Capturing the ordinary: Russell Lee in southeastern Louisiana

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CAPTURING THE ORDINARY: RUSSELL LEE IN SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art

in

The School of Art

by

Brent Mitchell
B.A., University of Louisiana-Lafayette, 2002
May 2004
Dedicated to my parents Kent and Betty Mitchell
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ABSTRACT

The photographers who worked for the Farm Security Administration Historical Section from 1935-1942 produced a large body of photographic work that now resides in the Library of Congress. These photographs serve as valuable visual resources for depicting an economically deprived section of America's population during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Some of these photographers, like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, are widely recognized for their work, while others remain obscure. Russell Lee falls into the latter category, although he contributed the largest number of captioned photographs to the FSA photographic files.

This paper explores Lee's photographic techniques in relation to other FSA photographers who addressed similar subject matter. In order to limit the scope of my study, I chose to investigate the photographs Lee took in southeastern Louisiana in April 1939 as part of an assignment on strawberry farming. This batch of approximately 150 black and white photographs offers insight into Lee's working methods. Lee’s imagery reveals the similarities and differences between his photographic style and that of his FSA colleagues, such as Evans, Lange, and Ben Shahn.

I will argue that Lee's anonymity is the result of his approach to photography, privileging a large quantity of pictures of a given subject or location over searching for a single remarkable image that captured the essence of the situation. His photographs, while technically precise, often lack the visual impact found in the work of Evans and Lange. Though Lee's artistic vision may not have been as keen as some of his colleagues', Lee's straightforward pictorial style bestows a hitherto undervalued importance to his contribution to the FSA photographic files. He captured ordinary moments in the lives of
human beings suffering during one of America's bleakest periods. In southeastern Louisiana, Lee took photographs of migrant workers at home and in the fields. He also visited a strawberry auction and documented the economic aspects of the agribusiness, while paying attention to such details as the shipping of strawberries on refrigerated rail cars. This collection of photographs underlines Lee’s fondness for filling his compositions with more visual information rather than less.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Russell Lee contributed nearly 19,000 of the approximately 63,000 captioned photographs produced by the Farm Security Administration Historical Section photographers between 1935 and 1942.¹ His images account for nearly a third of the FSA collection, and besides generating the largest body of work in the group, Lee also covered the largest amount of geographic territory.² Within this framework of Lee's photographs and travels sit the small southeastern Louisiana towns of Hammond, Ponchatoula, and Independence. Lee traveled to these towns in the spring of 1939 as part of his ongoing FSA assignments. Lee was no stranger to Louisiana since his assignments had carried him into the state prior to 1939, and he had succeeded in creating useful images for the FSA in towns like Crowley, Transylvania, and Pilottown. He even met his second wife in New Orleans in 1938 (T.1).³ Therefore, Lee probably anticipated a positive experience when returning to the state in 1939 to shoot strawberry pickers and to document the business of strawberry farming. Only a fraction of Lee's total FSA photographs was part of the completed assignment. Images from this cache can be identified by a number of defining characteristics. They display Lee's technical and artistic abilities, which set him apart from other FSA photographers. They also highlight Lee's sensitivity towards his fellow man. In essence, these photographs taken in southeastern Louisiana function as a microcosm of Lee's FSA work.

² Ibid., 3.
³ In a letter to Stryker, Lee mentions that he met a writer from the area who will accompany him on future assignments. This writer, only referred to as Mrs. Martin, became Lee's second wife whose name was Jean. See complete letter in Appendix (Testimonia items referred to in form of T.1, etc.). Roy Stryker Papers, 1938, Middleton Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La., microfilm reel 1.
Despite the many photographs he created, Lee somehow gets easily overlooked in discussions of FSA photographers and the work they created. Among those photographers most often cited in this context is Dorothea Lange, the creator of *Migrant Mother*, which became the single most recognizable image in the FSA files. Fellow FSA photographer Walker Evans remains well known to art enthusiasts thanks to the images he produced for the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Arthur Rothstein's name will usually come up in discussions of his famous *Father and Sons Walking in the Face of a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* picture. But how many people can recall Lee's name? We know Lee's photographs are among the most requested reprints from the Library of Congress where the FSA original negatives are housed, but few people know the man behind the pictures.

Lee's anonymity may be the result of his own doing. His large body of work for the FSA makes it difficult to restrict him to a single image. His approach to documentary photography induced him to shoot a subject from all angles. He produced a wide selection of images in order to present his supervisor, Roy Stryker, in Washington, D.C. with an exhaustive selection of images. Stryker could then edit and distribute Lee’s photographs to various outlets (T.2). Lee had earned a chemical engineering degree from

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4 The Resettlement Administration was signed into existence by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the spring of 1935. It was transformed into the Farm Security Administration in September 1937. The FSA was abolished by the Farmers Home Administration Act signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1946. Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty & Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 3.


6 In a letter to Mrs. Rosa Reilly of *Popular Photography* magazine, Stryker noted, "Our greatest demand for pictures comes from newspapers, magazines, authors, publishers and educators." Roy Stryker Papers, 22 June 1938, microfilm reel 1.
Lehigh University in 1925, and Stryker described Lee as "the engineer who wants to take it all apart and lay it on the table and says, 'There sir, there you are in all its parts.'"\(^7\)

But Lee did not approach his assignments with an undisciplined eye and shoot anything that presented itself before his camera. He was not in search of fleeting moments of activity that could make "good" photographs.\(^8\) Instead, armed with books such as J. Russell Smith's *North America*, Lee approached his assignments with an educated and sensitive mind.\(^9\) He stated that he carried Department of Commerce books on the census that provided him with statistics, which revealed population and other related trends in the counties he visited.\(^10\) When interviewed in 1964, Lee commented on Stryker's insistence on being prepared: "Well, my first impression [of the FSA] was the importance of getting a good background about the area to be photographed. Because Roy immediately gave me about five books to read."\(^11\)

Lee acquainted himself intellectually with the local situation, and from this approach he composed his photographs for the FSA. He took advantage of the knowledge and insight offered by his regional contacts when he arrived in a new town. Lee sought out information that could aid him in devising and refining his shooting scripts, which often came from Stryker, who gave him latitude in adding his personal input. One of his field journals contains several entries listing the names of contact persons he would meet

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\(^10\) Russell Lee, interview by Richard Dowd, 2 June 1964, transcript, Russell Lee Collection, Albert B. Alkek Library-Special Collections, Witliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography, Texas State University, San Marcos, Tex.

\(^11\) Ibid.
upon arrival in new locations. In his correspondence with Stryker, Lee noted several examples of how valuable his regional contacts were to his assignments:

He [Lyle Saxon] is a swell guy with a real knowledge of the state and an appreciation for documentation. He was especially glad that I was interested in people. We are planning to make a good survey of this state mostly in the rural areas. … Saxon knows the location of the really early plantation houses and by getting a set of several pictures we should be able to show architectural changes from the earliest to some of the last ante-bellum houses.

Talked with Jones this morning. He advised that there was nothing pressing in his region but that it would be a great help to him to have me get some background pix of this Transylvania project (T.3).

Talked with Nelson Cruikshank and B.J. Walker (regional labor relations man) this morning. They gave me a good picture of the whole migrant situation as well as labor displaced by the machine and made some interesting points.

Sometimes Lee would glean information from the local citizenry:

Have been over to Hurley on a reconnaissance tour. In talking with several of the old-timers and well-informed around here they advise that it would be best to spend about 3 or 4 days simply getting known before attempting to take any pictures. Of course the name - government - is 'mud' over there.

His educational approach to shooting was only one side of his assignments. Lee also sought to express compassion and sensitivity towards his fellow man. Lee came from a privileged background, which provided him with enough funds that he did not have to worry about money. Although he was better off financially than the people he photographed, Lee still managed to relate to his subjects in a personable manner. His photographs emphasize the inherent strength of people despite the unfortunate

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13 Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 13 September 1938, microfilm reel 1.
14 Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 18 January 1939, microfilm reel 2.
15 Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 8 February 1939, microfilm reel 2.
16 Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 21 April 1937, microfilm reel 1.
circumstances of their life. He avoided a romantic vision in his work, and he also depart from producing cold and impersonal scientific photographs. Lee's images succeed as visual documents that show the value of human industriousness, whether in the field or at home.

Lee's awareness of the human condition probably began close to the age of ten when he witnessed his mother's death, who was hit by a car while crossing the street in 1913. He ended up spending the remainder of his childhood living with various relatives and guardians. In 1917 Lee chose to have his great uncle Milton Pope act as his guardian. A wealthy landowner, financier, and influential Ottawa, Illinois, resident, Pope's manner of living taught Lee to respect people from all walks of life. Pope had been said to have "never showed his position or his worldly possessions to make him feel better than the man in the ordinary walk of life, and consequently he was admired by all he met. Jovial, good natured and possessed with sterling qualities of character…" Lee displayed the same positive character traits of his great uncle, for while attending Culver Military Academy he was awarded a silver cup for showing the most company spirit and for doing the most for his company during the 1919-20 school year. Lee let his positive attitude and group spirit influence his photography. As suggested by Charles Michener, Lee's photographs do not evoke "so much a sense of depression as a sense of community. Lee's children seem innocently content as they bathe in a washtub in a dilapidated kitchen in Oklahoma City in 1939."  

18 Ibid., 5.  
19 Ibid.  
20 Ibid.  
Lee endowed the people he photographed with a sense of trust. Stryker recounted an experience he had with Lee while accompanying the photographer on an assignment in 1937. An elderly woman questioned why Lee wanted to take her picture, and Lee assured her that he had only her best interests in mind. Lee told her, "Lady, you're having a hard time and a lot of people don't think you are having such a hard time. We want to show them that you're a human being, a nice human being, but you're having troubles." The lady agreed not only to having her picture taken, but she also invited Lee and Stryker to supper with some other women, whom Lee also photographed.

