-Documentarian," *PSA [Photographic Society of America] Journal*, vol. 17 (April 1951), p. 182.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Roy Stryker, "The Lean Thirties," *Harvester World*, vol. 51, February–March 1960, p. 9.
25. Roy Stryker, "The FSA Collection of Pictures," in Roy Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 7.
26. Interview, Arthur Rothstein by Richard K. Doud, January 1977, Detroit: Archives of American Art (hereafter cited as Rothstein-Doud Interview). A slightly condensed transcript of the interview was published in the *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1977), pp. 19–23.



Russell Lee, shack of World War I veteran with a view of Nuences Bay, Corpus Christi, Texas, February 1939. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

loss of soil fertility. “We had a great social responsibility,” said Rothstein. “We were dedicated to the idea that our lives can be improved, that man is the master of his environment, and that it’s possible for us to live a better life....”²⁷

Despite general agreement within the Historical Section about goals and methods, the atmosphere was seldom placid and harmonious. There were, for instance, constant complaints from Congress and some areas of the bureaucracy about the waste involved in Stryker’s photography project. “The file was always a thorn in the wound of Republicanism,” wrote John Collier,²⁸ hired by Stryker in 1941 largely on the recommendation of Dorothea Lange. Stryker had to be on constant guard against efforts to demolish the project. Within the RA and, later, the FSA, there was considerable dissatisfaction with Stryker’s truculent refusal to provide more utilitarian photographs for the use of the various divisions. There seemed to be no end to requests for pictures of happy resettlement clients in their brand new villages, or of agency bureaucrats hard at work “in the field.” Finally, there was divisiveness on Stryker’s staff. Ben Shahn’s wife, Bernarda, pointed out that “most of the photographers were considerably more sophisticated in the visual sense than was Roy Stryker.... He was thus the target of constant criticism, of complaints....”²⁹ Shahn and others considered

27. Ibid.

28. John Collier to Roy Stryker, March 1959, pp. 13–14, RES Papers.

29. Bernarda Shahn, “A Foreword,” in Hank O’Neil, *A Vision Shared* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), p. 7.

Stryker a vandal for destroying negatives that he felt should not be in the file (he ruined thousands of negatives with the use of a hole-punch); Lange complained bitterly about not being allowed to set up a separate West Coast photo lab; and Evans felt that he alone should be permitted to make prints from his negatives. It is to be expected, of course, that differences would exist in such a group, and one should note that by and large Stryker and his small staff of photographers functioned smoothly and efficiently enough to produce over a quarter of a million photographs during the eight-year life span of the agency. In the best work of the Resettlement and Farm Security Administrations, photographs that were used effectively as government publicity often doubled as works of art. "The subjects of land and people," wrote James McCamy, an expert in the field of government publicity, "offer the creative photographer an opportunity to use his camera as a dramatic but accurate instrument of reporting."³⁰ Rothstein's image of a father and his sons on their dust-blown farm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma; Lange's memorable "Migrant Mother," the portrait of a pea-picker's wife in Nipomo, California; and Walker Evans's portraits of three families of sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama, eventually used as illustrations for James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, are evidence of the acuity of McCamy's statement. These and other well-known photographs, however, comprise but a tiny portion of the collection.

"We set out to record on film as much of America as we could," Stryker explained.³¹ It is this work, this composite portrait of America, that now constitutes the heart and soul of the file. But in the late 1930s, what counted most was how the pictures were used. Stryker and his staff were not working in an artistic vacuum or collecting views merely for the edification of posterity. "We photographed destitute migrants and average American townspeople, sharecroppers and prosperous farmers, eroded land and fertile land," wrote Stryker. Always, however, the effectiveness of the pictures depended on the work of picture editors and publishers who saw to it that the images reached a mass audience. Stryker's primary, long-term objective may have been to "record contemporary history," but his more immediate task was to act as a "press agent of the underprivileged."³²

By the end of 1935, Stryker's Historical Section was well organized and functioning smoothly, although there were occasional problems and crises. Adequate funding was rarely assured for long, there were instances of Congressional displeasure, and Stryker had to contend with the idiosyncrasies of his photographers. But considerable progress had been made, much of it due to the zeal with which Stryker approached his work. As Lange remembered it, "He'd sit at the desk and he'd point down the corridor and 'they' were all his enemies. He was the guardian at the gate. He was the defender of the files, inviolable.... It was a holy crusade."³³ As the images began to make their way into the public domain via the wire services, magazine articles, traveling exhibitions, and government brochures and handouts, the public began to respond favorably to the photographs and, more importantly, to express their support for at least some of the RA's programs. The pictures were working.

