

Russell Lee and the Japanese-American Internment Camp Exhibit

The Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission is sponsoring an exciting new project: a traveling exhibit of Russell Lee's photography in Oregon and Idaho. Portland based historian Morgen Young will be examining Lee's series and contextualizing the images within the framework of the Farm Security Administration and Japanese internment in the two states.

In the summer of 1942, Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer Russell Lee visited and captured four FSA mobile camps in Oregon and Idaho. In July, he arrived in Malheur County, Oregon and photographed the Nyssa Japanese-American Internment Camp. He then traveled east, shooting similar camps in Twin Falls, Rupert, and Shelley, Idaho.

Established in an interim locale in the spring of 1942, the Nyssa camp housed approximately 235 Japanese Americans. President Roosevelt signed Executive Order Number 9066 on February 19, 1942, leading to the internment of Japanese Americans, with some 120,000 people held in internment camps for the duration of World War II. Before precise interments plans were in place, George Aiken, secretary to Governor Charles Sprague, presented the so-called "Oregon Plan" to the War



**Russell Lee. July 1942. Malheur County, Oregon.
Japanese-American transplanting celery.
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-073679-E DLC**



**Russell Lee. July 1942. Nyssa, Oregon. Farm Security Administration mobile camp now inhabited by Japanese-Americans who volunteered to do farm work. The U.S. Employment Service and the local sugar beet companies made agreements as to wages, working conditions, transportation, recreational facilities and medical care.
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-073574-D DLC**

Relocation Authority (WRA) and representatives from western states at an April 1942 conference held in Salt Lake City. Oregon desired to put the state's 4,000 Japanese American residents to work on public works projects. The "Oregon Plan" called for the movement of internees to abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camps in Malheur, Crook, and Harney counties. Japanese Americans would then provide year-round work on land and transportation projects. Camp residents would be placed under federal supervision and paid wages. They were to be returned to their respective homes and communities following the war. The plan was ultimately rejected by the WRA.

Oregon officials moved forward with a less ambitious plan, centered on providing agricultural labor to Malheur County. The Amalgamated Sugar Company had orchestrated the conversion of farmers' crops to sugar beets in the spring of 1942, but the war resulted in a shortage of farm labor. State officials appealed to President Roosevelt and Governor Sprague to move Japanese laborers into the fields to harvest the sugar

beets, before impending frost destroyed the crops. Roosevelt approved the farm labor plan on May 14, 1942. By June, several hundred laborers had been recruited from the Portland Assembly Center and the Minidoka War Relocation Center. Russell Lee arrived in the camp the following month and shot a series of photographs, documenting the camp, its residents, and agricultural labor.

Trained as a chemical engineer, Lee joined Roy Stryker's staff of FSA photographers in 1936. He continued to work for the New Deal agency until it was defunded in 1943. Lee was by far the most prolific of the agency's photographers, producing more than 5,000 images in less than seven years. Perhaps best known for his Pie Town, New Mexico series, Lee photographed across the United States. In the spring of 1942, he began photographing the evacuation of Japanese Americans in southern California.

The Farm Security Administration was undergoing significant changes in 1942. By March of that year, the FSA began engaging in defense photography for the Office of War Information (OWI), in addition to its more traditional rural-oriented assignments. The OWI required propaganda photography, rather than thoughtful, pictorial analysis typical of the FSA. The OWI stressed the single image, while the FSA emphasized a series of photographs. By September of 1942, the FSA was absorbed by the OWI and war propaganda photography became the full time mission of the staff.



Russell Lee. July 1942. Nyssa, Oregon (vicinity). Japanese-American family was evacuated from a coastal area to a reception center. Subsequently they volunteered for farm work and moved to the FSA (Farm Security Administration) mobile camp. From there they were hired as a group by a local white farmer. They will be allowed to remain on this farm for the duration of the war. When such an arrangement is made the U.S. Employment Service must inspect and approve housing facilities and wage standards.
*Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-073566-D DLC*



Russell Lee. July 1942. Nyssa, Oregon. Farm Security Administration mobile camp. The sugar beet companies who sponsored the Japanese-Americans who moved to the camp send trucks one night a week to take them into town for a few hours in a supervised group.
*Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-073597-D DLC*

This exhibit will select from the more than two hundred photographs of the Nyssa camp, and a smaller number taken in the three Idaho camps by Russell Lee. His original FSA captions will accompany each image. Through information gleaned from surviving residents of the camps and their family members, additional captions will provide additional biographical information of the photographs' subjects.

Please reach us to express interest in this project in early development by responding via our **Contact OCHC** header adding the phrase "Russell Lee and the NW Japanese-American Internment Camp Exhibit" along with anything specific you'd like to tell us. Check back for more information as this project evolves.