Armed with a curiosity about the regions he would visit and endowed with a comforting charisma that allowed him to gain the trust of his sitters, Lee became Stryker's most valuable asset in the field. Stryker wished he had more photographers like Lee, for Lee was able to stay on the road for long stretches at a time. This resulted in him covering more ground, and consequently, generating more photographs for Stryker back in Washington. Lee's visit to southeastern Louisiana in April 1939 resulted in the production of approximately 150 photographs that serve as insightful visual records into his style and personality. Lee had suggested the assignment to Stryker in March 1939. Stryker responded favorably to Lee's request, for he believed the photographs would "make a nice addition to our set, and will round out our material for the slide film on migrants." This lot of photographs covers some of the most important themes of FSA
photographs, namely migrant workers, their living conditions, farming cooperatives, and the auction process. Considered by itself, this small batch of strawberry farming-related images communicates Lee's technical and stylistic abilities with the camera, but within the context of the entirety of his FSA images, these photographs help complete the picture of Lee as the educated and compassionate ambassador for the FSA.
CHAPTER 2

PHOTOGRAPHING PEOPLE

Lee's extensive travels for the FSA prevented him from spending much time in Washington, D.C. to review his colleagues’ photographs. He mentioned that in his six-and-a-half years with the FSA only about six months were spent in Washington where he would look at the other FSA photographers' work.¹ Lee admitted that other FSA photographers did influence his photography, but he could not say in what aspect of his work.² He admitted that Evans’s and Lange’s photography played influential roles. Moreover, Lee's second wife, Jean, who accompanied him on his assignments, noted that Ben Shahn's coal-mining photographs were "interesting pictures" that were widely discussed.³ Lee claimed Rothstein's influence came at an early stage since he was one of Stryker's first hires on the project. He also gave praise to Carl Mydans for the work he did in the country, although Mydans spent most of his time working in cities on the Greenbelt projects.⁴ Lee's earliest artistic influences proved not to be FSA photographers, but rather, artists he met while exploring the art of painting.

Discontent with his career as a plant manager led Lee to pursue his interest in painting more seriously.⁵ His first wife, Doris, studied painting at the Kansas City Art Institute before the couple moved to San Francisco in 1929 to gain exposure to West Coast art.⁶ The Lee's circle of friends included Diego Rivera and Arnold Blanch, but Lee never acknowledged Rivera as a source of stylistic inspiration.⁷ Instead, Blanch's

¹ Lee interview with Dowd.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Hurley, Russell Lee: Photgraper, 12.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
recommendation that the Lees move to an artists' colony in Woodstock, New York proved to be a catalyst for Lee's social awakening that would later inspire so many of his photographs. The Lees arrived in Woodstock in 1931 to spend the summers in the small artists' community and the winters in New York City to study painting at the Art Students' League. Lee became aware of the work of Honoré Daumier, and he aspired to dignify work and workers in the same way the French artist had done. But it was not in painting that Lee would find the accomplishment of his vocation. Instead, he turned to the camera as a tool to remedy his lack of accomplishment in painting since he was by his own accounts not a good draftsman. He characterized all of his drawings as having "deadpan expressions," and two of his paintings (Figs. 1, 2) confirm this artistic

Fig. 1. Portrait of a woman. Russell Lee. Oil on canvas. 1931-36.  
Fig. 2. Unfinished painting of a man. Russell Lee. Oil on masonite. 1931-36.

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8 Ibid.  
9 Ibid.  
10 Ibid., 13.  
11 Ibid.
shortcoming.\textsuperscript{12} Once he bought his first Contax 35mm camera (Fig. 3) in 1935, the lens replaced the brush as his tool for expression. The camera appealed to both the artistic and the scientific sides of his personality.\textsuperscript{13} The Woodstock community afforded him the opportunity to photograph poor people selling their household goods at auctions, and these early experiences with the camera began to shape Lee's vocation as a socially aware photographer.\textsuperscript{14} Later, he reported that he was "developing a social conscience at that time because people were so damned poor."\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Fig. 3. Contax 35mm camera.}


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
This social awareness resonates throughout his southeastern Louisiana photographs. A good example of Lee's sensitivity towards his disadvantaged subjects is the photograph of an African-American strawberry picker shaving before a tiny round mirror attached to the wall (Fig. 4). The man holds a razor in his right hand while touching his clean-shaven face with his left hand. Lee's position behind the man does not allow for the man's face to be seen, but this image successfully captures the prosaic aspects of a working man's life. Lee shows us that the habits and customs that make up daily living are basically the same for everyone. Strawberry pickers may not have been

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able to afford luxurious lives, but they paid attention to cleanliness and good personal hygiene.

In another of Lee's photographs centering on strawberry pickers, an entire family stands straight and tall in a line before Lee's camera (Fig. 5). What makes this photograph relevant to this discussion is how well dressed and clean the family members appear. Everyone in the picture except for the smallest child looks directly at the camera, and most family members smile. This group portrait shows a proud family in the face of

![Fig. 5. Family of white migratory berry pickers near Ponchatoula, Louisiana.](image)

the camera. The men wear coveralls and hats. They have their hands hidden in their pockets; this stance forces two of the men's jackets open. This body language suggests

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17 Ibid., fsa 8b21465.
that these are confident men, who are at ease being photographed. Likewise, the girl on
the far right seems self-assured as she poses in a nice belted jacket and brimmed hat that
is slightly cocked to one side. She clutches an object with both hands, but Lee probably
allowed this prop to occupy the girl's exposed hands, which happen to be the only ones
visible in the photograph.

Lee was possibly taking cues from Evans in allowing this family to dress in their
nicer clothes for their portrait. Evans sometimes let family members prepare themselves
for their group portraits before subjecting them to his 8 x 10-inch view camera.18 "As an
artist committed to deliberate, careful composition," a written description of Evans
explains, "he considered it far more rewarding and ultimately less phony to photograph
the tenants as he thought they wanted to be portrayed."19 Although he may have
subscribed to Evans's opinion that a clean and well-dressed family makes for a good
photograph, Lee surpassed Evans in their abilities to work comfortably with people on a
consistent basis. Whereas Lee embraced the idea of following these strawberry pickers
into their homes to record everyday living situations, Evans balked at taking too many
pictures of the sharecroppers with whom he spent three weeks. In fact, during those three
weeks in Hale County, Alabama, Evans recorded fewer than 100 photographs. Within
this small lot of photographs, Evans's disinterest in pursuing these people into their
homes or in the fields remains evident.20

18 With a 35mm camera, Evans captured the Tingle children brushing their hair and finding their
proper seats in preparation of Evans taking their portrait on their front porch in Hale County, Alabama for
32.
19 Ibid., 34.
20 Ibid.
Lee chose to highlight the industrious nature of some migrant workers away from the fields in which they worked. A few of his images show a man and woman creating horn ornaments in their spare time. Lee's captions to these photographs explain that the couple relied on the money made from selling these ornaments in addition to whatever wages they earned as migrant workers. In one of the photographs, a man sits barefoot on a wooden crate while working on a set of horns in his lap (Fig. 6). A clutter of wood scraps surrounds the man, while a handsaw rests nearby on the ground. Lee's aim was not to point out that the man is barefoot or that his work is dirty. Instead, Lee's caption to this photograph simply states what the man is doing: "White migrant worker fitting horn onto wooden base near Hammond, Louisiana." Lee wanted viewers of this image to understand that this man was creating a commercial product to make a living. The discarded wood shavings and the simple handsaw allude to the man's productivity and not to his impoverished condition.

In much the same fashion, Lee captures the diligence of the woman working on a horn ornament while surrounded by a few other ornaments that she has presumably already completed or will later finish (Fig. 7). Her body positioning and crossed legs at the ankles make her appear comfortable with her work, and since Lee photographed her from above, no signs of discomfort or toil register on her down-turned face. But we do notice her hands, one of which grips a hammer. Again, a simple hand tool restores integrity to the working person as witnessed by Lee. He could have photographed this woman from a different angle or framed her tighter in a close-up for a more dramatic shot, but Lee understood the necessity of pulling back and displaying the end products of

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21 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21440.
22 Ibid., fsa8b21514.
Fig. 6. White migrant worker fitting horn onto wooden base near Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 7. White migrant worker finishing an ornament made of horns. They depend upon the sale of these ornaments for a living. Hammond, Louisiana.
the woman's work. Again, the focus of the picture is not the woman herself, but what she accomplishes through her work.

Most of Lee's photographs taken in southeastern Louisiana follow this pattern. Rarely does Lee rely on the tightly framed close-up of an individual to convey the message. Instead, he often photographed individuals in a style that allowed outlying elements to play a role in the final image. This technique differs from the manner in which Evans achieved one of his most famous and haunting images from Hale County, Alabama. Evans carefully focused his view camera on the face of a young girl wearing dingy clothes while standing for a group portrait. The child's smooth face and dark eyes are set off in contrast to the textured sack clothing surrounding her. In this image we see Evans's romantic vision of tenant life. Lee favored an alternative route to photographing the children of migrant workers. A good example of this practice is Lee's photograph of a young boy sitting on the floor and looking at a mail order catalog (Fig. 8). Lee could have focused on the boy's clothing, which was probably not very clean, or he could have chosen to ignore the boy's activity, focusing only on the boy's face as Evans had done with the little girl. But Lee downplayed the expression of pity and strove to record a young boy enticed by the material promises of a mail order catalog. Because Lee did not interfere with the boy's activity, the picture does not look posed or staged. He avoided the stiffness seen in a 1943 photograph taken by John Collier, Jr. that shows a Hispanic

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24 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21411.
couple studying a mail order catalog at their table (Fig. 9). In the Collier photograph the
subjects appear to be posed while waiting for the click of the camera's shutter.

Fig. 8. Negro boy looking at mail order catalog. This house is one of those provided

25 Collier, John. 1943. In America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the
8d25884]. [February 7, 2004].
Fig. 9. Trampas, New Mexico. Everybody in remote New Mexico buys by mail. Juan Lopez, the majordomo (mayor), and his wife Maclovia are thinking of buying new harnesses. It will cost sixty dollars, so they will probably get along with what they have.

Conversely, the child of a migrant strawberry picker appears fully content and oblivious of the camera at the moment Lee snapped his photograph. Lee did allow a clutter of boxes and peeling newspaper on the walls to enter the picture, but these elements add to the boy's ability to enjoy and occupy himself in a rather shabby environment. This photograph conveys a positive mood despite the circumstances of its creation.
Another one of Lee's photographs shows a young boy straddling a wooden crate and tugging at his coverall straps (Fig. 10). Not much is happening within the frame, but again, it is what Lee chose to include that makes the photograph worth viewing. In the same spirit as the aforementioned photograph, Lee does not solely rely on the child as subject to carry the weight of this image. Instead, the background includes pots and pans on an outdoor stove and the cropped legs of a woman who is probably the young boy's mother. An abandoned toy doll lies on the ground behind the boy. Certainly Lee could have eliminated these extraneous details, but their inclusion implies a feeling of security for the young boy. After all, his mother is nearby as well as a stove covered with cooking

Fig. 10. Child of migrant strawberry picker in front of tent home near Hammond, Louisiana.

