

How Dorothea Lange in Oregon became an Exhibition

Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission (OCHC), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, has organized and is touring a major exhibition of Dorothea Lange's 1939 Oregon photographs taken for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal agency. Lange has long been recognized as an artist of conscience and humanist values. The exhibition highlights New Deal projects in Oregon, especially its rural initiatives, and the lasting impact from employment of capable artists. The exhibitions' timeliness is obvious; its content couldn't be more compelling.

Lange's Oregon images capture the plight and prospects of many people, some long-time Oregon residents and many others just swept in from the Dust Bowl misery across the U.S. heartland. Her charge included the portrayal of federal agencies' good works in a crushing period economically. Intent on demonstrating the survival of traditional values and the persistence of social cohesion among rural Americans, FSA director Roy Stryker instructed his photographers never to ridicule their subjects. The effort ultimately generated some 270,000 images "the largest photographic project of a people ever undertaken," according to the FDR Presidential Library.

The images Lange took in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest have long remained invisible. Terminated from the FSA for the third time in 1939, partially for budgetary reasons but also due to feuds with the bureaucracy, Lange did not see her unpublished Oregon photographs until twenty-five years later. Several years ago, Portland activist and historian Mike Munk urged the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission (OCHC) to mount an exhibit of Lange's Oregon, available on-line through the Library of Congress.

With financial backing from individual supporters and three small grants, OCHC contracted with Portland photographer Rick Regan and Technical Imaging Services to print enlarged editions of 48 digitized negatives. Appropriate captions from Lange's field notes were matched with each photograph. As a visual sociologist, Lange sought to put words and images together by quoting her subjects and attaching extended captions and notations to her pictures. She believed a photograph should be "a promoter of consequences."

Extensive support materials and related programs have been developed to accompany the exhibition. The collection debuted at Portland State University's Littman Gallery in the fall of 2009, after which it moved to the Museum of People's Art in Bay City, where Art Space Gallery framed the photos. The exhibition has since been shown at the Washington County Historical Museum, Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario, and just closed in February 2012 the Wayne Morse Center at the University of Oregon Law School in Eugene. No less than 50,000 people have visited the exhibition. Many more have seen major stories in print and television.

Discussion is underway with several parties for future bookings of the exhibition. Nothing is yet scheduled. If your group or community is interested in a future visit of *Dorothea Lange in Oregon*, please send an email to encanto@ochcom.org with your name and affiliation. To sponsor an individual image—25 of the 48 have been to date—please review the accompanying files of photos and list of sponsored images.



**Photo of Dorothea Lange
by Rondal Partridge, 1936**