

“The making of a documentary photographer : oral history transcript / and related material” 1960-1968

Subject: Dorothea Lange - **Interviewer:** Suzanne Riess

http://archive.org/stream/documentryphoto00langrich/documentryphoto00langrich_djvu.txt

Photography for the Government Farm Security Administration

Lange: I am told that the Farm Security Administration photographic division existed because of a report I had done when I worked for the state relief administration. When my report went to Washington to be used it was seen by someone and, as a result, the whole Farm Security Administration photographic team was established.* It was all based on this report I did.

Riess: What was the report, and who saw it?

Lange: Well, actually there were two reports: one was on rural slum housing and one was on migratory labor. The one on migratory labor was done to try to get money to establish camps which would have rudimentary facilities and supervision.

Riess: These would be federal camps?

Lange: Camps with federal money. That is, at first the idea was not federal camps, but camps with federal money that later became federal camps. That report got the first \$20,000 to establish those camps.

Riess: A picture report.

Lange: Yes, and that idea just went like wildfire. It seemed as though this field had been just waiting. Rex Tugwell got Roy Stryker from Columbia University (they had been colleagues at Columbia) and told him to come to Washington to make a graphic history of American economic growth.

Riess: Was it Tugwell who saw the report and got things moving?

Lange: Exactly the channel, from whom to whom, I don't know. Certainly Tugwell was important because he was the administrator for the Resettlement Administration, which became the Farm Security Administration. Well, that Farm Security Administration under Roy Stryker was a very unusual thing. Now it's really famous and becoming more so all the time. It amuses me, really, because I have watched a legend--you're too young to have watched a legend grow--I've watched that legend grow and it's now become a full-blown legend.

Riess: Makes you feel like a legendary figure?

Lange: Not I so much, but Stryker. They're going to have a monument to him one of these days, in bronze I read all these histories of the photographic section, and my memories of the actual thing that it was then, and the way the participants in it think it was!.. It's very funny. Anyway, they used my report on migratory labor, as an example of the kind of thing they were talking about, to get the section budgeted. That was a way of getting it done that occurred to them, I think, in a subway in New York. And the way things went in that New Deal time, two weeks later it was established and was called the historical section of the Resettlement Administration. [In later revision Dorothea Lange said, "This section is irresponsible and needs to be restated."]

Riess: I read that one of the reasons for setting up this section was their conviction that the press couldn't be depended on for proper and sufficient coverage of the administration's work.

Lange: Well, that was one of the reasons that they gave to Congress, to get their money. Their real reasons were a little different. Stryker was a very good fellow for fending off Congress and protecting the section and staff from the wrath of people who said that in these times this was no way to spend money. But they had loads and loads of reasons. Actually, during those years those photographs were very little used. The thing that really fascinates me is to see how in the passage of time the validity of that file becomes more and more apparent. Its real value we had hunches of at the JL "Little used? Gee whiz!" P.S.T. 171 Lange: time; to justify it while we were doing it, Stryker used to try to make those photographs practical, get them into news- papers and magazines and so on, but he wasn't good at it. And as the thing grew, it became a very expensive business. It wasn't in the beginning, but as things go in Washington, the budget became big. While it was a small section, still they had a pretty good lab going and they had a lab man and they got this and they got that, and a lot of file clerks. Paul Vanderbilt was the fellow who put the files in order. Thank God for him! But while it grew, the use of it was something that we all had (at least I had) some qualms about. Stryker, however, stuck by that idea in its broadest sense and he found ways of defending it. One hard time we had was the time when they discovered that one of the photographers had moved a skull and that opened the whole thing up in Congress. What was this that was going on? Why were these people running around the country taking pictures? And what was this business of contriving situations in order to suit propaganda purposes? And that was quite a thing. People laugh at it now. We laugh at it when we get together, but it wasn't funny then. Roy was good at that job. (Later on, he moved to Standard Oil and he got a tremendous job, the same sort of task.)

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Riess: Were you out on your own, or did the photographers travel as a team?

Lange: It varied. Not a team out of Washington, but you'd pick them up on the road. Sometimes if you needed help, if you got lost. I don't mean geographically lost, you went to the regional office, and someone who understood the conditions in the area would go with you for three or four days and always would like to go. Or you'd pick up a state car and driver. Sometimes I'd have a typist-steno with me if I wanted to get a lot of notes, for a few days. That's the kind of thing. It was on and off.

Riess: Part of your job was getting the notes?

Lange: Always. You were responsible for that, no matter how you got them.

Riess: And you studied the conditions yourself beforehand through reports? You might, for instance, be located here in California, receive an assignment in some other area, then do a lot of reading before setting out?

Lange: Well, that isn't really the way I did it actually. Mostly if I had reading to do I would do it in the area. I couldn't retain it otherwise. But the contradiction was that the reading that was most fruitful and the best was the reading that I did after I had been there. That worked much better than doing the reading before. It's a somewhat questionable thing to read ahead of time in a situation like that, because then you're not going under your own power. It is often very interesting to find out later how right your instincts were if you followed all the influences that were brought to bear on you while you were working in a region. I can't just now give you an example, but it did happen more than once that we unearthed and discovered what had been either neglected, or not known, in various parts of the country, things that no one else seemed to have observed in particular, yet things that were too important not to make a point of.