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26 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8a25801.
hardware for his nourishment, and the doll on the ground hints at the idea that the boy is not completely deprived of toys for enjoyment. Lee forces the viewer to understand the resilience these people possessed.

Lee's southeastern Louisiana photographs help to open the viewers' eyes to the experiences human beings of all walks of life share. His photographs of migrant strawberry pickers and their families show them cooking, eating, cleaning, and playing. One photograph even focuses on a sick woman lying in bed (Fig. 11). Stryker once said, "Many of these people were sick, hungry, and miserable. The odds were against them. Yet their goodness and strength survived." Therefore, the sick were not exempt from the FSA photographers' cameras, and several photographs featuring sick individuals exist in the files. In fact, a 1940 shooting script from Stryker emphasized the need for photographs relating to the health of migrant workers. It requested images of "sanitary facilities," "sickness," and "medical attention (or absence of) (T.5)." Here Lee refrained from composing an overly dramatic scene and merely captured a simple picture of a sick woman in bed. The image stands in Lee's tradition of avoiding the dramatic in favor of the familiar and identifiable. Who has not experienced being bed-ridden while sick with some type of ailment? Who has gone through life without ever feeling incapacitated and unable to work due to illness? Through this photograph, Lee offers a commonly shared experience of human existence, that of being sick and unproductive, to which the viewer can relate. The sick woman's upward gaze away from the camera suggests her preoccupation with something other than Lee's presence. Lee even composed the image

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27 Ibid., fsa 8b21476.
29 Stryker letter to all photographers, Roy Stryker Papers, 1940, microfilm reel 2.
from a slight angle with the woman's head and face at nearly the farthest point from his lens. Not wanting to focus squarely on the woman's face to show any pain or discomfort, Lee respected the woman's personal space and took the picture from a comfortable distance between the woman and his camera. This also enabled him to include the crudely constructed bed as an element of these people’s daily environment. This technique probably went against Stryker's wishes, for Stryker believed in the powerful emotions a distressed face can evoke. In an interview, he stated:

The faces to me were the most significant part of the file. When a man is down and they have taken everything from him his job and his land and his home - everything he spent his life working for - he's going to have the expression of tragedy permanently on his face. But I have always believed
that the American people have the ability to endure. And that is in those faces, too.\textsuperscript{30}

But Lee often avoided concentrating on only his subjects’ faces. This wide-angle scene shows nearly the entire bed, the woman, and her shoes on the floor beside the bed. Again, nothing spectacular is taking place within this image, but showing the ordinary moments of life follows Lee's protocol. Lee's goals for this photograph were not iconic. This sick woman was not to be Lee's version of \textit{Migrant Mother}. She is not a model of despair and hope. Instead, this woman represents the normality of people. What makes this photograph remarkable is how it functions as a mirror in which the viewer projects himself. It highlights such a familiar condition that just about anyone can relate to it, and this permits the viewer to place himself in the sick woman’s position. We have all been in her position before. We can relate to her discomfort. Instead of an icon of suffering and pain, Lee allows this woman to function as a mirror for the viewer. Lee wants us not to only feel sorry for this woman but also to identify with her. With this identification comes an awareness that the human condition offers challenges for everyone - rich or poor.

\textsuperscript{30} Levine, "The Historian and the Icon," 33.
CHAPTER 3
PHOTOGRAPHING INTERIORS

Lee realized the importance of photographing inside people's homes to fully illustrate their living conditions. Some of this awareness came from Washington, D.C. in the form of shooting scripts or letters. As early as February 1937 Stryker had prodded Lee to "spend more time on a given family, photographing all phases of their life and activities."¹ In a 1938 letter, Lee received instructions from Director of Information John Fischer to record tenant workers' "economic conditions" by focusing on "their homes, working conditions, sanitary conditions, kitchens, etc."² Shooting inside these homes thus became a necessity for Lee. He would later describe this motivation in a videotaped interview:

Here was the way people lived. How did they eat? How did they sleep? How did they cook? Everything about the house. What was around there? In the house. What did it look like? What was on the walls? What was on the mantelpiece? What was on the table? All these things were part of their particular way of life and I wanted to get this. And that was one reason, that was the best way I could do it, by using flash.³

Nearly four years before Lee photographed the strawberry pickers in southeastern Louisiana, fellow FSA photographer Shahn had visited the area and selected similar subject matter for his work. Lee had been impressed with Shahn after meeting him at an American Artists' Congress.⁴ In fact, it was Shahn's association with the FSA project that encouraged Lee to approach Stryker for a job.⁵ Shahn's number of strawberry-related photographs does not approach the quantity of Lee's, but in the few images Shahn had

¹ Stryker letter to Lee, Roy Stryker Papers, 13 February 1937, microfilm reel 1.
² Fischer letter to Lee, Roy Stryker Papers, 17 September 1938, microfilm reel 1.
⁴ Hurley, Russell Lee: Photographer, 14.
⁵ Ibid., 14-15.
taken in October 1935, we can detect a technical difference between the two photographers when it came to picturing people inside their homes.

A key difference among Shahn's and Lee's pictures is Shahn's reliance on natural sunlight to illuminate his subjects. He often placed his sitters in the sunny outdoors or within the confines of a doorway opening to the bright outside. The lack of reliable flash equipment at this time prevented Shahn from freely shooting inside these people's houses. But this is not to say Shahn did not explore these interiors on occasion. He produced at least two images of strawberry picker James Temple sitting in a posed fashion indoors (Fig. 12). By the way the light falls on the back wall and on the small stove, the sunlight

Fig. 12. Strawberry picker, Hammond, Louisiana.

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apparently illuminates these scenes from the right. Also, Temple's nose casts a shadow onto the left side of his face. Another example of Shahn's dependence on sunlight for interior photographs can be found in two other pictures - one centering on a stove and the other focusing on a cluttered kitchen table (Figs. 13, 14).\(^7\) In both of these photographs,

![Fig. 13. Hammond, Louisiana. A stove in the home of a strawberry picker.](image)

sunlight pours in from the right-hand side of the frame exposing jars, pots, bowls, silverware, and other items in its strong light. Having learned much of what he knew about photography from Evans, Shahn probably preferred the effects of natural light on his subjects.

\(^7\) Ibid., fsa 8a16879 and fsa 8a17011.
By 1939 Lee's scientific and technical cunning had allowed him to avoid Shahn's reliance on the sun for interior photographs. His development of the direct and multiple flash techniques and his experimenting with film developers to "push" his film made shooting indoors a standard procedure throughout his FSA tenure. Direct flash and multiple flash enabled Lee to bring the "inside out." Not only could Lee expose these interiors, but he could also do so without worrying too much about the movement of his subjects. Lee understood the importance of showing these people performing normal daily activities inside their homes as part of Stryker's mission. They were individuals who

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9 Ibid., 34.
cooked, cleaned, and played in their homes just like Americans in more prosperous parts of the country. His interior photographs include a boy cooking at the stove, a woman scrubbing the floor, a girl hanging up a dress, a man working on an oil lamp, men playing cards, and a man strumming a guitar.¹⁰ One image shows a man frozen by Lee's flash as he turns and reaches for his shoe on a bed (Fig. 15).¹¹ Only his hand extending to the shoe

Fig. 15. Negroes in bunkhouse in strawberry fields near Hammond, Louisiana. Note crude bunks, straw mattresses, and crowded conditions.

and the shoe itself are slightly out of focus due to the man's motion. Without flash the picture would have been terribly blurred. When Shahn photographed James Temple

¹⁰ Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21503, fsa 8b21499, fsa 8b21457, fsa 8b21463, fsa 8b21506, fsa 8b21509.
¹¹ Ibid., fsa 8b21366.
indoors using sunlight for illumination, Temple had to hold perfectly still for the duration of the exposures. This requirement for stillness severely limited the scope of Shahn's interior photographs. But for Lee, direct flash became an indispensable tool in his quest to explore the living conditions inside his sitters' homes and dwellings, which is where he believed the crux of this assignment lay (T.6).<sup>12</sup> It allowed his subjects to act as normal human beings and to avoid the stiff, inanimate poses found in earlier FSA photographs.

Lee usually opted for active scenes rather than posed and static arrangements. To be sure, a few of Lee's photographs of people inside their homes appear to be rigid and unnatural, but the majority offers visually animated scenes. In fact, no action seemed too irrelevant for Lee and his camera. He made two different exposures of men handling oil lamps, but with different intentions for each one. In one photograph, Lee photographs a seated man from behind who appears to be readying an oil lamp for lighting (Fig. 16).<sup>13</sup> Because Lee wanted to catch the assorted household items hanging on the wall and stacked on shelves, he framed the scene so that we find the man off-center to the right. Moreover, a small dog rests at the man's feet. Lee's caption states that this photograph reveals the "detail of interior of temporary home" of the migrant strawberry picker. So even in his quest to merely show inanimate details of a household, Lee chose to include a man working on an oil lamp in the composition. In the other photograph, Lee allows the mundane act of lighting an oil lamp to become the focal point (Fig. 17).<sup>14</sup> Lee had stated

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<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Stryker regarding his Hammond assignment, Lee stated, "The story, of course, was housing and living conditions and I concentrated on that." Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 11 April 1939, microfilm reel 2.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21463.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., fsa 8b21504.
that he aimed to capture every detail of these people's lives, and this photograph serves as a good example for how the ordinary did not escape his vision.

Fig. 16. Detail of interior of temporary home of white migrant berry pickers near Ponchatoula, Louisiana.

One activity to which Lee dedicated a few exposures was card games. He shot two versions of a photograph of two young men absorbed by a game called "coon-can" in their Hammond bunkhouse (Figs. 18, 19).\textsuperscript{15} The two versions differ from each other by the introduction of a spectator watching the card playing men from a nearby bed. Lee may have made two exposures of the scene to obtain a greater choice of pictures covering this subject matter. His other card playing pictures include a group of men playing poker

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., fsa 8b21506 and fsa 8b21507.
Fig. 17. Negro man lighting lamp in bedroom of his home near Hammond, Louisiana. He works for a strawberry grower, doing odd jobs about the place.

around a table. One of these photographs is taken through a wall opening and shows the card players seated in a room on the other side of the wall (Fig. 20).\textsuperscript{16} The interesting vantage point in viewing these card players through an interior window makes this photograph visually appealing. In two other photographs of the same card players, Lee moved to the same room and positioned himself closer to the table action (Figs. 21, 22).\textsuperscript{17} In both photographs the viewer's attention is directed at the men reaching for poker chips in the center of the table. Their gestures demonstrate Lee’s proclivity for recording his subjects in the midst of movement.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., fsa 8b21346.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., fsa 8b21362 and fsa 8b21363.
Fig. 18. Game of “coon-can” played by group of Negroes in bunkhouse of strawberry pickers near Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 19. Game of “coon-can” played by group of Negroes in bunkhouse of strawberry pickers near Hammond, Louisiana.
Reflecting on his experiences with the FSA, Shahn had explained:

We tried to present the ordinary in an extraordinary manner. But that's a paradox, because the only thing extraordinary about it was that it was so ordinary. Nobody had ever done it before, deliberately. Now it's called documentary, which I suppose is all right. . . . We just took pictures that cried out to be taken.¹⁸

Fig. 20. Poker game in Negro strawberry workers’ bunkhouse. Note the crude bunk. Near Hammond, Louisiana.