30. James L. McCamy, *Government Publicity: Its Practice in Federal Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 81.

31. Stryker to Robert E. Girvin, 10 June 1947, RES Papers; see also Robert E. Girvin, "Photography as Social Documentation," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 24 (September 1947), pp. 218–219.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Lange, *The Making of a Documentary Photographer*, pp. 171–172.

Stryker was certainly aware of the propagandistic aspects of his job. "It didn't take long to realize that photographs of the immigrants [and] the sharecroppers were a useful tool for the Information people," he wrote to Robert Doherty. "My sense of P.R. ... grew rapidly. And we were succeeding with our pictures... to a surprising degree."³⁴ This was a time, however, when the excesses of government sponsored publicity campaigns in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia were reviled in the American press, and a time when some critics accused the New Dealers of using the same tactics as Nazis and Communists. Carlisle Bargeron, for instance, described Washington, D.C. as "the propaganda factory for the nation," adding that "the situation has been so one-sided that the New Dealers have had pretty much the full run of the so-called manufactured news."³⁵ Stryker willingly accepted the Administration's need for pictures that could be used to promote the new farm programs, but he steered clear of admitting that he was distributing propaganda. Documentary sounded much better.

His job was to persuade and to publicize, and there is no evidence to suggest that he was uncomfortable with his duties. But he was determined to do so with honest, well-informed photographs. Stryker's staff photographers were warned repeatedly not to manipulate their subjects in order to get more dramatic images, and their pictures were almost always printed without cropping or retouching.³⁶ This combination of straightforward still images with political and social argument is the essence of social documentary photography. "The most effective documentary photographs are those that convince their observers with such compelling, persuading truth that they are moved to action," wrote Rothstein in 1956. The Historical Section under the none too gentle prodding of Roy Stryker "used the camera most extensively to interpret and comment."³⁷

One wonders how it could have been any different; documentary expression in the 1930s obviated any neat escape into an artistic ivory tower. Stryker's photographers were very much involved in the events of the day. Even if, like Evans, they eschewed the role of social reformer, they could not help influencing public policy; Stryker and the men and women who actually used the FSA photographs saw to that. Elizabeth McCausland explained that "the crisis of world wide fascism and war" made it impossible for artists "to go forward on the old basis." Rather, those in the arts had to acquaint themselves with the real world, with "poverty, unemployment, starvation, slums, eviction, relief [and] picket lines."³⁸

On 31 December 1936, the Resettlement Administration was transformed from its status as an independent agency within the bureaucracy to that of an agency within the massive Department of Agriculture, and on 1 September 1937, the ratification of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act gave the new entity legal

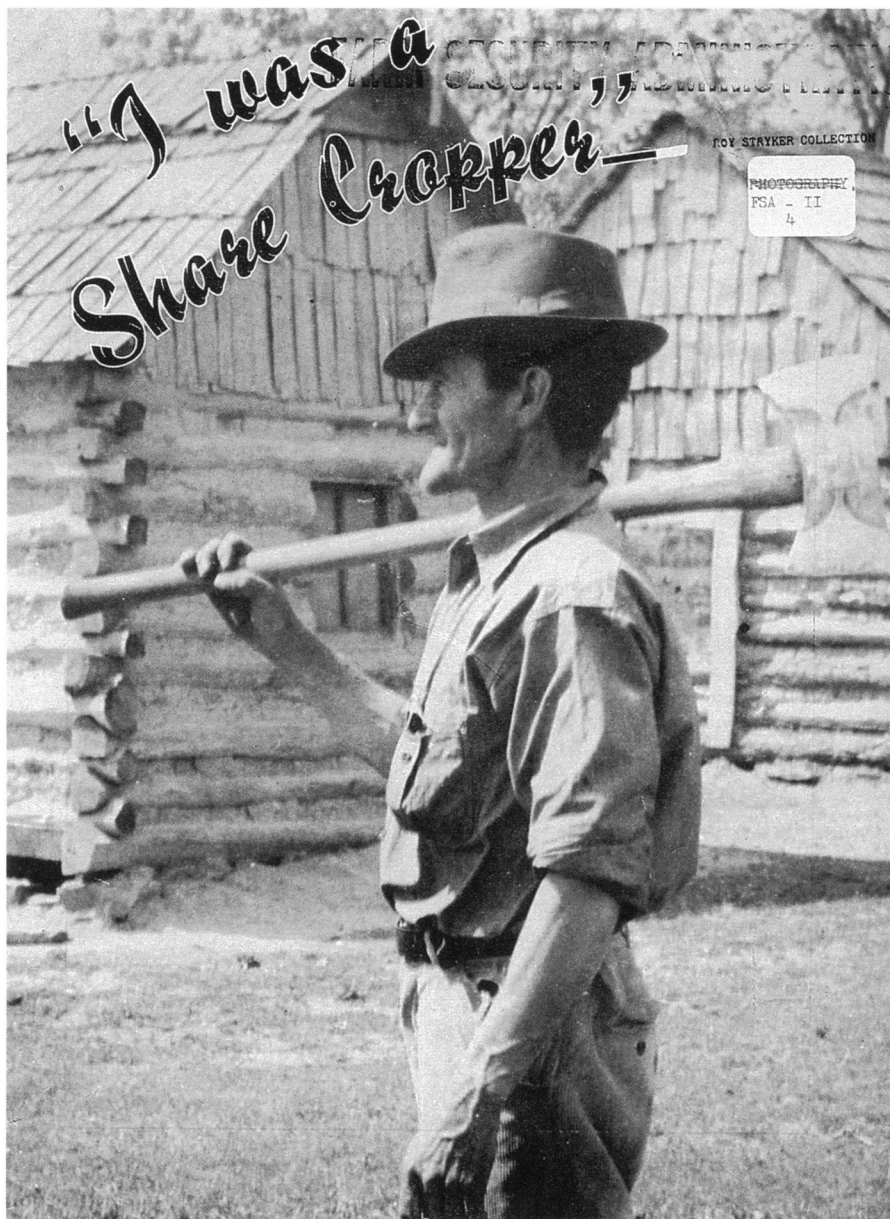
34. Stryker to Robert Doherty, 9 August 1962, RES Papers.