Riess: For instance, people being taken unfair advantage of?

Lange: Things that weren't working.

Riess: Administration things that weren't working?

Lange: During those years farm mechanization was just starting, and it was not a matter of general public knowledge that it was starting. The extension of big farming was happening in those years. It doesn't seem possible, but very few people knew it.

Riess: Not even the ones who were being hurt?

Lange: They were voiceless, you see, and we were the people who met them. The influx into California after the dust storms of April 1934, I made the first report on. The first wave of those people arrived in southern California on a weekend. It was as sharp and sudden as that when I was there.

Riess: Not just a trickling of people.

Lange: Enough so that it was noticeable. And we said, "What is this? What is this?" And from that time on it came like a deluge. But that Sunday in April of 1935 was a Sunday that I well remember because no one noticed what was happening, no one recognized it. A month later they were trying to close the border. There were so many that they were talking about it, but they never did really close the border, though they stopped everybody. That was the big agitation then. Should they, or should they not let them in? Well, that's the atmosphere of the work of those days, and you can see why I feel restive when I see what is going on in the field now, here in California, which means that those people will be or will not be organized. And it isn't that I'm not doing it that makes me restive so much as that there is no provision made anywhere for anyone to record this in photographs. There hasn't been a big photographic project since this one that we're talking about.

Riess: It's strange. Things usually progress. This just stopped.

Lange: No young photographers have had the training and the education and the experience that we had. That whole team are all people who have been able to use it very well. And they are still the top in the field. That's deplorable. The younger people should have had the same chance that we did. Somewhere some project should take on ten American photographers and put them to work on something. And nobody is doing it. The Ford Foundation is just shoveling out money for all kinds of things that are on the edges. But this is right in the middle! And nothing is being done to record this history of farm labor organization.

Riess: After your marriage to Dr. Taylor [December 1935], did you and he travel together on field and photographing trips?

Lange: The first five years, until the war interrupted, he went on some of the big field trips with me. He had assignments where the regions were parallel so we were together a lot of the time. It wasn't that he was with me all of the time. He'd be with me maybe a month and then he had to go back to Washington and he would rejoin me in the summers. And a good deal of the discipline that I needed in order to get hold of such an assignment--some of them had a very broad base--he gave me on those trips. So I never quite did what some of the photographers on that job, some of the best ones--I say best because what came out of it at the end was decidedly important did, the haphazard shooting. I learned a good deal from Paul about being a social observer.

Riess: I wanted to ask you about haphazard shooting, and particularly in the situation of the FSA team. Why do photographers take so many pictures of the same subject instead of pinpointing what it is they want to show and tell in a few shots?

Lange: It's highly desirable to make more than one shot on the same subject. There isn't always time. In fact, there is rarely time to work deliberately. When you get going, you have to shoot fast. Like asking a person to write their letters in triplicate you can't do it, but I certainly wouldn't seriously criticize a photographer who works completely without plan, and photographs that to which he instinctively responds. In fact, that's a pretty good guide--that to which you respond. I have all my Asian work that I'm going into now, cutting right into the middle of it, and I find that it proves that a very good way to work I'm careful not to say "the only way to work" because there is none--a very good way to work is open yourself as wide as you can, which in itself is a difficult thing to do, just to be yourself like a piece of unexposed, sensitized material. To know ahead of time what you're looking for means you're then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting, and often false. It's a very difficult thing to be exposed to the new and strange worlds that you know nothing about, and find your way. That's a big job. It's hard, without relying on past performances and finding your own little rut, which comforts you. It's a hard thing to be lost.

Riess: And so you watch and wait...

Lange: You force yourself to watch and wait. You accept all the discomfort and the disharmony. Being out of your depth is a very uncomfortable thing. In travel, for instance, you force yourself onto strange streets, among strangers. It may be very hot. It may be painfully cold. It may be sandy and windy and you say, "What am I doing here? What drives me to do this hard thing?" You ask yourself that question. You could be so comfortable, doing other things, somewhere else. You know?

Riess: You didn't feel out of your element for long when you were doing the Farm Security Administration photography, did you?

Lange: Sometimes I did. Oh, the end of the day was a great relief, always. "That's behind me." But at the moment when you're thoroughly involved, when you're doing it, it's the greatest real satisfaction.

Riess: At the moment of photographing, not the moment of developing?

Lange: Never then. But at the moment when you say, "I think maybe... I think that was all right. . . maybe that will be it." And you know when you're working fairly well. You have a stretch. But as I say, every day as it passes you say, after it's done, "It's over. I did the best I could. I didn't do very well but I did the best I could. . . There's nothing on the film. I'm sure there's nothing on it, nothing worth recording..." What I'm trying to say is, photography for the people who play around with it is very exhilarating and a lot of fun. If you take it seriously, it's very difficult. There's no end to the difficulties.