Shahn may have been correct in that "nobody had ever done it before" with regard to the scope of the FSA project, but to claim nobody had ventured into social documentary photography before the FSA was simply wrong. Two noteworthy

Fig. 21. Poker game in Negro strawberry workers’ bunkhouse. Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 22. Poker game in Negro strawberry workers’ bunkhouse. Hammond, Louisiana.
individuals who preceded Stryker and his crew in addressing social misery through their photographic work were Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. In fact, Lee's persistence in photographing the interior of people's homes followed the example of Riis in the late nineteenth century. Riis could be more accurately described as a social reformer who relied on the camera as an illustration tool. His book *How the Other Half Lives* features photographs and drawings based on his photographs depicting life in New York City's tenements and slums. Riis carried his cumbersome camera equipment into the cramped and dirty abodes of the working class to expose their squalor to the middle and upper classes of America. Both Riis and Lee entered their sitters' homes with a sense of heightened social awareness that resulted in similar photographic visions. For Riis, the tenants he photographed were living in filth, shame, and immorality, but he blamed the city's political leaders and the property owners for this social misery. Lee's photographs embrace the political nature of Riis's pictures, which is not surprising since the FSA supported the lobbying for federal funding of housing programs for displaced tenant and migrant workers contested by conservative politicians. In this respect, Lee's pictures do find fault with the government, much as Riis's outrage over the living conditions in New York City. Lee, however, more often than Riis cast his subjects in a positive light. Instead of focusing on the filth surrounding them, Lee chose to highlight the strawberry pickers' lifestyles within their interiors. When Lee took these pictures in southeastern Louisiana in 1939, the FSA had already shifted its emphasis on more positive imagery. Lee corrected his pictorial aesthetics accordingly. Riis did show his subjects working and cleaning in their homes, but his captions would sometimes tell a story different from the visual evidence. For instance, he wrote under one picture, "Sewing and Starving in an Elizabeth
Lee would probably have chosen to exclude the word "starving" had it been his photograph and caption, for the women's act of sewing would have been of central importance. But whereas Riis had a specific purpose for his photographs as illustrations for his book, Lee was never sure exactly how and where his photographs would be used by Stryker and the numerous outlets that received them.

Children appear quite frequently in Lee's interior photographs. The innocent victims of the depression had always been popular subjects for FSA photographers. Pictures that appealed to America's emotional side often included young children and babies, and from early on in his career with the FSA, Lee was urged by Stryker to shoot more pictures of children (T.7).20

Lee's interior photographs of children include some of his most static subjects. In many of these pictures, children are shown in various poses on the floor or standing idly in the space captured by the camera. Instead of focusing on action, several of his photographs highlight the bond between family members by showing babies being held and tended to by either their mothers or a sibling.21 These photographs appear more static and posed than Lee's favored photographs showing manual activity, but Lee's desire to photograph all aspects of these people's lives sometimes left him with idle subject matter.

Two remarkable examples of images featuring children evoke a spectrum of moods. The first photograph worth mentioning focuses on a young strawberry picker

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20 In a letter to Lee, Stryker noted the FSA photographic file's need for "an addition of more pictures on people, their homes, and their children." Stryker letter to Lee, Roy Stryker Papers, 12 October 1937, microfilm reel 1.

21 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21410, fsa 8b21374, fsa 8b21458, fsa 8b21451, and fsa 8b21449.
standing in an opening between two rooms in his home (Fig. 23).\textsuperscript{22} He wears a brimmed hat and an unbuttoned jacket. Lee captured the boy with one hand raised and the other one propped against the wall. He stares directly at the camera with a confident smirk on his face. This photograph attests to Lee’s compositional skills with the camera. The boy's raised arm cuts across the diagonal of the rectangular door opening and leads the viewer's eye to an arched bedpost in the back room. The boy stands slightly off-center emphasizing the left side of the frame, but Lee balances the composition by allowing an oil lamp to enter the frame's right side. Lee captured the confidence of this young man in a visually powerful manner.

Conversely, the subject of the other child photograph is worth reviewing in detail because it displays entirely different traits (Fig. 24).\textsuperscript{23} First of all, this child is much younger than the above mentioned boy, for he appears to be about two years old. Notable is the fact that the little boy has been left sitting alone on a wooden shelf. It is obvious from his age and size that he did not climb up on the shelf by himself. Somebody must have placed him there. This may have been done at Lee's direction, but this seems unlikely due to Lee's aversion to posed photographs. Lee probably noticed this awkward scene and chose to photograph it. The little boy appears uncomfortable in his position since his right hand reaches backwards in an effort to stabilize his seated body on the shelf. He too stares directly at Lee's camera, but at such a young age, he displays none of the confidence shown by the boy in the previous picture. Instead, he sits there with an empty look on his face. Whereas Lee captured the other young boy in a frontal pose, he chose to shoot this photograph from a slight angle. By doing this, he emphasizes the

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., fsa 8b21387.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., fsa 8b21456.
Fig. 23. Young Negro strawberry picker in doorway. Near Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 24. Child of white migratory berry picker near Ponchatoula, Louisiana.
shallow depth of the shelf on which the boy is precariously perched. If taken frontally, the picture would have been flattened somewhat and any sense of depth in the short space between the shelf's front and the wall would probably have been lost. This photograph was not likely to win favor with Stryker back in Washington, but such a consideration failed to stop Lee from taking the picture. He remained true to his instincts and took picture after picture recording scenes of action and idleness unfolding before his camera.
An important setting for many of Lee's FSA photographs was the fields in which migrant workers spent much of their days. His pictures of agricultural labor show a workforce of able but desperate Americans toiling for whatever wages they can earn. These workers came in various ages and both races as they traveled across the country in search of employment (T.8).\footnote{1} In southeastern Louisiana, Lee followed the migrant strawberry pickers into the fields. He understood the potent imagery afforded by these migratory journeys. Lee was determined not to let this opportunity for the FSA go by unused. Picking strawberries appears to be backbreaking work in Lee's photographs. Picture after picture shows pickers of all ages bent over in arduous positions working to fill their containers with fresh strawberries. The physical nature of strawberry picking did not escape Lee's eye, and to his credit he explored a variety of viewpoints in recording these scenes.

In 1935 Dorothea Lange placed her camera close to the ground in order to record a detailed scene of Filipinos working in a lettuce field (Fig. 25).\footnote{2} The cracked dirt and the rows of leafy lettuce lead the viewer's eyes to encounter six identically positioned field workers. This image successfully displays the repetition and monotony involved in this type of labor. Lee achieved similar success with his photographs of strawberry pickers. In almost all of his photographs showing workers bending and picking strawberries, Lee

\footnote{1} Lee made a distinction between migrant and migratory workers in a letter to Stryker. He said inter-state labor was true migratory labor comprised of mainly white people, while intra-state labor tended to be "practically all negro." Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 11 April 1939, microfilm reel 2. A letter from Stryker to Arthur Rothstein in 1936 outlined the route that "fruit tramps" might follow in their quest to find seasonal employment. Roy Stryker Papers, 1936, microfilm reel 1.

made sure to record the hunched-over workers with their arms fully extended (Figs. 26, 27, 28). It is nearly impossible to find a single image from his southeastern Louisiana lot in which a worker's picking arm is reaching into a container. Lee's desire to capture the dexterous workers at their most physically stretched point underscores the discomforting nature of this work. Lee possibly emphasized this peak of physical exertion over and over again in his photographs so that such pictures would not fall victim to Stryker's editing. If only one of these photographs had made its way into the files, it would have sufficed to

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3 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8a25783, fsa 8a25787, and fsa 8a25788.
demonstrate the physical hardship in the fields. But to the credit of Lee and Stryker several of these images survive in the FSA files to this day.

Fig. 26. Colored intrastate migrant worker picking strawberries near Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 27. Negro intrastate migrant boy picking strawberries near Hammond, Louisiana.
Lee was not content with shooting from a single viewpoint while in the strawberry fields. Some of his photographs focus on single workers while others include several individuals working side-by-side in the field rows. He also took pictures from the front, the back, and the side. This technique of changing viewpoints allows the strawberry pickers in some pictures to seemingly approach the viewer, and in others they appear to beretreating. When Lee photographed the workers from the side he achieved a sense of closeness for the viewer who feels as if he is standing next to the worker. But one characteristic of Lee's viewpoint that did not change with respect to these images is the height from which he shot them. It appears that Lee never crouched, kneeled down, or bent over when taking these photographs. The visual evidence suggests that Lee consistently shot these pictures while looking down onto his subjects. This makes sense if
we understand how a low point of view usually affects a photograph. In looking at
Lange's aforementioned picture of lettuce field workers, we realize a touch of drama and
rhythm thanks to the low perspective and the looming figures. Instilling this type of
drama into his photographs was not Lee's style. Therefore, it is understandable that Lee
would have chosen to remain upright while taking these photographs. He seemingly kept
this posture even when he photographed children in the field.⁴ Lee did manage to get
closer to the ground than usual for one of these photographs, but the end result is an
awkward-looking photograph (Fig. 29).⁵

In typical Lee fashion, he moved incrementally closer to one strawberry picker in
an effort to show various viewpoints of the strawberry picking experience. He framed one
photograph of a strawberry picker in a tighter close-up (Fig. 30).⁶ It is, however, not a
close-up of just the worker, but rather a close-up of both worker and strawberry plants.
Lee captures the man in action as he plucks a fresh strawberry from a plant. The man's
wooden strawberry carrier rests beside his feet, and one can almost count the number of
strawberries it contains. The cropping of this image de-emphasizes the man as central
subject and places equal importance on the plants. The man juts into the picture from the
top edge of the frame as an assortment of arms and legs with only a tiny fraction of the
top of his head visible. Conversely, a row of strawberry plants runs through the center of
the frame, underlining their central importance. Lee did not wish to focus solely on the
man. The strawberry plants and the man's wooden strawberry carrier fill as much of the
frame as does the working man. What remains important here is the nature of the man's
work, not just the working man.