35. Carlisle Bargeron, "Invisibly Supported," *Nation's Business*, October 1937, p. 28.

36. The only exception to this rule was when photographers were working for one of the big picture magazines. Wilson Hicks, the managing editor of *Life*, stated that photojournalists were "most interested in finding drama in everyday life...." Thus, a certain latitude was permissible on magazine assignments. See Karin Becker Ohrn, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 160; and Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p. 88.

37. Arthur Rothstein, *Photojournalism* (Garden City, New York: Amphoto, 1956), pp. 27, 30.

38. Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," p. 12.



►
Photographer unknown,
I was a Share Cropper—,
Farm Security Administration
brochure, ca. 1939. Photograph
courtesy of the University of
Louisville Photographic
Archives.

status and changed its name to the now familiar Farm Security Administration. Partly because Rex Tugwell was no longer director (he resigned when the RA became part of the Department of Agriculture), and because the new bureaucratic environment was considerably more conservative, Stryker's staff became increasingly concerned with depicting the health and vitality of farm life in the late 1930s.

Marion Post Wolcott, who was hired in 1938, recalls that her initial instructions were "to get more photographs of the positive side of the FSA program and something different for the exhibits that could be used to contrast with the other programs."³⁹ In this she proved especially adept. Her photographs that

39. Cited by Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared*, p. 175.



Marion Post Wolcott, Mr. R.B. Whitley visiting his general store in the town of Wendell, Wake County, North Carolina, September 1939. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

described the natural fertility of tilled land fit well with the new directions being taken by the Historical Section. "If you'll go through the file," Stryker told Richard Doud, "you'll find Marion has... a great sense of our land; of our terrain; of... people in the land, probably more than some of the others; also a great love of people, a great warmth, an understanding of people."⁴⁰ It is true, of course, that farm conditions were improving in the late thirties, and that to some extent the new FSA guidelines reflected the changes. At the same time, however, the plight of sharecroppers, migrants, and tenant farmers—the original clients of the RA—remained desperate. Clearly, the shift in focus was due at least in part to changes in the government's publicity needs.

By 1941, the prospect of war began to dominate the thinking of Americans, and the FSA work reflected the new mood. "I am very anxious that we get additional pictures of the soldier life around the towns near the big encampments," Stryker wrote Jack Delano, who was hired in 1940 upon the recommendation of Paul Strand. And in a joint letter to Delano and Russell Lee, Stryker explained that the new emphasis "on industrial centers is simply in keeping with the shift which is taking place in the country."⁴¹

The propaganda needs of the government had changed; so, too, had the shooting scripts of the FSA photographers. While the methodology of documentary remained constant, the photographers' subjects were increasingly from the

