

Questions about Dorothea Lange

Who is Dorothea Lange?

The Farm Security Administration's best-known photographer, Dorothea Lange, was born Dorothea Nutzhorn in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1895. At age seven, she experienced a bout with polio that left her with a slight, life-long limp. Five years later, her father abandoned the family. Undeterred from her goal of becoming a camera artist, Lange found work as a photographer's assistant in New York studios and took classes at Columbia University.

After adopting her German mother's maiden name, she moved to San Francisco, where she found a job in a photo supply house before establishing her own studio and specializing in portraits of the social elite. By the early 1930s, however, Lange's populist sensibilities led her into the streets to record images of poor, unemployed, and migrant families. After her 2nd marriage to Berkeley economist Paul Taylor in 1935, she collaborated on an extended illustrated study of Dust Bowl migrants.

Lange's most widely acclaimed photograph is "Migrant Mother" (1936), a picture taken in Nipomo, California that remains the single most significant icon of the Great Depression and a testament to the contrast between the subject's inner strength and pride and the impoverished nature of her surroundings.



Dorothea Lange, 1936, taken at 19 by Rondal Partridge, son of Imogen Cunningham and Roi Partridge

Why are her photographs worth seeing?

"Dorothea Lange's photographs tell stories," said the fall 2009 feature 'Hard times in sharp focus' in *Portland State Magazine*. "During the Great Depression, many rural Oregon families and migrant workers lived in tents, shacks, and dugouts as they eked out a living harvesting crops. Times were hard, but stories of small joy can be seen in Lange's photos along with the essential human spirit of the American West."

Who funded Dorothea's work?

The Farm Security Administration (FSA) was a branch of the Department of Agriculture (USDA) under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The FSA's best-known photographer, Dorothea Lange, was hired by Roy Emerson Stryker who led the agency's documentary photography project. Hiring a dozen photographers, Stryker set out to portray the suffering of rural Americans in terms understandable to the urban middle class. He insisted, however, on the need to balance off images of economic distress with evidence of the survival of traditional values and family cohesion. Stryker's ground rules stipulated that no representation ridicule its object or present a cliché.

What was the purpose of her work? When were the photographs taken?



“The Fairbanks family has moved to three places on the project in one year, Willow Creek area, Malheur County.”

from Dorothea Lange’s field notes

The photographs were taken to provide visual evidence of the FSA’s accomplishments to Congress and the public and establish an historical record of the agency’s activities. In the late summer and fall of 1939, Dorothea Lange traveled in the Pacific Northwest on an FSA assignment. She produced some 550 photographs in Oregon of the rural environment in the Willamette Valley, Columbia Basin, Josephine, Klamath, and Malheur Counties.

Forty eight images, preserved in the Library of Congress, have been printed, mounted and framed for the travelling exhibition produced by Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission of Portland.



Why did she take photographs in Oregon and in particular Malheur County?

Lange was assigned to take photos in places that had FSA and USDA projects. The USDA’s support of Malheur County’s irrigated agriculture projects made it a logical spot. The exhibition features 21 Malheur images from Lange’s 1936 photos of Oregon, just under half of the 48 images representing her work in Oregon.

While in Malheur County, Lange befriended several families associated with the Friends church (Quaker) in Dead Ox Flat. She visited and portrayed them on their farms and in their homes.

Lange took her last photos for the FSA here, fired for the third and final time by Roy Stryker. Returning to her home in Berkeley, California, she completed her field notes and finished her assignment November 30, 1939.

Only in the last month of her travels, in photos taken in Malheur County and Idaho, did she include the names of her subjects in her photo descriptions, in violation of FSA policy. This is allowing us to identify family members today who were in photos as children, or are descendents of those portrayed. Dozens of individuals with direct family links to Lange’s Malheur County subjects attended the opening of the 4th exhibition on the

tour of *Dorothea Lange in Oregon* at Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario on Friday, October 14, 2011.



Lola Hull, Dead Ox Flat, 1939

In 1936 the Hull family moved to Malheur County from Idaho