⁴ Ibid., fsa 8b25776, fsa8a25859, fsa 8a25858, fsa 8a25777, fsa 8a25778.
⁵ Ibid., fsa 8a25775.
⁶ Ibid., fsa 8a25851.
Fig. 29. Child of white migrant strawberry picker, Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 30. Picking strawberries in field near Ponchatoula, Louisiana.
Unlike other FSA photographers, Lee did not like the field workers to pose for him. Marion Post Wolcott produced two charming pictures of strawberry pickers in Florida just a couple of months before Lee was in southeastern Louisiana shooting his strawberry pictures. One of these photographs centers on an elderly female strawberry picker standing in a posed stance in a field of strawberry plants (Fig. 31).  

![Strawberry pickers near Lakeland, Florida.](image)

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features one arm bent with a hand on her hip while the other hand holds a strawberry container. The woman rests her weight on her right leg and smiles from beneath her wide-brimmed hat with a resolute charm. A photo of this type offers no hint at the physical demands of strawberry picking, nor does it succeed in doing much more than portraying this woman as a happy worker. While it is a well-composed scene and Post Wolcott's technical and stylistic abilities are apparent in such a picture, this photograph remains a distant relative of the type of photographs Lee was producing in southeastern Louisiana.

The contrast between Lee and Post Wolcott is further underlined by their difference in approaching child strawberry pickers. Post Wolcott photographed a young boy sitting down in a field while picking strawberries (Fig. 32). The boy looks directly at

Fig. 32. Strawberry pickers near Lakeland, Florida.

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8 Ibid., fsa 8a40518.
the camera with a smile beaming from beneath his baseball cap. Like the photograph of
the posed elderly woman, this photograph fails to show the physical demands of
strawberry picking. After all, the little boy is sitting down and smiling at the camera. This
is not so much a strawberry picking photograph as it is a photograph of a delightful boy.
But when looking at Lee's photographs of children in the strawberry fields, a very
different vision arises. First, none of the children are pictured sitting on the ground while
working. Two of these pictures do show young girls on their knees while another one
features a crouching girl (Figs. 33, 34, 35). However, no smiles are directed Lee's way

Fig. 33. Child of white migrant berry worker picking strawberries in field near
Ponchatoula, Louisiana.

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9 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-
1945, fsa 8a25859, fsa 8a25858, and fsa 8a25776.
Fig. 34. Child of white migrant berry worker picking strawberries near Ponchatoula, Louisiana.

Fig. 35. Child of white migrant strawberry picker, Hammond, Louisiana.
by the children, and in fact, the ones who do look at the camera appear to be caught off-guard. These children's awareness of Lee provokes no smiles as in Post Wolcott's picture of the little boy. Lee was not searching for cute or charming subject matter in the strawberry field since he sought to give an accurate visual record of how children functioned in their roles as strawberry pickers. One of his more effective photographs centers on a young boy picking strawberries in the same bent-over pose seen in his photographs of other strawberry pickers (Fig. 36).\[^{10}\] This young boy shares little in common with the boy in Post Wolcott's photograph besides the fact both are portrayed in a strawberry field. This boy appears to be actually working, which was always Lee's primary inspiration when he composed his photographs.

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\[^{10}\] Ibid., fsa 8a25778.
Lange deviated even further from Lee's style than did Post Wolcott when taking strawberry-related pictures. A Lange photograph taken in the spring of 1937 shows a strawberry grower sitting on an upside down bucket in a field ravaged by drought (Fig. 37). Again, as she did in the previous lettuce pickers photograph, Lange's decision to

Fig. 37. Strawberry grower from Oklahoma near Judonia forced to join the migratory workers in California for the season because the 1936 drought caused a shortage of plants.

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11 Lange, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945., fsa 8b31836.
shoot this man from below served a dual purpose. It allowed Lange not only to contrast her sitter's outline against the pristine background of the bright sky; it also adds a dramatic touch to the picture. Although he is sitting on a bucket, he appears to be sitting on the distant horizon thanks to Lange's compositional technique, and he looks directly at the camera from a slight angle. Lange had a knack for posing her subjects in such

Fig. 38. The Arnold children and mother on their newly fenced and newly cleared land. Note strawberry plants. Western Washington, Thurston County, Michigan Hill.
memorable fashion. Even her photograph of a Washington family posed in front of their strawberry plants exhibits a touch of drama since the mother and her children peer into the camera from behind a barbed wire fence (Fig. 38). Lange's style is distinguished by these types of visual characteristics that remain absent in Lee's photographs.

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12 Ibid., fsa 8b34711.
CHAPTER 5

THE BUSINESS OF STRAWBERRIES

While visiting southeastern Louisiana, Lee also covered the business side of strawberry farming. He attended an auction and related activities and also witnessed the process of shipping strawberries in rail cars. The business aspect of strawberry farming may not have offered photographic opportunities as rich as those found in the fields and in the pickers' homes, but Lee made the most of the experience and tried to fully cover his assignment for Stryker. Remarkably, Lee's social awareness in photography arose while documenting auctions where people had to sell their personal belongings in New York. Though the auction he photographed in Hammond was of a different sort, it still must have felt like familiar territory.

Lee employed his ongoing strategy of shooting a subject from all angles while covering the strawberry auction. His photographs show a variety of views that range from wide-angle crowd shots to close-ups of the auctioneer. For some pictures, he used a sort of crow's nest to shoot the action from above, but he also ventured closer to the participants in order to capture more intimate scenes. The manner in which Lee selected his auction photographs resembles Shahn's 1964 description of how he once photographed an auction:

I looked at it almost like a movie script . . . I'd first go out and photograph all the signs on the telegraph poles and trees announcing this auction, and then get the people gathering, and all kinds of details of them, and then examine the things, and the auctioneer, and so forth.1

While Lee's approach to the auction took on a familiar form, the political nature of the event distinguishes the resulting images from those Lee took in the field and in

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1 Pratt, *Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, xx.
migrant workers' homes. Being part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's political machine, the FSA continually operated under political pressures and Washington governmental concerns. Bureaucratic worries sometimes seeped into the mindsets of the FSA photographers, for they remained aware of budgetary crises and other issues that plagued Stryker back in Washington. Thus, the politically-oriented auction photographs added another dimension to the FSA files, which also contained portraits of agricultural laborers inspired by feelings of humanism along with formal studies of signage and building facades. Lee noted the political nature of this Hammond auction in a letter to Stryker, "There is a terrific political battle there between the Morrison union and the established auctioneers. I believe I have enough to show that angle of it."²

To convey the political overtones entrenched within the business of marketing strawberries, Lee actually covered an assortment of events relating to the auction. Obviously, he attended the auction itself and took several photographs revealing the process. Another event he covered featured "Senator" Jim Morrison, a local political leader, speaking to members of the Louisiana Farmers Protective Union, which he organized and sponsored. According to Lee's caption for one of these photographs, Morrison actually lost in his bid to become senator but claimed that he would have been elected had the ballots been counted correctly. Therefore, he referred to himself as "Senator Morrison," and Lee even took a picture of a sign near the city's entrance announcing "Senator Jim Morrison Welcomes You to Hammond La."³ A third event that shows up in Lee's auction-related photographs is that of a meeting held in the town of

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² Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 11 April 1939, microfilm reel 2.
³ Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8a25997.
Independence. A single image exists from this meeting of strawberry growers who met to "consider marketing and auctioning problems," according to Lee's caption.4

It was at the auction that Lee captured the more noteworthy images. His close-up of one of the auctioneers implies that the auction was tiresome work (Fig. 39).5 The auctioneer's unbuttoned collar and his loosened tie enhance the weary look on the man's face. A half-empty glass sits on the podium illuminated by a hanging pendant lamp. These details suggest that the auction was a long and tedious process. Lee's picture of the other auctioneer is more optimistic, focusing on the business-like atmosphere of the auction (Fig. 40).6 Depicted in profile, the auctioneer is shown with both his arms extended to the podium; one of his hands holds a pen or pencil, with which he takes notes on the writing tablet resting in front of him. He wears a vest over his long-sleeve shirt, which remains buttoned at the cuffs, unlike the previous auctioneer who had rolled sleeves as seen in other photographs.7 The auctioneer's posture and straightforward gaze exude power and underlines the auction's setting as a place for business transaction.

When Lee was shooting assignments in Illinois in 1937, Stryker had asked him to "get another picture of the men sitting in the bleachers" at a cattle auction.8 Lee followed these instructions while in Hammond, for he took several pictures of the men bidding on strawberries from the bleachers. Again, Lee took these pictures from a variety of viewpoints using an assortment of wide-angle and mid-range shots. The most striking

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4 Ibid., fsa 8b21484.
5 Ibid., fsa 8a25849.
6 Ibid., fsa 8a25850.
7 Ibid., fsa 8b21469, fsa 8a25856, and fsa 8b21467.
8 Stryker letter to Lee, Roy Stryker Papers, 30 November 1937, microfilm reel 1.
Fig. 39. Strawberry auctioneer, Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 40. Strawberry auctioneer, Hammond, Louisiana.
image of this sort, however, features no men at all, but rather focuses on the empty bleachers before the auction's commencement (Fig. 41).\(^9\) The men's names are painted on the top of the bleacher railings to designate proper seating arrangements, and in place of the businessmen stand nearly identical upright wooden clipboards. Here, Lee accomplishes a marvelous feat of symbolic representation in allowing the stiff, inanimate clipboards to replace the businessmen.

![Image of bleachers with names painted on railings and wooden clipboards](image_url)

**Fig. 41. Before the strawberry auction. Hammond, Louisiana.**

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\(^9\) Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21494.
Interestingly, Lee's auction photographs fail to show the item around which the event revolves - strawberries. The closest he gets to representing strawberries at auction is in a photograph of a list of car lots being studied by a group of buyers (Fig. 42).\(^{10}\) The reason for mentioning this lack of strawberries is in regard to instructions passed down from Edwin Rosskam in Washington to Stryker and photographers Lee, Post Wolcott, Rothstein, and John Vachon sometime in 1939. In the multi-point letter, Rosskam addresses gaps in the FSA files that included deficiencies in auction photographs. Rosskam suggested that the photographers should "concentrate on middle distance action

\(^{10}\) Ibid., fsa 8b21397.
shots with a maximum of expression - including in the same picture the auctioneer, the object being auctioned, and the audience or some part of it. 11 Lee's auction pictures have the first and third items listed by Rosskam, but the object being auctioned, strawberries, never appear. It is worth noting that Rosskam was referring to a different type of auction where a farm was sold and not the kind of auction that Lee attended in Hammond. But had Lee received these instructions before going to Hammond, he probably would have attempted to include strawberries in his auction photographs. However, the manner in which the Hammond auction was conducted did not allow the opportunity to picture the fruit.