40. Interview, Roy Stryker by Richard K. Doud, Montrose, Colorado, 17 October 1963, unedited transcript, RES Papers.

41. Stryker to Delano, 6 May 1941; Stryker to Delano and Lee, 13 December 1940, RES Papers.



**John Vachon, abandoned
farm home in Ward County,
North Dakota, October 1940.
Photograph courtesy of the
Library of Congress.**

middle class, the suburbs, and small towns and villages. “Emphasize the idea of abundance—the ‘horn of plenty’ and pour maple syrup over it,” Stryker told Delano in 1940. “I know your damned photographer’s soul writhes, but to hell with it. Do you think I give a damn about a photographer’s soul with Hitler at our doorstep?”⁴²

From the outset, one of Stryker’s most important tasks was to see that the photographs produced by his staff received maximum use. This was partly in response to the volume of criticism directed at Tugwell’s more radical programs. As McCamy rightly points out, “publicity activity increases with the amount of hostility to the agency.”⁴³ In addition to supplying pictures to the press and to various departments and agencies within the Administration, however, Stryker continued to believe in the historical, non-political dimension of the collection, in the idea that the images constituted a visual history of American society and culture from 1935 to 1943. The day-to-day work, he said later, consisted mostly of “taking routine pictures for other Farm Security units, feeding pictures to newspapers, [and] providing illustrations for reports and exhibits.” But along the way, Stryker “held onto a personal dream that inevitably got translated into black and white pictures.” The collection would be a visual encyclopedia of American life.⁴⁴

42. Stryker to Delano, 12 September 1940, RES Papers.

43. McCamy, *Government Publicity*, p. 231.

44. Stryker, “The FSA Collection of Photographs,” in Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, p. 7.



**John Collier, Grandfather
Romero in Trampas, New
Mexico, January 1943.
Photograph courtesy of the
Library of Congress.**

In the 1939 edition of the *U.S. Camera Annual*, Edward Steichen defended the work being produced by Stryker's photographers. "Pictures in themselves," he noted, "are very rarely propaganda. It is the use that is made of pictures that makes them propaganda."⁴⁵ In spite of Steichen's defense, the use of FSA images by the government to further its own causes was controversial during the life of the program, and remains so today. In an article for *Survey Graphic* in 1940, Harley Howe stated that attacks on the photography project were "centered around charges that it is one-sided propaganda for the New Deal." But he added that "government-sponsored publicity which is accurate, and which tells about policies and programs rather than individuals and parties, is not only harmless but desirable. Certainly, FSA photographs come well within this category."⁴⁶

45. *U.S. Camera Annual, 1939* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1939), pp. 43–47.

46. Hartley E. Howe, "You Have Seen Their Pictures," *Survey Graphic*, April 1940, p. 238.

The line between documentary and propaganda is thin; some might argue, in fact, that at times it does not exist at all. "In documentary, once you pass to opinion," writes Grierson, "there is hardly any avoiding the accusation of propaganda." Insofar as documentary, at least in its 1930s incarnation, sought to direct thinking and stir emotions, it contained an indissoluble link to propaganda. After all, the "propagandist note is not just an occupational risk of editorial documentary; it is inevitable if there is any depth to one's interpretation."⁴⁷

Stryker's photography project was designed to provide visual evidence of the need for federal programs to aid the neediest victims of the Depression. Unmanipulated still pictures were offered as proof that sharecroppers, tenants, migrants, and families eking out life on dust-blown and eroded land were in need of help. There can be little doubt that the photographs were propaganda instruments used to stimulate social change. However, the use of photographs to educate and persuade in no way alters their documentary value, nor does such use taint their truthfulness. "So long as they are made without trickery," wrote Stryker, "their effectiveness rests with men who know how to use them, to put them together so as to bring out strong and complete statements, and to supplement them with significant words and figures. Use is what counts."⁴⁸

Under the direction of Roy Stryker, photographs were used for the first time on behalf of the government as instruments of social reform and as a medium of communication. Stryker believed to the end, however, that the political usefulness of the photographs never outweighed their value as historical documents. He was a collector of Americana, ever insistent upon assuring authenticity and mindful of the needs of the people who paid the bill. "If it is not the single most monumental photographic coverage ever executed," wrote John Vachon, the last photographer hired by Stryker, "it is certainly the most monumental ever conceived."⁴⁹ It is also, as Pare Lorentz said, "another proof that good art is good propaganda."⁵⁰ □

47. Grierson, "The Documentary Idea," p. 1376.

48. Girven, "Photography as Social Documentation," p. 215.

49. John Vachon, "Tribute to a Man, an Era, an Art," *Harper's*, September 1973, p. 99.

50. Pare Lorentz, "Putting America on Record," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 17 December 1938, p. 96.