In his effort to show strawberries in a setting outside the fields, Lee followed the fruit to shipping stations where ice-cooled rail cars and federal inspectors awaited their arrival. Several of his rail car pictures illustrate the methods employed in loading the large blocks of ice for cooling into the cars (Figs. 43, 44). 12 Lee kept a distance between himself and the workers so he could capture all of the action, and these images exhibit his penchant for sequential photographs. When Lee ventured closer and stepped inside a rail car to photograph a man affixing labels to crates of strawberries, he composed a more remarkable photograph (Fig. 45). 13 The image draws a parallel between the field workers and this worker through the young man's posture that shows an affinity to that of pickers bending over and reaching for strawberries in several of Lee's field photographs. While this young man wore nice clothes and worked in a cleaner environment than that of

11 Rosskam letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 1939, microfilm reel 2.
12 Lee, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, fsa 8b21404 and fsa 8b21406.
13 Ibid., fsa 8b21717.
Fig. 43. Icing refrigerator cars for shipment of strawberries. Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 44. Icing refrigerator cars for shipment of strawberries. Hammond, Louisiana.

Fig. 45. Labeling crates of strawberries loaded in refrigerator cars. Hammond, Louisiana.
strawberry pickers, Lee still managed to associate him iconographically with the field workers.

Lee took a few photographs of federal inspectors handling strawberries in the company of growers (Figs. 46, 47). The federal inspectors' faces remain hidden beneath the brims of their hats; it is the faces of the growers and their interested demeanor that are more clearly visible. In not showing their faces, Lee portrays these federal workers in much the same way he treated the numerous other workers in his pictures. It is the job these men are performing that is important, not the men alone. Lee shows them pouring strawberries into their hands from small containers as part of the inspection process. Lee's captions for these photographs are short and concise, for they offer no insight into the

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14 Ibid., fsa 8a26006, fsa 8b21716, fsa 8a26008, and fsa 8a26003.
Fig. 47. Federal inspection of strawberries with growers in background. Hammond, Louisiana.

inspectors' judgment criteria or whether any strawberries failed inspection. Instead, Lee photographed these men at work without heightening the drama or altering the moment's reality.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Working as a photographer for the FSA suited Lee's personality and style. His scientific background as an engineer proved to be an asset, for he readily accepted the technical challenges the medium presented in his quest to visually document the social and economic conditions left in the wake of the Great Depression. Lee favored taking series of photographs while on assignment instead of attempting to capture the essence of a given situation with a single remarkable image. He also managed to stay on the road covering assignments for lengthy stretches of time. This approach ultimately allowed him to produce the largest number of captioned photographs for the FSA files. While Lee's name may not be mentioned often in discussions about the FSA photographers, the images he produced are among the most sought after in the files now held by the Library of Congress.

Lee's sensitivity towards other human beings, whether innate or developed during his unconventional childhood, figured to be a key for his photographic success. He approached his subjects with compassion and sincerity; this appeal opened doors for him when he asked to take people’s pictures for a government agency. Lee understood the necessity for being prepared when entering new towns. He referred to books, government publications, and tourist guides among other things as sources of current information about the regions he visited. He fulfilled his duty by showing respect to the people he photographed and by equipping himself with an understanding of the various situations he encountered.
The FSA photographers, numbering approximately 20 during the agency's existence, worked independently of one another while in the field. They each had their own way of doing things, but in the end, their collective work depicts an impoverished and displaced segment of the nation's population, whose lot was to be improved by government relief agencies and programs. The visual evidence they created relates to documentary photography and art produced at the time. Photographers like Evans and Lange approached their assignments with an artistic mindset. Evans relied heavily on his large view camera so his contact prints would contain the utmost detail and tonal range. His artistic requirements led to a slow work pace; his output for the FSA numbers fewer than 500 captioned photographs. Evans sought the singular image when taking photographs. He fused content and technique in his desire to create extraordinary photographs of ordinary things. His photographs of building facades and roadside signage illustrate the formal beauty found in the medium. Like Evans, Lange hoped to capture the spirit of the people she photographed in one single image. Her background as a portrait photographer aided her greatly in the field, for she recognized the power of people's facial expressions and body language. She liked to shoot people from a low point of view with their bodies outlined against the white sky. This technique not only emphasized the formal qualities of the human form, but it also added drama to the scene.

Shahn viewed photography differently than Evans and Lange. Oddly, he learned much about photography from Evans, with whom he lived at one time. Like Evans and

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2 In a footnote, Appel provides the number of captioned photographs several FSA photographers contributed to the files. Her findings are as follows: Russell Lee (18,799), Marion Post Wolcott (8,487), Arthur Rothstein (7,885), Jack Delano (6,978), John Vachon (6,264), Dorothea Lange (3,848), and Walker Evans (485). Appel, "Russell Werner Lee: The Man Who Made America's Portrait," 37.

Lange, Shahn considered himself an artist but as a painter and a graphic artist. In 1946, he said photography only interested him "as a means of documentation and to make notes for my future paintings."\(^4\) He was aware of photography's creative attributes, but a photograph could never be as expressive as a painting.\(^5\) Unlike Evans, Shahn paid little attention to technical details of photography; he chose to concentrate, rather, on content.\(^6\) He believed photographs should be viewed by as many people as possible with less importance placed on image quality.\(^7\) But none of this is to suggest that Shahn was an inferior photographer. His technique often involved shooting his subjects frontally which produced a flatness of space akin to graphic posters.\(^8\) Though Shahn's photographic work owes a debt to his other artistic passions, namely painting and graphic work, it never attained similar stature as art in his eyes. He once admitted "the whole artistical approach to photography" was foreign to him.\(^9\)

Lee fits somewhere in between Evans and Shahn. Like Evans, he appreciated the technical side of photography and pushed the medium further in that respect. Like Shahn, he came from a painting background, which he ceased to pursue once he acquired his first camera. Lee also shared Shahn's appreciation of the value of quantity when it came to taking pictures. For these two photographers, the adage "less is more" did not hold as true as it had for Evans and Lange. Lee also preferred his 35mm cameras over the large 8 X 10-inch view camera favored by Evans. Lee reported in a letter to Stryker that "the arrangement of having two miniatures to work with at one time produces many more

\(^4\) Ibid., vii.  
\(^5\) Ibid.  
\(^6\) Ibid.  
\(^7\) Ibid.  
\(^8\) Ibid., ix-x.  
\(^9\) Ibid., vii.
possibilities - especially when different lenses are available." The small 35mm cameras permitted Lee to shoot sequential series of photographs that resembled the photojournalistic essays that became popular in magazines like *LIFE* during the 1930s. Interestingly, Lee obtained his job with the FSA as a replacement for Mydans who had left to become a photographer for the newly created *LIFE* magazine in 1936.  

Lee's compositions differ from those of Evans and Shahn. In southeastern Louisiana, Lee took a few pictures of lettered signs, which were a favorite subject for Evans. Lee may have understood the informational value of these signs, but he lacked the recognition of their formal and compositional potential that Evans possessed. His eye was not as artistically honed as that of Evans when it came to taking pictures of buildings, signs, and other inanimate subject matter. When he took pictures of people, Lee rarely photographed them frontally. A few of his portraits of individuals and of families are frontal, but Lee rarely insisted on this pose as a requirement in his pictures. Shahn, on the other hand, favored this approach and composed his scenes according to the spatial confines of the frame.  

Judging from the photographs he took in southeastern Louisiana, Lee relied on a more detached vision of his subjects than did other FSA photographers. For some reason, Lee rarely filled the frame of his pictures with close-ups of people's faces. Instead, he often included a person's entire body in the frame along with details of the surrounding environment. This fact seems inconsistent with his enthusiasm for a newly acquired lens that he believed would be "swell for closeups." Maybe something in Lee's personality  

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10 Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 1938, microfilm reel 2.  
12 Pratt, *Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, x.  
13 Lee letter to Stryker, Roy Stryker Papers, 1938, microfilm reel 2.
or from his past, such as his witnessing his mother's death at the age of ten, prevented him from getting too close to the people he photographed. It has been noted that Lee "normally worked unobtrusively, even in the confines of a small sharecropper's shack."14 Perhaps because he did not wish to draw attention to himself while working, Lee put a distance between himself and the people he photographed. His southeastern Louisiana photographs support this idea. He seldom varied his vantage point even when shooting children lying on the floor or working in the fields. It has been suggested the work of artists like Laslo Moholy-Nagy of the German Bauhaus school of design and Hollywood producer Busby Berkeley influenced FSA photographers to experiment with their compositions, but the visual evidence found in these Louisiana photographs suggests Lee rarely explored askew viewpoints or unorthodox compositions.15 His photographic style seems to have been unaffected by any of the various art movements of his time, including that of the muralists who also worked for the federal government under the Works Projects Administration. Although he studied art for a short time, Lee found it difficult to name contemporary artistic influences on his work. His photographs function more accurately as utilitarian objects than as artistic ones. Lee remained content with his straightforward method of portraying people as individuals performing duties such as picking strawberries or rocking a child to sleep. He succeeded in presenting these underprivileged people as capable and industrious Americans before the eyes of the rest of the nation. That, for Lee, remained the most important mission of being an FSA photographer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Dear Roy --

Have been bogged down with rain this week which, coupled with a cold that I acquired last week, has not produced many pictures. However, the rest has been very good to look back upon what has been accomplished in the past two months.

I felt it very important to telephone you about the trouble with the range finder on the Contax. I seem to have had my share of bad luck with cameras lately and hope that too many pix have not been spoiled. As was suggested over the telephone it seems to me very important that an 8x10 enlargement be made from a representative negative on each Contax roll. Not only will it tend to check the camera but will provide a good immediate index of the quality of work being produced.

I have a new lens for the Contax - an F2 - 85mm Sonnar telephoto - which will be swell for closeups. Have been able to get several shots - about 50 - between showers with this and the wide angle lens I kept when the other Contax was sent into N.Y.C. Incidentally Roy, the arrangement of having two miniatures to work with at one time produces many more possibilities - especially when different lenses are available. The F2 - 50mm and F4.5 - 135 mm Leica lenses are a fine combination and also the F3.5 - 35mm and F4 - 90mm Leica lenses.

As I stated in the telephone conversation all the time spent in Hot Springs appearing on my travel report was for Public Health. 148 flashbulbs were used. Incidentally the single flash combined with the 135mm lens on the Contax gives some swell closeup possibilities.
Would appreciate it if you could get some information from the weather bureau in Washington as to what particular region in the South is apt to have most number of sunshiny days. I have been told that Louisiana may have a spell of 30 to 40 days of continuously cloudy weather at this time of year. Would it be better to go up the Mississippi, over to Texas or where? I am getting information thru New Orleans weather bureau but they may not have a very wide scope. I might be a nice transition to work in Texas for awhile but there is plenty to get in seasonal crops here, which must be gotten. Subject matter is most important. It has all been extremely interesting to Doris who has been around with me this week. She has driven for me and we have gone thru several books together on this country. It has been awfully helpful to me. After Doris leaves I may take a writer, who lives down here, along with me for awhile. Her name is Mrs. Martin and she is very interested in all this and I believe that it will help me and the files very much. (She has done feature work on southern newspapers.) She can help with the driving too. Thank God.

Doris is leaving the first of this next week for Georgia hill-billy country where she has been commissioned to do another mural. If she cannot arrange to stop in Washington on the return trip she hopes you will see her when you come to New York soon. Ask information for telephone number at 30 East 14th St.

Am enclosing signed receipt for transportation requests. Will get my travel reports and notarized vouchers in very promptly.

Doris and I send best regards to Alice, Phylis and yourself. Will again soon.

Russell

P.S. Please address everything to New Orleans in the future at General Delivery. It will be much easier for forwarding.
Dear Mrs. Reilly,

I will try to answer some of the questions which you attached to your letter. They are the type of questions which to us, seem awfully irrelevant, but I can understand how a publisher would like to incorporate some such information in his article.

The cameras are varied. -- Cameras -- Eastman, Leica, Contax, Ikonta, Speed Graphic, Recomar. The photographers themselves own Linhofs. To date, the Government has not purchased this particular camera. In the dark room we use the standard type of equipment. The enlargers -- Leica Enlargers, Eastman and Saltzman. There are at present over 15,000 negatives in file. I might add, however, they are not of the quality or type which we had at the New York exhibit. Many of them are rather dull progress photographs. I am a little in doubt as to what is meant by question 4. I presume that they wonder what general classes our pictures would fall into. First, the bulk of them are rural, although we have a great many urban slum pictures. Here, we have done more on the negative side, that is the problem side rather than the "pretty" side of agriculture. We have a great many pictures that might be called the life in the small towns of America. There are a great many pictures which would fit into a classification which might be called American Agricultural History. By this, I mean all sorts of detail pictures which would show how agriculture today is carried on. For example a complete set of pictures on the threshing of wheat.
These pictures are used by our own organization, other bureaus in the government for posters, booklets, slide film and exhibits. Many of our pictures we have to inform Washington staff people of field activities. Our greatest demand for pictures comes from newspapers, magazines, authors, publishers and educators.

I hope that this information will be useful in satisfying the requests of the publisher.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely yours,

Roy E. Stryker
3900 Connecticut Avenue
Dear Roy --

I sent you a telegram this morning advising that I was leaving for Tallulah La. to cover the Transylvania project. Have established headquarters at Lake Providence - it is closer to the project.

Talked with Jones this morning. He advised that there was nothing pressing in his region, but that it would be a great help to him to have me get some background pix of this Transylvania project. So I will be here until Monday working Saturday and Sunday and then will go on to Dallas. I believe that some of the families selected for this project live in the hills back from the river and along with those living in the bottoms should build up a real picture of conditions. Certainly those which were evident even along the 28 mile stretch from Tallulah to Lake Providence were bad enough. Will be sending in a lot of pix this Saturday - of Laurel and of this project.

Was sorry to leave Laurel so soon but felt it best because of the lousy weather and also because of Jones statement that he wanted background pictures. I also asked him how his camera is working. He says that the results are much better since I adjusted his range finder and gave him a few tips.

Am dropping Caufield a note tonight advising him that. I shall see him Tuesday or Wednesday. Will write you again in a few days.

Best regards,
Russell
Mr. Russell W. Lee  
Plentywood, Montana

Dear Russell:

The lens is packed ready for shipping, but cannot go forward until there is some money available which will probably be tomorrow. Reg has packed it very carefully, we have insured it, it is plainly marked, and I hope to god it reaches you in good shape.

We received the McLeish negatives and are getting prints out today. We really are snowed under with about several thousand prints for publicity on the new movie, The River.

Just had a letter from Ed. He is desperate for a photographer and wanted to know if I would be willing to let Arthur have a chance. After talking it over with Arthur, we have decided he is to take two weeks’ leave and do work for Ed unofficially. We have our doubts as to whether Arthur will come back to us. This incidentally is all on the q.t. As I have told you before, Arthur has been somewhat restless ever since Carl got his job with Life. He has by spells done excellent work but underneath it all he has been decidedly restless. Despite this I am reluctant to let him go. However, with things as uncertain as they are generally, I do not think I ought to stand in his way for a moment. We are safe for a year with a possibility of increased salaries for the photographers, but even so, that doesn’t do much for Arthur’s future.

I feel more definitely about you, since if anything happens to me, (in the way of a new job) I shall almost insist that you be given a very satisfactory offer at that time (and hope to god you would see fit to go along with me). Furthermore, you are older, and can carry
on in other fields than photography very easily. Arthur is a little bit in a rut down here too, and I think a while in a new field will do him good. Also he will not be going into a job where he is unknown, and where he does not know the boss. Ed understands him and will be able to help him a great deal. Arthur has developed such fine workmanship that he can be extremely valuable to Ed.

This is going to put a hell of a crimp in my work for the present time, but I feel that we must be broadminded, and remember that the personal factor is important.

Do you have any suggestions for a photographer who might be interested in a job for $2600. I need not go into the qualifications, you know them. It is needless to ask you to get me another Russell Lee, because there are no such persons. I wish to god, however, that I could get another like you, but I know that is out of the question. Give this thought and let me know what you think. The decision doesn’t have to be in tomorrow, but after all two weeks can pass very rapidly, and it wouldn’t do to leave the job open too long, one never knows what fool ideas these bosses might get.

Russell, I am wondering how long you ought to stay out in the field. I do not want to hurry you, but on the other hand, I do not want to tire you out. As long as you feel that you are enjoying your work, and are able to keep up the vigorous approach you have now, I suggest that you stay. There is no limit to the things to be done, and to the things I should like to have, but I don’t want you to overdo it. I am sure you are going to want to be back by Christmastime, and I shall be glad to have you.

Do you want to go back in through Illinois and Iowa and add a few winter pictures to the collection? There will be some jobs to be done in and out of the office, but you won’t
have any extended trips. You will have time to print up pictures, to do research, and to
work over any work for another year. Let me have your thoughts regarding this.

Sincerely yours,

Roy E. Stryker
3900 Connecticut Avenue
To: All Photographers

From: R. E. S.

Some Suggestions for Pictures on Migrants

Health
Sanitary facilities
Sickness
Medical attention (or absence of)

Recreation
What do the migrants do for amusement?
What do the youngsters do?

"Help Wanted" signs

Farmer "hunting" help in the towns

Washing clothes

Eating

Cooking

Do the youngsters work in the fields?
Get ages of those you take if possible

"Air views" of camps (from as high a spot as possible)
Dear Roy—

Arrived in Lufkin Sunday night after finishing the job at Hammond La. The main story there is on intra-state and inter-state labor, as outside labor is needed to harvest the crop. People are brought in truckloads and housed locally on the small farms; the inter-state labor is a true migratory labor – not migrants – and follows the berry and vegetable picking up to Michigan thru Illinois. I have pictures on both of these classifications – the intra-state is practically all negro – the inter-state all white. The story, of course, was housing and living conditions and I concentrated on that. There is a terrific political battle there between the Morrison union and the established auctioneers. I believe I have enough to show that angle of it.

In talking with the BAE’s market news service man at Hammond, he gave me some very valuable information about migratory labor. He stated that he felt that the labor in tomatoes and celery was even more important than the berry pickers. He gave these places and dates of harvest at which sizeable amounts of migratory labor could be found.

**Tomatoes – Green wrapped**

**Texas** –

Jacksonville – latter part May (about 20th or 25th)

**Mississippi**

Hazlehurst & Brookhaven – about 10th of June.
So. Carolina

Charleston – 15th of June perhaps a little later, ends up in N.Y. state last few days of August and all of September at Medina, Lockport, and Burt, N.Y.

Celery

New York state – about same time as tomatoes – mostly negro migrants from Sarasota & Sanford. Harvest concentrated around Marion, Sodus, Williamson, Savannah, N.Y. state.

Potatoes – negro labor

Charleston, S.C. – May 20th – June 10th – activity not so great

Eastern N.C. – June 1 to July 1st.

Eastern Shore Virginia – June 20th to July 20th.

While you are undoubtedly acquainted with a lot of these I have included them all. He also gave me some information about Arizona, N. Mexico, and California & Colorado – mainly cantaloupe harvest – all heavy users of migrants. He recommended that we get a booklet of B.A.E. titled “Shipping Calendar of Fruits and Vegetables” – probably by Edwards (book is at least 5 yrs. Old and “Carlot Shipments of Fruits and Vegetables for calendar year 1938” also a B.A.E. publication. Would appreciate very much if you could get me a copy of each of these as they would be a marvelous guide to migrants.

Have received the prints you sent me –the “D” set of Crystal City and the miscellaneous batch of prints for which captions have been misplaced. These will all be captioned and returned to you from Lufkin. The other set the “M’s” you said were forwarded along with the “D’s” have not been received.
Lufkin is supposed to be a boom paper mill town but there seems to be but very little activity associated with what we commonly think of a boom town. However, I shall look around more and perhaps something will have developed. Am going to San Augustine for a few days. It is the oldest town in the state in cutover region is the carryover of the old plantation system of Miss., Georgia & Alabama. There is also a hookworm problem there which F.S.A. is going into this year and try to eradicate. From San Augustine I shall go to Kilgore Texas for a few days to pick up a few pix on oil and then probably to Marshall Texas to pick up the negro project there and then to one of the smaller towns around Bryan Texas for your suggested pictures of the typical small town. I shall ask Prof. Hamilton at College station (Texas A&M) as to the best place to cover. He really knows the agricultural and mechanization setup of Texas too.
October 12, 1937

Mr. Russell W. Lee
Williston, North Dakota

Dear Russell:

Your special delivery arrived this morning. Keep the 3 ¼ x 4 ¼ until yours comes back and you are sure it is in good shape. Reg says that we must watch the Kalart finders very carefully as he has noted that they get out of adjustment very easily. Reg has developed into quite a mechanic as far as Kalarts are concerned, and keeps these other in adjustment all the time.

Regarding the prints, some of those we sent you were probably made with an enlarger out of focus. However, the ones of the boardwalk were made by Lettau after the camera had been very carefully adjusted, and I am sure there was no vibration. I think I told you that Arthur’s comment was that he felt that you did not stop down enough. We are re-making some of the prints you suggested in your letter. It is quite possible that the developing had something to do with it. We shall continue our investigation here on this end, and keep you informed.

I feel much better about the change in our plans, since you will be able to continue your work in that region, and to do a much more thorough job. Next spring and summer will be ample time to work in Montana.

The MacLeish book has taken a decided change from what we had talked about. I am sure you will be more pleased with his manuscript as it now stands. The pictures will be used more effectively. There are, however, a few things which we still need. I am
describing them on an enclosed sheet. Do what you can to find pictures which answer this
description.

I had a chance to see briefly an exhibit of McManigal’s pictures – he is a free lance
agricultural photographer, some of his things were right good, a bit static perhaps, but
good. A few of these pictures have a great deal of feeling for the subject on which he is
working – corn and the people who are affected by it.

I am glad you are getting so much done on the sugar beet workers. I see no reason why
you cannot go to western Nebraska if you find things there worthwhile. I am going to
leave that pretty much in your hands, you are on the ground and can make a better
decision.

In looking over Arthur’s pictures on dust and drought I find that there is not a great deal
that portrays the effect of dust and drought on people. Your work, I believe, will help us
close this particular gap. Arthur’s pictures of the dust and its effects on farm buildings
and land are very excellent, but we do need an addition of more pictures on people, their
homes, and their children.

I am trying to steer Ben and Willard Morgan onto the documentary show which you and
Ben and I talked about this summer. I am thoroughly convinced that this is worthwhile,
and that the time is definitely ripe. I have suggested to Willard that we must be most
careful in the people we get on the steering committee, also the show’s judges is going to
be most difficult. Whom do you suggest? Also please send in a list of people whom you
think we could ask to formulate briefly the theme of the show. You remember Ben
suggested that no pictures should be included that did not have certain definite social
feeling clearly expressed. All suggestions that you have will be greatly appreciated.
Russell, it is going to be a hard winter and you save some of your money, and do not go and buy a 4 x 5 yet. I am still not convinced that the 4 x 5 is as good as the 8 x 10 contact, probably it is, but you wait until we are sure of this. You know what you want, and it is your money, but please give this a little more consideration before you put your money into it. Don’t you think you might get too many cameras to work with . . . you will get dizzy trying to decide which one you want to use. Stick to the 8 x 10 until we have had more time to put the two cameras through some pretty effective tests. If then, you are still convinced of the value of the 4 x 5, by all means get one. If and when you want to go ahead on buying the other contax I suggest you write my friend, David Rabinowitz, Rabson’s Music & Camera, Inc., 1373 6th Avenue, New York, New York. Dave will advise you when he has a good second-hand buy. You can depend on his recommendations.

I am enclosing a post card and a letter – some more practical jokes on my former Columbia associate. Will you please mail them for me. Leave a couple of days elapse between the post card and the letter.

I hope to get the Harvey developer out pretty soon.

Don’t forget the railway stations, etc., Saturday afternoon, railway towns, corn harvesting, American backhouses, barber shops, pool halls, American meeting place series, garages, country stores, street corners, etc.

Best of luck to you. I shall be writing you right along now. Keep me informed of your whereabouts as I have things to send you and will be wanting to communicate with you about various things.

Sincerely yours,
Pictures yet to look for on the MacLeish Book.

1. Photographs of great sweep of open land – meadows, trees, hills.

2. The widest possible open country. Here is a chance for you to use that big camera. This will take a lot of hunting around, because the pictures must not be dull or monotonous. Please work on this right away, and send me copy as soon as possible.

3. Best grass picture possible. I do not know whether you are going to be able to get anything on this or not. I doubt it.

4. Air view of regularly squared farm country. You won’t be able to get this, but you might be able to look for it in agencies and state offices. I have found a very excellent picture like this in FORTUNE. It is, however, in Indiana.

5. Kitchen in the dust area with the windows sealed with towels. This picture is to emphasize the conditions the women and children have to endure in the worst dust storms.

6. This is going to be very difficult to get. I wish you would look in the State Historical Society in Lincoln, Nebraska, for any material of this nature. The request is, to quote MacLeish, “A picture of early settlement in Mississippi Valley – ox trains in the clearing. It must be the Mississippi Valley.” You might stop at the state capitals and check over the files in the Historical Societies. I am writing the Nebraska State Historical Society, and you might stop in there and look over their files, telling them that you stopped in to look over their files, since they
might wonder why we do not coordinate our requests. I wish you would make an appraisal of all of these files each time you have a chance to look through them.

7. Here is one I am sure you can get – To quote MacLeish, “typical Midwestern four corners, with the church falling down, the store caving in, and the fences falling.”

I am sure you will be able to find a picture like that somewhere in your travels.
Both the raising and harvesting of fruit and vegetable crops in Florida as well as the canning and packing of the produce are accompanied by a large influx of agricultural migratory labor. There are two main reasons for this:

The growing season is comparatively short and intense requiring a large force of workers for a short period. A great expansion in labor needs lasts from only a few weeks in the celery, lettuce, bean and tomato fields to six or seven months in the citrus groves. The time for picking, packing and canning oranges and grapefruit comes at the peak of the winter vegetable season.

Farming in the northern states is at a standstill during the period that workers are needed in Florida. An opportunity to make some money and in addition spend the winter in a more equable climate is an incentive to many. Some of the workers are sharecroppers and tenant farmers from Alabama and Georgia.

Since the work is seasonal and the rate of pay low, the worker cannot remain in one place even if he should so desire. This situation has created a class of "fruit tramps" - men, women and whole families who follow the crops and thereby maintain an annual wage that keeps them in a low standard of living throughout the year. A typical fruit tramp might follow this route:

- Belle Glade, Fla. - Dec.
- Plant City, Fla. - Feb.
- Starke, Fla. - April
- Ponchatoula, La. - April, May
- Bald Knob, Ark. - May
- Humboldt, Tenn. - May
- Paducah, Ky. - May, June
Baroda, Riverside, Mich. - June  
Bear Lake, Hart, Shelby, Mich. - July  

From this point, he might proceed back to Florida obtaining work in New York apple orchards in the fall. Others cover a wider territory and after leaving Florida sometimes get as far as the Yakima valley of Washington. There are weeks of travel and periods of idleness between growing seasons which the migrant must withstand. Loss of a crop through drought, flood or frost is more than they can provide for. A large percentage of their earnings go for transportation between jobs. Single men and women travel by automobile in groups and live in boarding houses. Families live and travel in homemade trailers or trucks with converted bodies. Most of them express a desire to settle down but in the summer only a minority are able to return to farming, usually on a tenant or sharecrop basis. There are a number of small farm owners, from the middlewest, who come to Florida for a vacation and obtain a job as supervisor or foreman to help pay their expenses. They live in the more expensive tourist and trailer camps and tend to increase competition for the better paid positions.

On the whole, conditions among the citrus workers are better than among the vegetable workers. The Florida citrus groves are in the central portion of the state characterized by a slight ridge or hummock and numerous lakes. The people in this section are better educated and enjoy a higher standard of living than those in the drained swamp lands where vegetables are grown. The proportion of migrants in the citrus groves and packing plants is less than in the vegetable area. At least 50% of the workers in the Winterhaven district were permanent residents. Also, the other half of the workers were fairly certain of getting their seasonal job again.
The wage rate of 20 cents an hour is the same for both citrus and vegetable workers. However, the weekly wage for the citrus worker is higher because of a more regular and fuller work-week. The average wage is about $15.00 a week. Living expenses for a small family amount to $9.00 a week -- that is, bare subsistence. Unless there is a frost, the citrus worker is sure of six months work which gives him an annual wage of about $400.00.

Working conditions in the citrus industry are fairly good and grievances are minor. Attempts to organize a labor union, however, are met with apathy by the workers and strong opposition from the employers. The few men who have attempted such organization are effectively kept from obtaining work anywhere. Employer's associations work cooperatively to avoid cut-throat competition, to keep the cost of production down and to maintain a fair price for their product. Wage rates are fixed and standard and the constant available supply of cheap labor from nearby states tend to keep them that way.

In the vegetable area, work is very irregular and dependent to a large extent on weather conditions. The crop of beans, celery, lettuce or tomatoes has to be picked at exactly the right time. This type of work is usually done by negroes who crawl on their hands and knees in the black soil which is known as "muck". Many of them, as a result, get an occupational rash or "muck itch". The pickers receive 15 cents a hamper of beans. Although two or three hampers can be filled in an hour, their earnings are not high because so many pickers are used that the job is finished in a hurry. There is a large proportion of migrants among the negroes. The migrant workers usually move in with families who are permanent residents of the negro quarter. This section of town is always
full of shiny new automobiles against a background of dance halls, bars and unpainted shacks.

Except for a few negroes who do the heavy lifting and moving, the canning and packing plants employ white workers. Hours of work are dependent upon the amount of produce brought in from the fields. On some days there might be only one hour's work and on others fifteen. This uncertainty extends also to the length of the "season". When periods of idleness become too frequent, migration begins. In all of the plants a belt system maintains a rapid working pace. Sometimes the workers have to stand in water. Child labor is employed, even on night shifts. Under the best conditions, the weekly wage is about $10.00. It often falls as low as $2.00.

Living conditions in tourist and trailer camps are characterized by overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. Large families live in one room cabins or small tents. There is neither privacy nor respect for property. Fights are common, sometimes accompanied by stabbings. Well-defined family distinctions which exist in the day time grow rather vague at night. Often a man and woman will live together as "good friends" and when the season is over, leave for different localities. There is probably a high percentage of venereal infection. Conditions are such that some program of education and rehabilitation is obviously necessary.
VITA

Brent Mitchell was born and raised in Jennings, Louisiana. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in history in 2002 from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He began the graduate program in art history at Louisiana State University in the fall of 2002 with a concentration in the history of photography. He is currently a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in art history, which will be awarded May 21, 2004.